



the
**POVERTY
ALLIANCE**

WORKING TOGETHER TO COMBAT POVERTY



The impact of stigma on benefit take-up

**Report of a Get Heard Scotland
Citizens' Panel - May 2024**



Impact of Stigma on Benefit Take-up - Citizens' Panel

Executive Summary – May 2024

The Scottish Government is working to raise awareness of Scottish benefits, and to ensure that people are receiving what they're entitled to. A key principle is that social security is an investment in the people of Scotland.

The Poverty Alliance worked with the Scottish Government's Benefit Take Up team to deliver a Citizen's Panel on the impacts of poverty related stigma on benefit take-up. This participatory process with people living on low incomes is intended to help improve understanding and practice by producing citizen-led recommendations for Scottish Government.

This brought together a diverse group of sixteen panellists living on low incomes and with experience of social security in Scotland to share experiences and learn together with officials. Although a panel this size cannot be representative of Scotland's population, recruitment was guided by Scotland's priority family groups and Scottish Government's understanding of seldom heard voices.

The Panel discussed key questions from Scottish Government, to create understanding of:

- How stigma impacts on decisions around benefits take up,
- How stigma impacts on talking about benefits with friends, family and wider community,
- Whether experiences of stigma have changed over time,
- The effectiveness of Scottish Government anti-stigma measures.

Discussions evidence that stigma around social security is felt keenly and creates powerful barriers to accessing entitlements. Uncertainty around eligibility and entitlement played into fears around talking about social security with friends, family and the wider community. Most Panellists agreed that stigma had gotten worse with austerity, UK government's 'welfare reform', and the cost-of-living crisis. Panellists largely agreed that although not perfect dealing with Social Security Scotland was a far less stigmatising experience than the Department for Work and Pensions.

The Panel engaged in supported deliberations to decide on nine key recommendations for steps Scottish Government could take to increase benefit take up and address stigma. Recommendations were agreed using a consensus approach, with panel members ranking and prioritising recommendations for impactful steps the Scottish Government could take to reduce stigma and improve benefit take up.

Panel members evaluated their involvement in this process, and the contribution of Scottish Government officials and the Poverty Alliance, very highly. They showed a strong willingness to continue to contribute to the development of policy and practice.

Prioritised recommendations

Recommendation 1: Fear and uncertainty of benefits being reduced or being left with debt during waiting periods prevents people from claiming benefits. The Scottish Government should reduce the fear and avoid debt by providing faster decisions and social security payments.

There was unanimous agreement on this recommendation, and it was clearly ranked as top priority by panellists.

Prioritised recommendation 2: Better investment in advocacy would increase benefit take up. As would taking a human rights approach to advocacy. Scottish Government should widen the right to advocacy for everyone when claiming social security.

There was unanimous agreement with this recommendation which was prioritised second jointly with recommendation 3.

Recommendation 3: Stigma is built into benefit processes and policies, often unconsciously, as staff don't know what it feels like to claim benefits. Scottish Government should build capacity for policy makers and front-line staff, through training on stigma, poverty and inequality.

There was consensus agreement for this recommendation which was prioritised jointly with recommendation 2.

Recommendation 4: Fear of the trauma of retelling our story and the exposure to the stigma that brings prevents us from accessing the benefits system. The Scottish Govt can further reduce this fear through better systems linking Scottish and local authority entitlements together, so we apply for one and get all entitlements.

There was majority agreement with this recommendation which was prioritised fourth.

Recommendation 5: The Scottish Government should work across teams to create an awareness raising campaign - based on lived experience - of stigma, poverty and diversity and focused on the general public. To raise awareness and target negative views including around disability, race, and gender identity. Helped by developing a system for sharing learning and good practice across government and wider public and third sectors.

There was consensus agreement for this recommendation which was prioritised fifth.

For more information please contact:

David Reilly, Communities and Network Manager

Impact of Stigma on Benefit Take-up Citizens' Panel

Full report

1. About the Project

The Scottish Government is working to raise awareness of Scottish benefits, and to ensure that people are receiving what they're entitled to.

To support this, the Poverty Alliance worked to recruit, facilitate and support a Citizens Panel on the impacts of poverty related stigma on benefit take-up. 16 people were recruited and supported to contribute. All panellists were living on low incomes and eligible to claim social security.

Through six sessions - from December 2023 to March 2024 - the panel came together online, to share their experiences and insights into poverty related stigma and social security. Through supported discussions, panel members learned together about key policy challenges, built understanding of how poverty related stigma impacts on benefit take up, and deliberated to develop and prioritise a set of recommendations for steps the Scottish Government could take to reduce stigma and improve benefit take up.

2. About the Panel

Panel recruitment was guided by a desire to prioritise those most affected by poverty related stigma and barriers to benefit take up. A panel this size cannot be representative of Scotland's population. Member recruitment followed a framework representative of Scotland's Priority Family Groups and where possible, Scottish Government's understanding of seldom heard voices. This offers a snapshot of people both most at risk of poverty and underrepresented in participation. More information is available in Appendix 2.



**Citizens Panel on Impact of Stigma
on Benefit Take-up**



3. Key Questions and Findings

Headline findings from key questions are summarised below.

a. What is the impact of stigma on people's decisions around benefit take up?

Stigma around social security exists on every level and creates powerful barriers to accessing entitlements. Stigma is fuelled by language and messages of politicians and the media, but is also reflective of wider, ingrained social values, with 'politicians saying what they think people want to hear'.

Panellists spoke about their own experiences of stigma within their families, showing how it can be passed between generations:

"Mum had an illness and my dad never understood her; now with my siblings, if I mention I'm not feeling good their attitude is snidey remarks like 'what's wrong with you'? or 'She's on benefits, she's raking it in while we're paying our taxes'."

"So many years it took me to apply for benefits, I'm the first in my family to apply – my grandmother won't apply, my mother won't apply."

Stigma was prevalent within communities:

"People who live in poverty – even within our own networks and cultures we are judgemental of each other, like 'I'm struggling but I'm out working' or 'I came from a council house but I've made my life better'."

Stigma can be experienced differently at different life stages:

"If you're young and you've never worked you can be made to feel like you don't deserve it as you've not paid enough into the system – whereas if you've worked all your life you might feel like you're lowering yourself by claiming."

Panellists discussed fears of being seen going into the job centre, and internalised feelings of shame and self doubt which held them back from seeking support. Several spoke of putting off claiming for as long as they possibly could, to the point of hunger and destitution. Others knew they weren't receiving their full entitlement but were afraid to apply or 'rock the boat', fearing the extra money may not be worth the 'pain' of the application and assessment processes.

Positive tipping points in a decision to take up entitlements included having positive support from a trusted professional to encourage and help with applications.

Panellists discussed how social security stigma overlaps and interacts with other forms of stigma, prejudice and discrimination. Ableism, and ignorance about disability were a common theme of experiences, underpinning experiences of stigma. UK government policies and narratives were felt to demonise disabled people as 'lazy', 'scroungers' and 'fraudsters' and fed directly into negative attitudes panellists encountered with their families, communities and services.

Misconceptions about the scale of benefit fraud and the presumption of disbelief disabled people face in claiming support were linked to stigmatising narratives of disability as something rare and exceptional, rather than a normal part of human diversity. These prejudices were tied up in a lack of understanding and empathy around the impact of an impairment or health condition and the additional barriers and discrimination that prevent panellists from working. Panellists shared examples of stigma and discrimination they had encountered in work and education:

“The interview was going great, so I told them openly about my health condition. They said they would never employ me as it would put more strain on the rest of the team.”

Fluctuating or invisible impairments were felt to be particularly stigmatised:

“People only see you when you are well, they don’t see the hidden aspects, pain, crying, physio to get yourself out of the door. You’re judged by you at your best, people only see the tip of the iceberg.”

Some panellists described specific stigma they encountered in their faith communities:

“I get shunned for accepting myself as a disabled person – there’s a belief I should be praying for healing [or] I’m not a good enough Christian. That was an area I didn’t expect [stigma] to come from.”

Panellists reported that their own positive acceptance of their disability or health condition had been a tipping point in applying for their entitlements. Challenging disability related stigma was offered as an important way to increase benefit take up.

Panellists from minority ethnic backgrounds described ingrained racism, fuelled by ‘hostile environment’ migration policies, exacerbating the stigma and inequality they experience:

“As a single woman of colour I’m deemed lazy and often seen to be wanting to take away from citizens of the UK. As a Black woman I don’t want to be seen to be taking things from people who deserve them, yes as a migrant. I’m the scapegoat for why people are not getting housing, jobs”.

Gendered dynamics of stigma were also discussed. Men could face scorn if unable to fulfil the ‘breadwinner’ role – some felt this was particularly the case in working class communities. Lack of acceptance of men’s mental health impacted on stigma:

“I get a lot of comments of people asking what’s wrong with you, there’s nothing wrong with you... You’re expected to keep going and keep going and keep going and it’ll all work itself out and it doesn’t you know, sometimes it doesn’t. There is quite a lot of expectations.”

Women, and particularly lone parents, were affected by a stigmatising belief “that women get themselves pregnant so they don’t have to work”. Single mums are too often stereotyped that they “sit at home on benefits”, whether working or not.

“There’s the attitude that you must have done something wrong to be a single mum. Nobody sees you or hears your story – you’re shunned.”

b. How does stigma affect talking about social security with friends, family and wider communities?

Panellist confirmed that word of mouth is a powerful route to boost benefits take up. They spoke of the value of connecting with others who have been through the process and spoke of actively encouraging others in similar circumstances to apply, as well as to appeal if unsuccessful.

“The only time you talk about social security is when you’re in a safe space – when you know other people are receiving those benefits.”

Panellists shared many examples of stigma within their families and networks that prevents this with their friends, family and the wider community.

“I don’t like talking about social security with friends and relatives – to me it seems to be enabling someone to lose respect for me. I’d rather keep it a secret, to save my dignity.”

“Shame and fear prevents you from accessing help or support of friends and family – you constantly feel judged by everyone. Accessing is admitting vulnerability - failure - every time.”

The landscape of uncertainty around eligibility and entitlement played into fears around talking about social security with friends, family and communities. One panellist described encouraging a family member to apply for support as they have the same health condition; when she got refused this led to tensions and “snide remarks about ‘getting extra’” – leaving him afraid to tell others in future.

c. Have experiences of Social Security stigma changed over time?

While some panellists felt attitudes were shifting amongst younger generations, most agreed that stigma had gotten worse with austerity and UK government ‘welfare reform’.

The majority also felt that the cost of living crisis had exacerbated stigma, particularly between those in work who are struggling and those out of work.

“People who are in in-work poverty get angry at their situation so then they feel the need to attack people who don’t work because they see them as scroungers or people who can play the system.”

Common misconceptions that people claiming social security are ‘raking it in’ have been exacerbated during the cost of living crisis:

“Nobody knows who got what but you’ll notice people assume that you get everything if you are on benefit and that’s what I found with cost of living. People in work assumed everyone on benefits got more. It made it worse.”

Panellists identified a two-tier system where people on legacy benefits missed out on the £20 Universal Credit uplift, while some got furlough payments – creating tensions amongst those claiming.

There were discussions about the particular challenges faced by those in in-work poverty who are claiming social security, and ‘constantly weighing and balancing’ the hours they can work so they don’t end up worse off – a situation exacerbated by the cost of living crisis, where thresholds were not felt to be keeping up with rising costs:

“You see a lot of people experiencing the threshold, they lose out and we all know people who are worse off in work because of minimum wage”.

Panellists felt a more tapered system would be fairer and help ease this pressure and stigma.

d. How effective has Scottish Government’s anti-stigma work been so far?

Panellists largely agreed that dealing with Social Security Scotland was a far less stigmatising experience than the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Panellists reflected that experiences under DWP have been so extremely negative that it’s not hard to be better. However, the difference, was ‘night and day’.

Feedback on Social Security Scotland included:

“I’ve only really felt in the past year or two that I’ve been able to draw breath, basically due to the change in attitude of Scottish government rather than Westminster government. Before that, every assessment was basically panic and dread.”

“Social Security Scotland is very helpful and process is very easy even though our language is not English.”

“I do think they [SSS] do a better job, the help and info - you do feel like you are on the level when you are making a claim.”

Panellists welcomed changes based on lived experience feedback such as the switch from brown to white envelopes, as easing some of the fear and stigma, enhancing privacy and dignity.

“When you open a SSS letter your heart isn’t pounding as much.”

Panellists had seen advertising campaigns, mostly on social media, and welcomed the more ‘humane’ language.

Almost half (45%) of panellists were aware of the Social Security Scotland Charter, having received copies of it in the post alongside letters. The values in the charter were welcomed as a good foundation for a more dignified system.

Support provided through Social Security Scotland through local teams and home visits was also welcomed. However, one panellist commented that outreach and

engagement in rural areas has been unreliable, with workers failing to show up, which affected trust and relationships between communities and organisations.

Approaches to promotion of Scottish Child payment were felt to have been particularly effective. One panellist had been encouraged by multiple different organisations to apply for it.

Recommendation 1: Fear and uncertainty of benefits being reduced or being left with debt during waiting periods prevents people from claiming benefits. The Scottish Government should reduce the fear and avoid debt by providing faster decisions and social security payments.

Panellists repeatedly described fear as a barrier to benefit take up. Fear came from stigmatising language and processes which some Panellists felt were designed to be difficult and off-putting, against a backdrop of austerity and 'saving money'. Fear also came from uncertainty about eligibility and entitlements, and ultimately a fear of being disbelieved or 'presumed to be at it', when seeking support.

UK policies like conditionality and the five week wait for initial Universal Credit payments contributes to stigma and exacerbates hardship, forcing people into debt.

While Panellists welcomed many positives in their experience of Social Security Scotland compared to the UK system, several panellists reported long waits for support or decisions, and a lack of communication during these waits.

“Decisions take a really long time; in my experience it's a lot longer than the DWP, and there's no proactive updates nor confirmation of receiving the form or evidence - for around 5 months now.”

Panellists highlighted particular delays when changing from one system to the other. One participant told of significant disruption and delays when admitted to hospital and notifying DWP about this change in circumstances. There was lack of clarity as to whether they should reapply for benefits and lengthy delays with mixed messages and a lack of updates on the progress of their application.

It was also noted that parent carers applying for Child Disability Payment had “endured the humiliation of a visit to verify the child’s eligibility” despite paper evidence of their needs and condition being provided. This was felt to be an unnecessary hurdle, delaying decisions and potentially compromising dignity.

Panellists discussed whether processing times could be sped up through recruiting more staff, and through ensuring staff receive in-depth training in understanding how conditions and circumstances impact on people needs and how they might present.

Recommendation 2: Better investment in advocacy would increase benefit take up. As would taking a human rights approach to advocacy. Scottish Government should widen the right to advocacy for everyone when claiming

Many panel members identified that having support and encouragement was a turning point in feeling able to apply for their entitlements, for example from a healthcare professional or welfare rights advisor. This was important for people to demystify the system, understand their rights and entitlements, and how to go about claiming them, often at times of trauma and crisis.

“If we are saying access to benefits is a human right - we need to know what those rights are. If we don't know, we can't use them and hold government to account.”

Panellists felt more could be done to promote the existing advocacy service available to disabled people. Panellists also felt that the right to advocacy, which for some groups is protected in law, should be extended to anyone requiring support to claim their social security entitlements. Many of the circumstances which lead people to claim benefits may be overwhelming, traumatic, or cause stress that make it even harder to find out what you are entitled to and navigate the system successfully. Therefore, independent, informed support should be better available to anyone in circumstances that might require it.

Panellists felt that extended rights to advocacy could be built into the upcoming Human Rights Bill, as part of access to justice provisions – similar to the provision in the UNCRC Act. This would enhance a human rights approach to advocacy and social security more broadly.

Panellists further emphasised that advocacy services need to be better resourced to be able to meet demand and meet clients' needs. Experiences were shared of reduced availability in local advice services, with long delays for appointments, and generalist, de-personalised advice, particularly in volunteer-led organisations struggling to cope with demand since the pandemic. Support has become harder to access, with one panellist describing a situation where they were asked to send information digitally, but they were unsure how to do this and no support was available. Another said:

“It took ages to get appointment, when I finally got one all the support was ‘have you done the calculator’ but I'd already done all that and it was going to take another 6 weeks to get a 1:1 appointment to support for filling in the forms.”

A sufficiently resourced right to advocacy was unanimously agreed by the panel as essential to overcoming stigma and increasing benefit take up.

Recommendation 3: Stigma is built into benefit processes and policies, often unconsciously, as staff don't know what it feels like to claim benefits. Scottish Government should build capacity for policy makers and front-line staff by training them on stigma around poverty and inequality including around disability, race, gender identity. This would be helped by developing a system for sharing learning and good practice across government and wider public and third sectors.

The panel strongly felt that there is a need for ongoing awareness raising and training on stigma, poverty and inequalities faced by marginalised groups - for policy makers, decision makers and staff across the public and third sector. This should be informed and where possible delivered with people with lived experience of poverty related stigma and intersecting inequalities. It should enable staff and decision makers to identify and address their own conscious and unconscious biases which perpetuate stigma within services and policies that affect people living on low incomes.

This was different to, but complimentary of, work to tackle negative public attitudes in society.

The Panel felt that training was equally important for front line staff and volunteers, as for managers policy makers and decision makers - as stigma was experienced at the direct, individual level, and in the structure and design of services and policies.

Examples ranged from “tone of voice when you call – abrupt, looking down on you” to signs outside foodbanks refusing service to anyone seen smoking or drinking.

“Staff seem to see you as a list of criteria – it’s dehumanising and belittling”.

It was suggested this training could link with Public Sector Equality Duties as well as forthcoming Human Rights legislation. This could encourage action to proactively improve equality and address stigma. This training could improve the experience of people accessing social security as well as wider public services including housing, health and social care, and education. Training, and effective action, necessitates cross-government collaboration to address poverty related stigma.

Some panellists expressed fatigue around sharing their time, energy and experience with policy makers and decision makers through participation processes without seeing a wider impact. This was linked to feelings of disempowerment, and frustrations that their insights might end up gathering dust on a shelf.

To address this, panellists suggested developing a platform or resource where insights on stigma, poverty and inequality, generated by lived experience experts, can be shared and promoted across public sector teams, agencies, and wider service providers. This could join up knowledge, maximise impact and reduce the risk of ‘participation fatigue’.

Recommendation 4: Fear of the trauma of retelling our story and the exposure to the stigma that brings prevents us from accessing the benefits system. The Scottish Government can further reduce this fear through better systems linking Scottish and local authority entitlements together, so we apply for one and get all entitlements.

Many panellists identified the difficulty of navigating multiple systems, and the stigma and barriers this causes as a barrier to benefit take up. It was widely felt that parts of the benefit system have been designed to be difficult, to put people off applying. In particular, the need to retell your story multiple times was seen as rooted in policies of disbelieving and distrusting claimants, suspecting them of fraud:

“The reason you have to keep repeating yourself is to prove that you’re not lying.”

The result is a system that was felt to be exhausting, impenetrable, and re-traumatising for people, often at times of grief and crisis.

“It’s not even the shame of claiming but having to retell your stories over and over again. It’s the shame of why we’re having to claim benefits - relationship breakdown, bereavement, illness or disability. That comes with baggage, it’s not just the shame itself.”

Lack of clear information about entitlements and processes add to the stigma:

“You have to do your own research because no one is actually going to tell you what you’re entitled to, in my experience.”

A notable exception to this was Scottish Child Payment, which panel members had seen widely promoted and which some had been actively encouraged to apply for.

Panellists felt strongly that more could be done to streamline processes for accessing entitlements, through increased automation and ‘passporting’, for example of council tax reduction or exemptions, and bus pass eligibility. This could significantly reduce the mental and physical impacts of navigating the burden of “constantly having to prove that you’re disabled enough, ill enough, poor enough”:

“It’s a full time job, navigating the system. We don’t have time to rest, we spend all that time proving we are ill.”

Steps could include enabling local authorities to accept wider forms of proof (such as accepting benefit statements rather than just award letters) or automating entitlement for recipients of eligible benefits.

The Panel also called for clearer supply of information about all linked entitlements.

“You have to find information for themselves when it should just be there. When you go into a job centre or look for one benefit all the info should be available to you.”

Panellists felt that, to support a whole system approach, Social Security Scotland could have a clear role and responsibility for coordinating passported and automated entitlements at local level, to reduce stigma and improve take up.

Recommendation 5: The Scottish Government should work across teams to create an awareness raising campaign - based on lived experience - of stigma, poverty and diversity and focused on the general public. This should raise awareness and target negative views.

Stigma was encountered within families and communities, in education and local services, and across media and social media. Stigma was strongly felt to be fuelled by negative, 'demonising' policies and rhetoric at the UK government level, while some feared that 'politicians say what they think voters want to hear'.

To break this cycle Panellists recommend a public awareness campaign to tackle negative stereotypes by sharing stories which highlight why social security is a good thing – with examples of the positive impacts for individuals, families and communities.

An awareness raising campaign should focus on normalising social security as a human right, making more people aware of their own entitlements, whilst reframing society as kind and caring.

Stories should be used highlighting the diversity of circumstances where people are claiming entitlements – including those in work, unpaid carers, people who volunteer - as well as examples of the positive role social security can play supporting people at times of crisis, adversity, or recovery. Personal stories should be told which reverse narratives of shame and emphasise human dignity. This would counteract negative stereotypes about those claiming social security, and reduce stigma.

Panellists identified major overlaps between social security stigma and other ingrained forms of prejudice – particularly around disability, racism, and gender. Many had been directly impacted by a lack of understanding around their circumstances, including the barriers and discrimination they face, and narratives of blame and shame associated with claiming benefits. The panel felt an awareness campaign to counteract these prejudices could include equality and human rights and have wider positive impacts for progressing equality.

Social media was seen as a powerful forum to challenge attitudes; as was education. Stigmatising beliefs and values were seen as built-in to the schools system. One participant reflected:

“My daughter is choosing her subjects and being told it will define the rest of her life. We’re teaching children you have to achieve a certain amount to be deserving of a good life. I don’t think it’s fair to put so much pressure to achieve a certain level. All of us [need] to break the cycle and change perceptions.”

An awareness raising campaign could reframe how society values unpaid work, caring, and wider contributions people make to society. It could also build more positive attitudes around tax as an investment in everyone’s social security.

Recommendation 6: Stigma is built into benefit processes and forms. Challenges in completing forms prevent people from claiming benefits. The Scottish Government should design benefit forms that support people's individual needs. Smart forms that take our answers and impairments into account and which are available in community languages should be standard. In person support through the application process would help boost benefit take up.

The complexity of social security systems sparked fear and anxiety, leaving some too afraid to claim, saying “it’s not worth the pain” and “I would rather lose that money than go through that process again.” Others described waiting until the last possible moment, with some “practically starving” or “living off fresh air” before they attempted to claim.

Some systems were felt to be intentionally difficult to access, designed to put people off applying in order to “save money”. One panellist described the process of applying for Personal Independence Payment as “more difficult than an exam at Masters level at university.”

Panellists agreed that simpler forms and processes, which can be accessed in a range of ways, would make a great difference to reducing stigma and boosting benefits take up.

‘Smart forms’ were suggested for online users, where questions are tailored to the information you supply, minimising the confusion of navigating parts of the form that are not relevant for you. These could also respond to any impairments or access needs that are shared at the start of the process, e.g. large print or coloured backgrounds.

Applications in community languages were also suggested as a way to empower those with English as an additional language to apply with greater confidence and independence.

Clearer, consistent, and up to date information about eligibility and processes was seen as essential. Panellists said lack of clarity and ‘shifting goal posts’ can be a source of stigma and fear, with red tape leaving you “caught in the head lights and humiliated”.

“I was afraid that I wouldn’t be disabled enough or poor enough to be eligible and would be turned down and that would make it harder next time.”

Several panellists described how having applications turned down put them off from applying for further support. Whilst accessible, adaptive forms and information were seen as an essential measure to boost uptake and reduce stigma, panellists felt strongly these should not become a substitute for in-person advice and support, to maximise applicants’ chances of successfully accessing their entitlements.

Recommendation 7: Support services that are close to home, joined up and adequately resourced are needed to address stigma and increase benefits take-up. Scottish Government should ensure better investment in advice and support at local community level including linking social security access points to community services such as education, social work, secondary care, mental health services, school leavers, care leavers.

As well as enhancing access to advocacy, Panellists agreed on the importance of local, readily available information, advice and support services.

Embedding Social Security advice and information in community settings was felt to normalise this support and reduce stigma. One panellist noted, when a welfare rights advisor attended a local parents' group: "More people are seeing others accessing that support and feeling able to access it themselves".

Others emphasised the value of trusted, pre-existing relationships to remove some of the fear, and the hurdle of knowing where to start. Community mental health teams, social work, and other secondary health or care providers were suggested as helpful points of contact for support to access social security.

Welfare Rights advisors in schools and GP surgeries were welcomed. However, some panellists pointed out that GP services can themselves be hard to access, while schools can be a challenging setting of stigma and fear for some parents. Panellists knew parents who were afraid to apply for benefits in case they were seen as not being able to look after their children.

Accessible, community-based supports, utilising existing, trusted relationships, could be particularly helpful for those facing multiple forms of stigma such as ableism or racism. Expanding the reach and investment in these supports should go hand in hand with the stigma awareness training described in recommendation 4, with a focus on delivering dignity, respect and empowerment.

One panellist illustrated the stigmatising impact of being offered support in the wrong way.

"Getting text messages from a family support worker out of the blue because as a lone parent they assumed I needed help - Getting group texts about free school dinners - the impact that had was patronising, she doesn't know me - I was embarrassed and thought why am I on this list that I don't know about?"

Panellists emphasised the need for a "wide range of touchpoints" where information and routes to social security entitlements could be normalised and made more accessible – e.g. better welfare rights provision in higher education.

Young people not in education, employment or training were felt to be particularly cut off from information and supports. Panellists suggested ensuring all school leavers are aware of their Social Security rights and entitlements as a way to normalise accessing this support, and counterbalance the dominant idea that claiming benefits is a sign of failure but rather that it is a valid and respectable way to pursue your future.

Recommendation 8: Language can enable stigma or help overcome it. Scottish Government should consider ways it can go further in supporting stigma free and positive language and consider changing the use of 'benefit' to 'support' or 'income'.

Panellists recognised the huge role that language plays in perpetuating or challenging stigma around social security. Language used by politicians and media at the UK level has directly and hugely impacted people's experiences of stigma. Panellists felt they had been portrayed as 'lazy', 'fraudsters' and 'scroungers', who are living a 'cushy life' at taxpayers' expense.

Commonly used language around 'hard working families' was also felt to deepen the divide and create tensions between those in in-work poverty and those out of work. This is a key source of stigma within families and communities. This language was seen as feeding the perception that social security is only claimed by those out of work, with implications of laziness and freeloading. This exacerbates a lack of understanding that many claimants encounter, and an undervaluing of unpaid labour and contributions such as caring, volunteering, and community participation:

"The language grates if you have disabilities – the talk about hard working families and parents - and you are doing your best to survive, you want to contribute and volunteer, but they talk like you have to be in a job but that's not possible for everyone."

The panel recognised a significant shift in language and attitude from Social Security Scotland and the positive impact this has had on experiences.

"Scotland seems more human, more compassionate, definitely going in the right direction compared to Westminster. I have seen this in the media – the messages have been more gentle in the language and the way they present that – I like what I see in the way people are treated. The way they look at you is much improved."

Panellists welcomed the responsiveness of Social Security Scotland to feedback around the naming of new entitlements as 'payments'. The word 'benefit' was felt to be loaded with stigma and misconceptions that it was an easy life choice. Panellists felt that words like 'support' and 'income' were far preferable.

Panellists also welcomed the significant steps taken by Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland to change the language around social security and encourage more of this work in ongoing collaboration with people with lived experience.

A key aspiration was for more work to be done with media and across social media to shift coverage, language and 'click-bait' stories away from the harmful stigmatising narratives. Panellists would welcome any steps from Scottish Government to support this shift within the wider media landscape.

Recommendation 9: The trauma of controlling and manipulative behaviour by partners, financial control and domestic abuse prevents some people from accessing the benefits system. Stigma around domestic abuse adds to poverty related stigma as a further barrier. Scottish Government could start to address this through training staff, recruiting specialist trauma informed advisors and a resource supporting people experiencing domestic abuse on accessing entitlements without shame.

Several panellists described the particular challenges faced by survivors of domestic abuse, the majority of whom are women, when experiencing stigma around social security. Some shared examples of judgmental attitudes faced when applying for benefits and social housing as a single parent, after leaving an abusive partner.

“I had complex PTSD, no understanding from my family, and at the job centre, there was no private room, I had to retell my story. Interacting with DWP was like an extension of dealing with the manipulation and coercion I’d been subject to all my life.”

Tackling the ingrained stigma and shame around claiming social security, as per recommendation 4, may make it easier for people to leave abusive relationships.

“When my ex was around I had no idea of the benefits system and I felt a lot of shame around accessing it, and I also didn’t know what was available – if I had known I would have been in a much better position to leave at an earlier point.”

Panellists felt this particular double-stigma could be tackled through clear, targeted information about benefits entitlements for people experiencing domestic abuse, including rights-affirming, anti-stigma messaging such as ‘You don’t need to feel ashamed for asking for your entitlements’.

The Panel also called for training for staff around identifying signs of domestic abuse and understanding the support needed to do this, including trauma-informed approaches.

More widely the Panel discussed the value of recruiting more staff who themselves have lived experience of the social security system and/or the range of challenges that clients may be facing, such as domestic abuse, disability, homelessness.

“If you can speak to people who have been through system it can be easier.”

“Getting support from someone who’s been through it is invaluable.”

The Panel also emphasised the importance of screening for values throughout the recruitment process and ensuring that inductions and ongoing training include stigma and trauma awareness, drawing on lived experience or delivered by those with lived experience.

3. Methodology

This process takes a Citizen Panel / Jury approach, developed to provide citizens the opportunity to learn about an issue, deliberate together with a diverse group of their peers, and develop informed priorities or solutions to challenging public issues.

Process, structure and key questions were designed in collaboration with Scottish Government Benefit Take Up Team. Sessions one and two focused on panellists connecting, co-producing a working together agreement, exploring process parameters, learning about stigma, devolution and the challenges faced by the Benefit Take Up Team. This included an in-depth question and answer session with officials from that team.

Sessions three and four used key questions developed with Scottish Government to guide the Panel's discussions, headlines from which are outlined in this report. The panel identified and ranked priorities from these discussions which formed the basis of deliberations in sessions 5 and 6, focussed on developing recommendations. These were drafted, discussed and redrafted.

A consensus based decision making approach was used to give panellists the opportunity to agree or disagree with recommendations. Panellists were then invited to prioritise those recommendations that would be most impactful for Scottish Government to improve benefit take up and reduce stigma. A process of dialogue was supported between panellists and Scottish Government officials for clarification and next steps. This discussion was widened to involve officials from Social Security Scotland alongside Scottish Government Benefit Take Up Team.

Panellists were compensated for their time and expertise through a choice of vouchers, in line with Scottish Government guidance and Poverty Alliance practice. Additional support with childcare, IT equipment and connectivity was available. Opportunities were provided to engage in a range of ways to ensure accessibility, including use of a shared online space, phone calls, and email outside of sessions.

A system of wellbeing checks was in place, and information about income maximisation support, wellbeing and other issues was shared after each session.

4. Evaluation and Next Steps

Through evaluations at sessions 2, 4 and 6, Panellists shared feedback and reflections on the process as it progressed.

- 95% agreed or strongly agreed they learned something new in the sessions.
- 100% agreed or strongly agreed they felt supported to participate.
- 100% agreed or strongly agreed they had the opportunity to share their views and experiences.
- 100% agreed or strongly agreed the aims of the discussion were clearly communicated.
- 100% agreed or strongly agreed the facilitators ensured everyone was involved.

Through an evaluation discussion at the end of session 6 Panellists reflected on the impact of sharing experiences and learning from others in a safe and supportive environment; feeling that their voice is being heard, feeling valued and 'part of something bigger'. Panellists shared a sense of pride at contributing to positive change that might improve others' experiences, and spoke of gaining a sense of connection, validation and empowerment from taking part in the process:

"It made me feel better about myself and that my life experiences have a use and a purpose".

"It's good to know that I am someone who is not a politician, and still my voice is being heard – that's a good empowering position".

"It's a gift to be included in things like this when other organisations or society see our group as the bottom of the pile and our opinions are not relevant. Excited to see if there are any changes being made, as a sense of pride. We have one thing in common - experience and empathy".

Panellists reported increased feelings of confidence and self-worth:

"This is the first time I joined something formal and meeting many people from other communities and hearing their experience – I was unsure if I could contribute because I don't know a lot about Scotland but now I know more and have confidence about myself that I can contribute in other sectors and fields. I can say what I want as my opinion can be heard, make change, this is very nice feeling for me."

"When I started, I was starting on the journey of benefits application. This panel gave me information and confidence to not be deflated. And I know I'm not alone. These sessions have made me build capacity in myself to be confident, ask questions, and not be afraid. I feel valued and respected regardless of my circumstances".

Panellist valued having facilitators from Poverty Alliance who were independent of the Government. Direct engagement with Scottish Government officials was warmly welcomed, as was time spent focussing on solutions. Helpful feedback was shared regarding points of process and length of sessions being tiring, or feeling rushed at points, and these will inform the planning of future processes within Poverty Alliance.

Throughout the process panellists emphasised that a vital part of meaningful participation is knowing what happens next, seeing the impact and influence of contributions and seeing a tangible outcome. They were keen to participate and be kept informed of Government response, actions, and ongoing work to tackle stigma.

“What frustrates me is that I want to see change happen – so I can say “I was part of that” – see a difference to people living in poverty. Here’s to something positive coming out of all the time we have spent.”

Poverty Alliance commits to sharing the Panel’s findings internally and externally to maximise the impact of the Panel’s insights and contributions, and to maintaining contact and information sharing between Panellists and Scottish Government colleagues regarding responses to this work and the future progress of anti-stigma and benefit take-up work.

Acknowledgement

Poverty Alliance is grateful to all Panellists for their openness and dedication to the work of the project. We wish to acknowledge the significant emotional labour involved in sharing personal experiences on such a difficult and painful topic, and credit all Panellists for the ‘safe, supportive and non-judgemental’ environment the group created and maintained.

We are also grateful to Scottish Government colleagues in the Benefits Take Up Team for their flexible, supportive and positive engagement with the process.

The Poverty Alliance is Scotland’s anti-poverty network. Together with our members we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, provide evidence through research and build public support for solutions to challenge poverty.

The views in this report are those of Panellists and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Poverty Alliance or our members.

For more information please contact:

David Reilly, Communities and Network Manager

May 2024

Appendix 1 – Summary of all recommendations

1	<p>Faster decisions and payments Fear and uncertainty of benefits being reduced or being left with debt during waiting periods prevents people from claiming benefits. The Scottish Government should reduce the fear and avoid debt by providing faster decisions and social security payments.</p>
2	<p>Right to Advocacy Better investment in advocacy would increase benefit take up. As would taking a human rights approach to advocacy. Scottish Government should widen the right to advocacy for everyone when claiming social security.</p>
3	<p>Training and Awareness for staff in all sectors Stigma is built into benefit processes and policies, often unconsciously, as staff don't know what it feels like to claim benefits. Scottish Government should build capacity for policy makers and front line staff training on stigma around poverty and inequality including around disability, race, gender identity. Helped by developing a system for sharing learning and good practice across government and wider public and third sectors.</p>
4	<p>Better linking of entitlements Fear of the trauma of retelling our story and the exposure to the stigma that brings prevents us from accessing the benefits system. The Scottish Govt can further reduce this fear through better systems linking Scottish and local authority entitlements together, so we apply for one and get all entitlements</p>
5	<p>Public Awareness Raising The Scottish Government should work across teams to create an awareness raising campaign - based on lived experience - of stigma, poverty and diversity and focused on the general public. This should raise awareness and target negative views.</p>
6	<p>Simpler Forms and Information Stigma is built into benefit processes and forms. Challenges in completing forms prevents people from claiming benefits. The Scottish Government should design benefit forms that support people's individual needs. Smart forms that take our answers and impairments into account and which are available in community languages should be standard. In person support through the application process would help boost benefit take up.</p>
7	<p>Investment in local community based supports Support services that are close to home, joined up and adequately resourced are needed to address stigma and increase benefits take-up. Scottish Government should ensure better investment in advice and support at local community level including linking social security access points to community services such as education, social work, secondary care, mental health services, school leavers, care leavers.</p>
8	<p>More positive language Language can enable stigma or help overcome it. Scottish Government should consider ways it can go further in supporting stigma free and positive language and consider changing the use of 'benefit' to 'support' or 'income'.</p>
9	<p>Training and Resources on Domestic Abuse The trauma of controlling and manipulative behaviour by partners, financial control and domestic abuse prevents some people from accessing the benefits system. Stigma around domestic abuse adds to poverty related stigma as a further barrier. Scottish Government could start to address this through training staff, recruiting specialist trauma informed advisors and a resource supporting people experiencing domestic abuse on accessing entitlements without shame.</p>

Appendix 2

After discussion and deliberation, members of the Citizen's Panel were asked to rank their top three recommendations. Recommendations have since been renumbered to reflect these results which can be seen below:



Appendix 3 Recruitment Data

Recruitment Framework Panel to include at least:	Panel Representation 16 people recruited included:
8 women	10 women 2 non-binary 4 men
5 disabled people or carers	10 disabled people / people with a limiting long term condition 9 carers
4 people from minority ethnic communities	11 white British / white Scottish backgrounds 5 Minority Ethnic backgrounds including Arab, Pakistani, Black African and mixed White Scottish Black Caribbean
2 people from refugee / migrant communities.	3 people from refugee backgrounds

Priority Family Groups represented:	Scottish government identified 'seldom heard' groups represented
Lone parents: 8	Experience of homelessness
Larger families (3+ children): 5	'Mobile' populations
Families with a disabled person in household : 5	Stigmatised illness
Minority Ethnic Families: 5	Life-limiting / terminal illness
	Bereaved Families
	Survivors of domestic abuse

Panel recruits included 13 from urban and three from rural locations. Panellists came from Aberdeen, the Borders, Cowdenbeath, Dundee, Dunfermline, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness, Kinross and Paisley.

Age

Panellists came from the following age groups:

16-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65
2	1	5	6	1

