

# STIGMA PLEDGE 2: ATTITUDES MATTER



How we talk about poverty and how we portray it can stigmatise and harm people: **We will never use language that may stigmatise people experiencing poverty.**

Over recent years we have witnessed a hardening of attitudes towards those in poverty, accompanied by an increase in individuals being blamed for their poverty. This rising negativity towards people experiencing poverty is partly driven by the increasingly divisive rhetoric deployed by the media and politicians when describing people in receipt of benefits.

## 'Hardworking' families

We are all aware of the phrase 'strivers and skivers' but, it is often the more nuanced language that can be the most divisive. Phrases such as 'hardworking families' imply that there are families who aren't hard working and divides people into 'them' and 'us'. The recent focus of politicians on 'working' families' ignores that there are people who will never be able to work but contribute to society in other ways. It is important to recognise the value of unpaid work too, both to our society and our economy. By using phrases such as these, and a tendency to focus on individual causes of poverty, we are moving back

towards the language of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor'.

## 'Three generations of families out of work'

There is a strong belief in Scotland poverty is caused by people not wanting to work.<sup>1</sup> This is associated with a "culture of worklessness" which is assumed to be the result of inter-generational unemployment. The extent of inter-generational unemployment is frequently overstated. In the

entire UK, there are only 15,000 households where two or more generations have 'never worked' and in thirty-five percent of these cases the second generation has been out of education for less than a year.<sup>2</sup> In addition to being inaccurate, the idea of a

"culture of worklessness" is also divisive. This myth suggests that people experiencing poverty differ from others in terms of their fundamental values and aspirations<sup>3</sup>. This contributes to an "us" vs. "them" narrative in which people



<sup>1</sup> McKendrick, J.H. (2014) 'COUNTING POVERTY IN SCOTLAND - NUMBERS THAT SHOULD SHAPE OUR PRIORITIES FOR ANTI-POVERTY ACTIVITY BEYOND 2014' in Scottish Anti Poverty Review [http://povertyalliance.org/userfiles/files/SAPR\\_16\\_AUTUMN\\_14.pdf](http://povertyalliance.org/userfiles/files/SAPR_16_AUTUMN_14.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2012) Poverty: The Role of Institutions, Behaviours, and Culture: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/poverty-role-institutions-behaviours>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p.26

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with experience of poverty are accused of having poor values - including laziness or the unwillingness to work - and of not wanting the best for themselves or their children. The pervasiveness of these assumption is illustrated by the fact that a large number of Scottish people now view "unwillingness to work" as a major cause of poverty, and see this as being encouraged by overly "generous" benefits levels<sup>4</sup>.

## Impact of stigma

Evidence suggests that the stigmatisation of people in receipt of benefits has negative impacts on their well-being and may reduce benefit take up. <sup>5</sup> Turn2us suggest that benefit stigma in Britain is primarily driven by the perception that claimants are 'undeserving'. <sup>6</sup> They argue that looking at trends over time, non-take-up of benefits has risen concurrently with stigma and that stigma has also had a negative impact on claimants own sense of self-worth. <sup>7</sup>

## Change is possible

The good news is that change is possible! The See Me campaign is a clear demonstration of this. While there is still a stigma surrounding mental health, there is no doubt that there is a much greater understanding and acceptance towards people with mental health problems today. See Me has certainly contributed to a better understanding of mental health.

By signing up to the **Stick Your Labels** your organisation will be publically committing to never use language that may contribute to stigmatising people living on low incomes. Whether in policy documents, speeches, press release, on twitter or Facebook, you will make sure that the language that is used is sensitive to the realities of poverty. Making sure that the organisation speaks about people on low incomes with respect will mean that in the long term people will be treated with respect.

To get involved contact us at:

**0141 353 0440**

**admin@povertyalliance.org**



<sup>4</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2012) Poverty: The Role of Institutions, Behaviours, and Culture: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/poverty-role-institutions-behaviours>

<sup>5</sup> Scottish Government (2015) 'Public attitudes to poverty, inequality and welfare in Scotland and Britain' <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0047/00473561.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Turn2us (nd) 'Benefits stigma in Britain' <http://www.turn2us.org.uk/PDF/Benefits%20Stigma%20in%20Britain.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Turn2us (nd) 'Benefits stigma in Britain' <http://www.turn2us.org.uk/PDF/Benefits%20Stigma%20in%20Britain.pdf>