

Understanding and addressing poverty stigma in Swansea

A community-led report for the communities of Swansea



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The Wales Centre for Public Policy bridges the gap between research and decision-making by making rigorous evidence and expertise accessible, relevant, and actionable for policy makers, practitioners and public service leaders across Wales.

Our vision

A Wales where public policy and practice are consistently shaped by the best available evidence and insight, leading to more effective, equitable, and responsive public services.

Our mission

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- **ADVANCE.** We advance knowledge in the field of evidence-informed policy by sharing learning, evaluating impact, and contributing to a growing knowledge base of what works in practice.

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Contents

Summary	4
Introduction	5
How poverty stigma works: what communities told us	6
How services can make things worse	11
What works: community solutions	12
Professionals' ideas for tackling poverty stigma	13
Taking action: what Swansea partners can do	14



Summary

What is poverty stigma?

Poverty stigma occurs when people experiencing poverty are made to feel ashamed, judged, treated differently or excluded because they do not have enough money. A Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) survey found that one in four people in Wales reported experiencing poverty stigma "always, often or sometimes" in the past year. This rises to one in three among households with an annual income below £20,000 (2024).

What we did

We worked with community researchers who have lived experience of poverty to understand how poverty stigma operates in Swansea and what public services can do to reduce it.

Who is this report for?

This report was written for the communities of Swansea, particularly the people and groups who participated in the research. An accompanying report, which also draws on international academic evidence, has been prepared for policy makers and practitioners and can be seen [here](#).

What we found in Swansea

This research shows that poverty stigma shapes daily life through systems, spaces and relationships.

What needs to happen:

- Employ people with lived experience of poverty within public and support services
- Create warm and welcoming environments in all public buildings
- Reduce the need for people to repeat their personal stories multiple times
- Support community-led solutions that are already working
- Treat people with dignity and respect in all interactions

Introduction

Between February and May 2025, we carried out research in Swansea to understand how poverty stigma affects people's lives and to identify practical responses. This work was co-produced and led by community researchers with lived experience of poverty, working alongside independent researchers.

We spoke with 46 people across seven community groups and held two workshops with professionals from local services.

The research focused on four main questions:

1. Where and how do people experience poverty stigma in Swansea?
2. In what ways do public services contribute to poverty stigma?
3. What impact does this have on individuals, families and communities?
4. What actions can prevent and address poverty stigma?



Our Community Researchers – clockwise from left: Karen Berrell, Michelle Hopkins, Melvyn Williams, Dr Tarh Martha Ako Mfortem

How poverty stigma works: what communities told us

Early experiences that last a lifetime

Children who experience poverty stigma can carry those feelings into adulthood. One participant recalled: *'I had the school dinners, free school dinners. I was tormented about all that... We were the poor kids in school.'*

Another parent described how their child was called 'rusty' by classmates for wearing older shoes because they could not afford to replace them immediately: *'She still feels it now.'*

These early experiences of being singled out because of not having much money can cause lasting emotional harm. They can shape how individuals see themselves well into adult life.

Participants described how this can create a cycle:



When poverty stigma gets inside your head

Comments and attitudes from others about being poor can begin to influence how people see themselves. One participant explained: *'I don't feel stigma because I don't give a sh*t that I got no money. I couldn't give a toss... But when I was going to when I had Universal Credit, I would break down because I get so anxious about doing it and the state I'd be in going either into an office or talking on the phone to people, I would get so anxious about it, and that was my stigma that I have about being poor, which I didn't even think about.'*

This shows how people may reject poverty stigma at one level, while still internalising it in ways that create anxiety and stress, sometimes without recognising the source.



Social media and media pressure

Social media can generate ongoing pressure to compare lifestyles. As one participant described: *'People on there who post up they're doing something every day... I feel terrible if I haven't done nothing with mine.'*

Christmas can intensify this pressure: *'Everyone in matching pyjamas... everyone's got a post when there's birthdays or Christmas coming, oh Santa's been and the living room's full',* leaving families who cannot afford similar displays feeling bad.

Traditional media can also contribute to stigma through negative portrayals of people living in poverty, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and assumptions about who deserves support.

Families under pressure

Parents work hard to protect their children from experiencing poverty stigma, but children often understand more than parents realise. One young person said: *'Living has become a chore... that makes you feel bad for your mother.'*

Parents described the lengths they go to: *'I would rather feed my child than feed myself... you end up going without certain things just to make sure they've got the brand.'*

Children also find ways to protect their parents from feeling guilty. When excluded from school trips, they say: *'Mum, it's fine. I don't want to go anyway.'* But as one parent recognised: *'I have known for a while she wanted to go.'*



Poverty stigma can separate and divide people

Stigma can create perceived differences between people in similar situations.

One person described feeling judged by a neighbour: *'It's like my friend, she lives in a council house. She works five days a week. I work two. I'm a full-time father... judge me, if you want. I'm enjoying my kids.'*

One participant described his reaction to a food bank user: *'A lady pulls up in a brand new car, she goes into the food bank. So I said, "Look, if you don't put a stop to that, I'm off."'*



No good choices

Poverty stigma also occurs when people are blamed and judged for choices they are forced into by poverty and the systems around them. Systems intended to help can instead trap people, then blame them for making rational decisions within those constraints. People told us they felt judged for working part-time, but would lose money if they worked more hours.

As one young person explained: *'You can only work 10 hours a week, and if you go over you get your benefits completely taken... for every pound you earn, it's 55p taken off your benefits... so you're getting a couple of pounds off at the end'*, making additional work feel pointless.

When people choose benefits over work that would leave them worse off, they are blamed for being lazy. But this overlooks the fact that the system itself does not always function in a way that makes work pay.

We heard about people in arrears with housing associations and paying the bedroom tax who were not allowed to move to smaller accommodation until they cleared their debt: *'Her arrears are going to keep accumulating because she's in a three-bedroom and she's a single person... She's stuck in a big cycle... Instead of moving her from a three-bedroom to a flat, yeah, and then letting her pay off her arrears.'*

Sometimes people are even judged for wanting a choice about where they live and work, things that others take for granted.

When systems make getting help hard

Seeking help with basic needs can feel like a public sign of failure. As one person described going to a food bank: *'The first time I went, I felt exposed and embarrassed... it was like I'd walked in with a banner. I'm poverty stricken.'*

Complex forms and assessments can become sources of distress: *'Groundhog Day... you're retraumatizing the person... having to repeat things over and over again. It makes you feel less valued.'*

The benefits system can make people feel they must perform being in need, while also feeling judged for needing support. One young person described their assessment: *'I felt like I was putting a show on... it just feels like there's this performance, and then I just end up feeling really ashamed of myself.'*



Multiple layers of unfair treatment

For some people, these experiences are intensified when not having money combines with other challenges, such as being from another country, having a disability, or experiencing racism.

For example, asylum seekers are given vouchers for bus travel that must be completed correctly. It is easy to make a mistake. One woman told us that when she made a mistake, the bus driver accused her of doing it deliberately. Passengers on the bus joined in with racist abuse, saying she did not pay taxes and had come to the country to get things for free.

Spaces that include or exclude

Physical spaces and places can either welcome or exclude people depending on their financial situation.

One person explained how the same activity is treated very differently: *'You got a bit of money, and sit in beer garden, have a glass of red wine every night... quite acceptable places to drink alcohol. If you haven't got the money to do things like that, where do you go, can of Strongbow in the park on the weekend. Very, very different kind of feelings...'*

The physical environment of services can also send messages about a person's worth. Security guards and screens in places such as job centres can make people feel they are viewed as criminals or potentially violent, rather than as people seeking help.

Transport costs mean that *"£7 for a day [bus] ticket"* keeps some people confined to certain areas and excluded from others.

Businesses may exclude people based on appearance: *'Most of the people living on the street in Swansea was stopped from going to Burger King, McDonald's... He had money in his pocket but because they clocked, they look a certain way.'*

Where someone lives can become a marker that affects how they are treated. Young people reported hiding their postcodes on job applications because they worry it affects their chances of getting work.

How services can make things worse

Rather than reducing poverty stigma, public services can sometimes reinforce it through:

- **Staff determining who receives help**, with frontline workers controlling access and deciding who qualifies for support
- **Variation by area**, with people reporting that response times and service quality depend on where you live
- **Repeated assessments across different services**, requiring people to retell their experiences multiple times
- **Unwelcoming buildings**, including security guards and design features that suggest people are not valued

Both members and professionals identified similar problems and proposed comparable solutions.

What works: community solutions

Food banks as community spaces

Operating as 'community shops', where people make small donations, helps to maintain dignity. As one person said: *'We found by calling it a shop and not a food bank more people will come.'*



Community employment

The Phoenix Centre, which is a community hub at the centre of Townhill, was seen as effective because *'everybody who works here ... is from the Hill'* – meaning that services delivered by the community for the community remove barriers and build trust.



Peer support networks

Informal support often works better than formal provision, with peer supporters noting that *'they'd rather contact us than actually get in touch with the services.'*



Professionals' ideas for tackling poverty stigma

When we spoke to professionals about poverty stigma in Swansea during two workshops, they identified the following approaches:

Including people with experience

Services are more effective when delivered by, or in partnership with, people who have direct experience. Communities said: *'I would rather speak to someone like myself than speak to someone who's learned from a book.'*

Believing people first

Starting from a position of trust, rather than initial scepticism, helps people feel respected and reduces anxiety.

Agency and choice

Using language that recognises entitlement, such as *'you have a right to this support'*, rather than focusing on what people do not have, helps to maintain dignity.

Better environments

Removing unnecessary security guards, creating welcoming spaces and co-locating services can reduce stigma.

Supporting staff

Heavy workloads and pressure to process cases quickly can prevent staff from providing respectful support. Setting realistic targets and allowing time for meaningful conversations would enable staff to treat people with dignity.



Taking action: what Swansea partners can do



Immediate changes

- Employ people with lived experience of poverty in frontline roles across services
- Remove security guards from service buildings where they are not essential for safety
- Create warm and welcoming spaces in all service buildings
- Train all frontline staff to start from a position of belief and trust, adopting a 'believe people' approach
- Reduce repetitive assessments by improving joint working and information sharing
- Expand successful community models, such as the Phoenix Centre approach
- Introduce 'no wrong door' policies so people can access help through any initial point of contact

Building on what already works

- Support existing community innovations, such as food banks operating as 'community shops'
- Invest in community spaces that bring together multiple services
- Recognise and fund informal peer support networks, for example Adferiad's informal support networks
- Learn from successful models in which communities deliver services within their own areas



Advocacy and influence

While some changes require action at other levels of government, Swansea partners can:

- Advocate collectively for Universal Free School Meals, including for secondary as well as primary pupils, affordable and accessible transport, and reform of Universal Credit
- Build and share evidence of what works with other areas and policymakers
- Use existing powers creatively to reduce poverty stigma within current systems



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