Tackling poverty stigma workshops

Background

In 2022, we were asked by the Welsh Government to produce a series of reports on poverty and social exclusion, looking at evidence from Wales and around the world. To understand the lived experience of poverty in Wales, we carried out a review of existing research and held a series of focus groups with people with first-hand experience of poverty.

We learned that tackling stigma is a key priority for people with first-hand experience of poverty. This is because poverty stigma damages people's mental health and can keep them from getting support or playing a full part in their communities.

After finishing the original project for the Welsh Government, we decided to explore the topic of poverty stigma further, looking at existing research and having conversations with academic and lived experience experts.

Having taken stock of these initial findings, we held a series of workshops in November and December 2023, in collaboration with the International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO) and Co-production Lab Wales. The overarching aim of the workshops was to help us identify what WCPP or others could do next, to support public services in Wales to use the best available evidence to tackle poverty stigma more effectively.

Overview of the workshops

In November 2023 we held an in-person workshop at Tŷ Pawb in Wrexham, which brought together a broad mix of policy makers in local and national government, practitioners, young people, and academic and lived experience experts, from all over Wales and elsewhere in the UK.

The purpose of the in-person workshop was to bring together these different people and perspectives, to explore what we knew collectively about poverty stigma and reflect together on what this means for policy and practice. In doing so, we sought to start to surface some potential areas of focus and direction for future work to support public services to use the best available evidence to tackle poverty stigma more effectively.

We followed up the in-person workshop with a second workshop online in early December 2023, attended by a mix of those who had joined us in Wrexham and those who had been unable to attend in person. The purpose of this second session was to build on what we'd learned together through our discussions in Wrexham, to identify some ideas for work WCPP and others could take forward to help public services use the best available evidence to tackle poverty stigma more effectively.

Workshop one – Wrexham – November 2023

The workshop in Wrexham featured a series of participatory discussion activities, designed in partnership with lived experience experts from the Swansea Poverty Truth Commission and APLE (Addressing Poverty with Lived Experience) Collective. These were designed to build collective insight on the following questions:

What is poverty stigma and why does it matter?

1   Who can help tackle poverty stigma, and how?

2   What do decision-makers need to know and understand, to tackle poverty stigma more effectively?

The summaries below provide a high-level overview of these discussions.

Activity 1: What is poverty stigma and why does it matter?

During this activity, workshop participants reflected on their response to the question, 'What is poverty stigma and why does it matter'. Pre-workshop responses to this question were provided to support discussions.

What we learned

First and foremost, poverty stigma is something that is **done to** people in poverty and takes place at multiple levels of society, from the interpersonal to the structural.

As well as coming directly from others, poverty stigma is created and reinforced by media and political representations of poverty, and by the design and delivery of policies and public services – particularly where these "single out"

people in poverty or are bureaucratic and dehumanising. Some participants argued that at a political level, poverty stigma actually functions as a tool to reduce public spending and decide who gets help and who doesn't.

For those in poverty, the stigmatisation of poverty in society can result in feelings of shame, guilt, otherness and inferiority, leading to poor mental health. It can also limit people's social participation and access to support.

As well as these insights, the discussion highlighted the following:

- **The role of cultural ideals**. Poverty stigma is exacerbated by cultural ideals which promote a narrow sense of what it means to live a 'good' or 'successful' life, such as being financially independent. These are deep-rooted within our society, developed from early childhood, and contribute to conscious and unconscious biases which impact upon people in poverty. To address poverty stigma, an underlying culture must celebrate diversity and difference, and value other ways of contributing to society beyond work and wealth.

- **The need to empower people and communities to tackle poverty and poverty stigma.** There is a need for a cultural shift towards a preventative agenda, addressing the root causes of poverty (and poverty stigma), and changing the narrative, from one which perpetuates the myth that 'poverty is a choice', to one which sees poverty as a consequence of a failed system (which anyone could fall victim to, and everyone must take responsibility for). Critical is

the meaningful involvement of people with lived-experience of poverty (and poverty stigma) in the policy and decision-making which sets out to address it.

- **The specific experiences of children and young people.** Poverty stigma is experienced by children and young

people, especially at school. This can be added to by school policies (for example regarding school uniforms or free school meals). The education system has a key role to play in addressing poverty stigma.

The word-cloud below reflects the words shared by participants on the paper provided on their tables during Activity 1.

Activity 2: Who can help tackle poverty stigma, and how?

In this activity participants worked in small groups to create' Actor Maps', detailing who they viewed as the key individuals and organisations who have a part to play in tackling poverty stigma, what their roles and responsibilities are, and how they are connected to each other.

What we learned
Whole-group feedback and discussion of these highlighted the following:

- **Regulators**: Regulators have a key role to play in tackling poverty stigma (for example, media regulators and regulators of private landlords).

- **Education**: The education sector broadly, and schools specifically, have a key role to play (which schools having the ability to make an immediate impact to the poverty stigma experienced by young people through simple changes to in-school policies).

- **Media**: Media organisations have a key role to play in changing the prevailing

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narrative with regards to poverty (with stigma driven by current media norms).

- **Policy-makers**: With strategic policy changes (for example, adoption of models like the poverty truth commission) able to make significant positive impacts.

- **Agenda-setters:** Change requires buy-in from the top, and our national leaders (examples offered included the Prime Minster and King) have a part to play in influencing the political agenda and creating an impetus for action.

- **Collaboration:** It was emphasised that 'collective action' is needed, with tackling poverty stigma 'everyone's responsibility' and collaboration between diverse organisations and people with lived-experience essential.
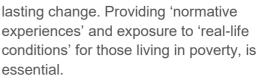
Activity 3: What do decision-makers need to know and understand, to tackle poverty stigma more effectively?

In this activity, participants sat together in a circle and conducted a 'Community of Enquiry', collectively discussing the question 'What do decision-makers need to know and understand to tackle poverty stigma more effectively?'

What we learned

Whilst a wide-ranging and extremely rich discussion, eight broad themes which featured prominently were as follows:

1. **Lived experience:** It is crucial that policy and public services decision makers work directly with and listen to people with lived experience of poverty.
2. **Empathy:** Decision makers need an emotional connection to people, and the issues, if they are to drive effective and

lasting change. Providing 'normative experiences' and exposure to 'real-life conditions' for those living in poverty, is essential.

3. **Root causes:** Poverty stigma can only be tackled if the root causes of poverty (and poverty stigma) are tackled.
4. **Narratives:** 'Changing the narrative' around poverty is critical to address stigma. The existence of poverty, and importance of tackling poverty and poverty stigma, must be acknowledged by our leaders. This narrative must include a shift from poverty as an 'individual's problem' to poverty as a 'societal and collective problem'.
5. **Roles and responsibilities:** Some policy areas do not recognise their role with regards to tackling poverty (and poverty stigma). Assessing the (intended and unintended) impact of policy on poverty and poverty stigma is essential.
6. **Working culture**: The cultures within teams and organisations are directly related to their ability to take meaningful action with regards to poverty and poverty stigma.
7. **Interconnection:** Poverty stigma must be understood in connection with wider issues and broader contexts (for example in relation to generational trauma, life limiting choices, diminished agency and so on). Creating 'psychologically informed environments' to safely explore the issues is essential.
8. **Long-term thinking**: Long term thinking (beyond election cycles) is needed from Government to ensure meaningful and lasting change.

At the end of the Community of Enquiry, each participant was invited to share any closing remarks or reflections. Five key themes from across these reflections were as follows:

1. **The scale of the challenge:** Poverty stigma, and wider connected stigmas, are deep rooted within our society, and within our systems. Wholesale changes are needed in many different areas, and more voices (including senior leaders) need to join the discussion.
2. **Kindness:** A kind and supportive culture is desired, with our public services (and work together) underpinned by compassion, empathy and respect.
3. **Shared responsibility:** With everybody having a role to play, and everybody needing to accept their personal responsibility for contributing to the solution.
4. **Ensuring all voices are heard**: With the involvement of people with lived-experience (and in particular the voices of our young people) fundamental to making progress.
5. **The value of discussion:** The group valued the nature of the Community of Enquiry itself. It was noted that opportunities to converse in this way are rare, but much needed.

Closing reflections

At the end of the workshop, participants were invited to share any closing remarks or reflections. A number of key themes emerged from these reflections.

Whilst there was an appreciation of gathering together in a physical space to discuss this issue, there was also a recognition of the **scale of the challenge** that we all face in tackling poverty stigma, which is deep rooted our society and within our systems. Wholesale changes are needed in many different areas, and more voices need to join the discussion.

Others reflected that the 'kindness is often lost when we start talking about stigma, because it is based on judgement' (Workshop participant). **A kind and supportive culture** is desired with public services and others in this area, underpinned by compassion, empathy, and respect.

Important to participants throughout the day, and was stressed in the closing reflections, was **ensuring that all voices are heard**. This, importantly, includes the involvement of people with lived experience, and in particular the voices of young people, which was seen as fundamental to making progress.

A key theme that emerged was the need to recognise that tackling poverty stigma is a '**collective responsibility** but in different roles' (Workshop participant). Everyone has a role to play in tackling stigma and for everyone to accept their personal responsibility in contributing to the solution. Participants also stressed the need to recognise what is our responsibility today to create change now:

> We've got to look at what our responsibility is today, even if it's as simple as when you hear something, you don't attack somebody for saying it, you just pose a few little questions to think… then we can really sit and think about in the long term, how can we together create this change or work towards it so that we're not sat in this circle in 20 years time saying the same thing? (Workshop participant)

Lastly, the group reflected on the **value of coming together in a shared space** and the open nature of the discussion that the format of Community of Enquiry allowed for. It was noted

that opportunities to do this are rare, but very much needed.

Workshop 2 – Online - December 2023

The online workshop in December was designed to provide a recap of the key insights shared at the in-person workshop, and to explore and inform our next steps and the potential for collaboration, both for those who joined us in person in Wrexham and for those who missed out and were joining the conversation for the first time.

The aims and objectives of this workshop were to:

- Provide an update of where we are so far in the project (what the research told us, what we learnt from the workshop);

- Identify and discuss ideas for work that WCPP/IPPO and partners could take forward to help public services in Wales to use the best available evidence to tackle poverty stigma more effectively;

- Let people know 'what happens next';

- Identify potential activities and outputs

- Explore and develop potential partnerships to take this work forward.

As a warm up activity, attendees initially joined small breakout rooms to introduce themselves and get to know on another. Groups reflected on their main takeaways from the Wrexham workshop (if they attended) and what they were expecting from the online session (if they didn't attend the Wrexham workshop). Attendees then rejoined the main group.

Members from both the APLE Collective and the Swansea Poverty Truth Commission were invited to share their reflections on the in-person workshop in Wrexham. Members reflected on what they found useful in the workshop, including the relationships that it enabled attendees to build and the benefit of gathering in a physical space to discuss an important issue that spans across sectors. It was also noted that there is a real interest in where the project goes next.

All attendees were then invited to spend a short amount of time reflecting individually on the question: 'What could WCPP/IPPO and partners do to support public services to use evidence to help them tackle poverty stigma more effectively?' In larger groups, attendees then took the ideas they had formulated and were asked to rank them from 'less impactful to 'more impactful', and 'easier to do' to 'difficult to do'. Ideas that attracted a lot of support within these groups were then taken to a whole group discussion. This discussion is summarised below.

Key themes from the group discussion

Training, resources and awareness raising

Ideas in this area focused specifically on raising awareness of the role that public services can play in tackling stigma. This includes supporting them through the design of training and resources. These should be designed in collaboration with lived experience experts to best inform policy makers and local authority decision makers on the role of poverty stigma.

Popular ideas included:

- Creating a toolkit similar to the CPAG's 'poverty proofing the school day' toolkit and/or awareness raising around this or other existing resources

- Co-design poverty/stigma awareness training for policy makers and practitioners with lived experience experts, drawing on behavioural science or other existing frameworks

- Working in/with schools to raise awareness of stigma, taking a child-led approach

- Highlighting simple and resource effective 'quick wins' for tackling stigma, perhaps through a series of blogs or other accessible resources

Information sharing and pooling and relationship building

There was appetite for developing a cross sector coalition or 'best practice' reference group where insights and information could be shared and pooled. This would also allow for the building of relationships and a wider poverty stigma network. Attendees also valued the idea of activity to bring people together to have conversations at a local level as well as gathering and promoting positive stories and case studies.

Other ideas included:

- Developing a simple dashboard to collate and share relevant insight and evidence.

- Creating bank of lived experience evidence.

- Developing a 'shared platform' to promote who is doing what and where (again building relationships and coordinating resources)

- Sharing findings with WG and work with them to develop and identify actions and solutions.

Events (including further workshops)

- Run a poverty stigma summit that includes speakers from across sectors

- Another workshop that includes representatives from media and health, and representatives with lived experience from both urban and rural settings.

- A workshop with service providers that focuses on simulating a 'role reversal' of service providers and people with lived experience of poverty stigma

Changing the narrative (working with media)

- Create a toolkit on how to work with local media and internal comms departments to tackle stigma

- Work with local media and government to change narratives

- Consideration of the language that WCPP (and partners) use in their work

Evaluation

Several attendees noted the importance of an 'evaluation' stage – measuring the impact of actions and intervention.

This could include evaluating the effectiveness of different interventions, alongside identifying any research gaps to focus our work.

Development and provision of research tools to support public services

Suggestions also included connecting public services with the latest research tools and resources to enable them to tackle poverty stigma. Suggestions include a navigable dashboard of research activities, providing insights, reports and topic papers produced by WCPP on request that relate to wide ranging themes in the poverty stigma space e.g. poverty stigma and public transport. There were also suggestions of enabling 'easy access' to WCPP research and resources.

The inclusion of lived experience (experts and young people) in policy development

It is also important to note that workshop participants felt strongly that including lived experience throughout any decision making processes, and building professional relationships with people with lived experience, were important themes underpinning the ideas discussed above. Participants also felt strongly about working with young people and including them in any policy development.

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