

A GLUE THAT HOLDS POVERTY IN PLACE

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
ENDING POVERTY STIGMA



**STIGMA
FREE
FUTURES**

Poverty and poverty stigma are deeply connected.

Poverty stigma makes us all feel like we're to blame for poverty.

It tries to take away our dignity and inherent worth. It stops us from seeing each other as human beings. It makes us blame ourselves and each other instead of blaming the systems that create poverty and stigma.

Stigma is not inevitable; it is deliberate and by design. It benefits those with power.

Stigma can be devastating, debilitating and dangerous, and it can kill.

If you've experienced poverty, this description of poverty-stigma may resonate with you, as will our aims to tackle it.

Find out more about poverty stigma:

- [- Poverty Stigma Explained](#)
- [- The Power of We](#)



The Stigma Free Futures Design Team was brought together to understand the causes of poverty stigma, to learn from current and past initiatives to address it, and to make recommendations on what most needs to be prioritised to end it.



THE STIGMA FREE FUTURES DESIGN TEAM

We share a commitment to fighting poverty and economic injustice and abolishing poverty stigma.

Our team is made up of people who have lived experience of poverty and poverty stigma; alongside racism, care experience, disability, gender and/or sexuality-based oppression and discrimination.

Nkechi

I have Nigerian heritage but spent most of my childhood in Scotland, navigating multiple cultures profoundly shaped my identity, experiences, and understanding of inequality. Whilst my personal experiences have mostly related to gendered and racialised inequality, I have diverse insights into the experience of how race, gender, migration status, socioeconomic, and many more factors intersect with contemporary life for people of colour in the UK

Alana

I grew up in Ireland in a small family, with roots in America and England. I have collaborated on storytelling and social justice projects that shine a light on what is most important to people because of my own experiences. I help people carve out time for themselves, develop understanding and gain clarity through my coaching and communications background.

Sarah C

I grew up in a working class village in North Yorkshire with roots in South East Asia. My understanding and lens on social injustice is rooted in experience - of my own community and working alongside others experiencing it in their daily lives. My working life in charities has been spent advocating for and building a bridge between policy making and those who are impacted by those policies.

Steve (AKA Redeyefeenix)

I'm a hip-hop emcee from Hull, the protagonist in Sean McCallister's documentary A Northern Soul. I'm also the founder of the Beats Bus Records, a social enterprise and award-winning community organisation that has a record label and a mobile recording studio for outreach work discovering young talent, and offering them mentorships for no cost.

THE STIGMA FREE FUTURES DESIGN TEAM

China

I've grown up in a family impacted by distress and the mental health system and this has shaped some of my understanding of stigma, and how stigma and mental health connect to poverty. A lot of my focus and activism is with disabled folks who experience the brutalities of the UK welfare system. I feel like we know a lot of what is wrong with our current system and for me what is more challenging and vital is visioning more life-affirming and dignifying systems and ways of being.

Heather

I'm from Edinburgh and having grown up and worked in the care system, I have personal knowledge and experience of the effects of poverty and stigma. I know what it feels like to experience stigma, and this has influenced the kind of work I've been drawn to. Two of my favourite sayings are: "the view from a desk is a dangerous one" and "Nothing About Us Without Us".

Sarah W

Having come through a difficult childhood, growing up around drug addiction and social care interventions in one of the UK's most deprived cities, at the age of 23 I became a single mum and a week later I lost my own mum. By the age of 26, I'd spent almost three years on benefits and the media's negative poverty rhetoric had become my inner voice. An article in my local paper for the School of Participation led to me discovering the power of telling my story and speaking of my experiences. Inspired by this I set-up Community Pride CIC to empower people to speak up about and take action on personal, community, national and international issues.

Imogen

I grew up in North-West England, where I continue to live and work. Personal experiences of stigma and shame have profoundly shaped my life and my career as a sociologist. I've collaborated with several community and activist groups addressing social inequalities and injustices that are compounded by poverty stigma, classism and racism, including Morecambe Bay Poverty Truth Commission, the UK Poverty Truth Network and Lancaster Black History group.

Alexandra

I grew up in Merseyside at a very interesting time politically, and as a result have always been interested in how social policy and public services shape our experiences and opportunities. My working life has been spent in the public sector, and consequently, I have witnessed how stigma and individual biases can be just as damaging as policies and systems. I want to change this, and I'm also interested in how local identity and gender intersect with experiences of stigma, and in narratives surrounding social mobility.

Hal

I am a 2nd generation Bengali east Londoner, who grew up watching the rapid development of the east end around me, whilst feeling ashamed of the council estate I was from. It sparked a life-long passion for all things cities, and deeper thinking about how the neighbourhoods we live in and the social and economic infrastructure available to us, shape the course of our lives.

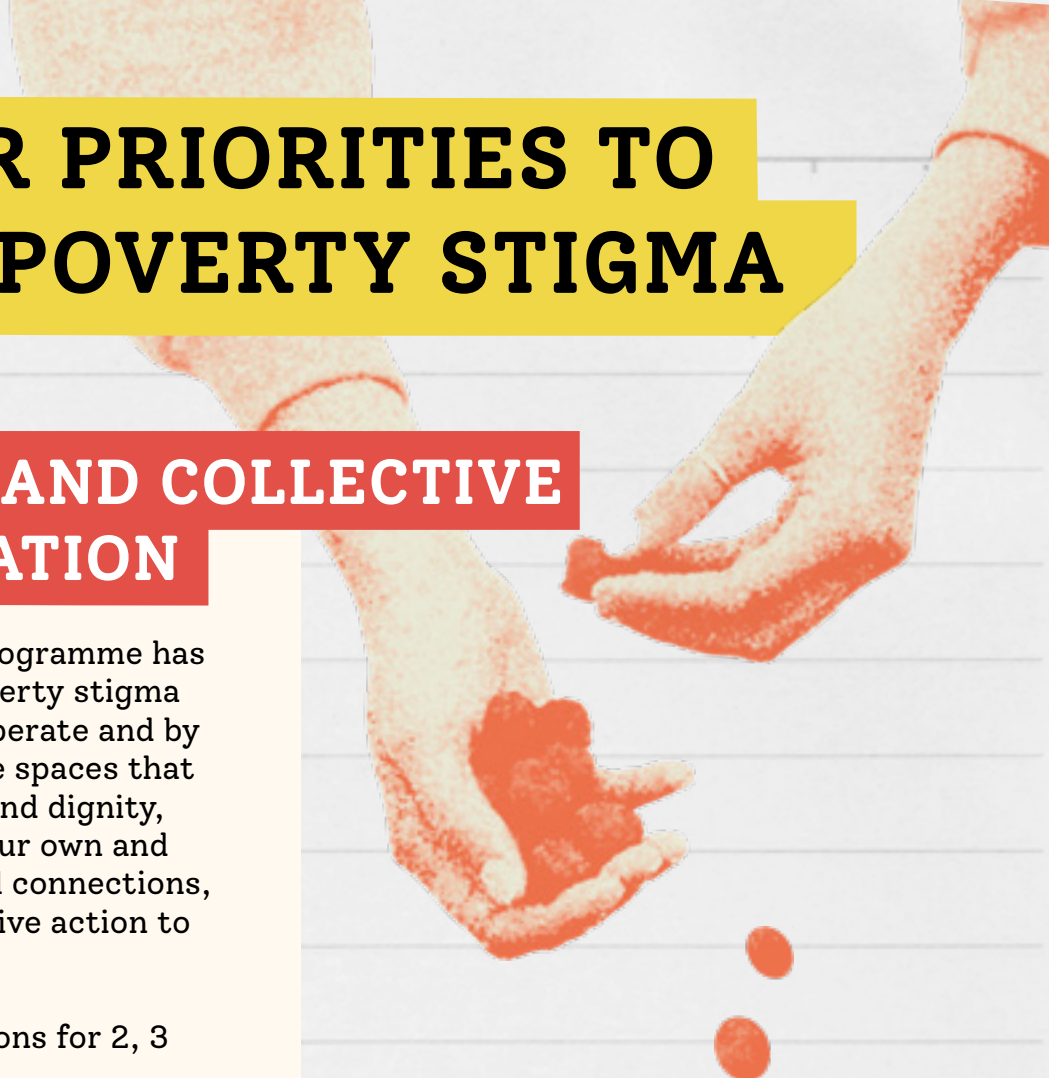
Patrick

I grew up during the time of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland and, as for many then and still now, that came with growing up in circumstances of poverty, acute childhood experience and cross-generational trauma along with the experience of stigma that surrounded that lived experience. Being a 'first generational' University attendee gave me a large element of what I needed to find ways 'outwards' rather than 'beyond' this start in life as the language of shame and stigma is so easy to reinforce - even for those who experience it.

Nasrat

I moved to the UK from Bangladesh 13 years ago, and ever since I've lived in East London, specifically Tower Hamlets. Due to this, on a daily basis I see the effects of poverty and stigma. For the last few years, I've also been working as a peer researcher in communities and have been made aware of many people's individual experiences of such issues.

OUR FOUR PRIORITIES TO ABOLISH POVERTY STIGMA



1. PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE TRANSFORMATION

Our experience on this programme has helped us realise that poverty stigma is not inevitable, but deliberate and by design. We need to create spaces that affirm safety, belonging and dignity, where we can recognise our own and each other's dignity, build connections, and move towards collective action to end poverty stigma.

This creates the foundations for 2, 3 and 4 below.

2. KNOW-HOW AND TOOLS TO RECOGNISE AND CHALLENGE STIGMA

Build the know-how and tools for people and organisations to recognise poverty stigma and challenge it where it occurs.

3. LIVED EXPERIENCE TRULY PART OF DECISION-MAKING

Recognise the expertise of people with lived experience of poverty stigma and create systems where they can work in coalition with others on shared decision-making about resources.

4. IMAGINING NEW SYSTEMS WHERE WORK DOESN'T DEFINE WORTH

Document existing and imagine new systems where work doesn't define people's worth, so that everyone's inherent value is recognised.



1. PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE TRANSFORMATION

Our experience as a team has helped us realise that poverty stigma is not inevitable, but deliberate and by design. We need to support others in coming to terms with what this means. Giving space for processing the harm done to them or recognising the part they might have played in perpetuating poverty stigma. By no longer blaming ourselves and each other we can focus on the practices, experiences and systems that create poverty and stigma.

We have been on both individual and collective journeys as part of the process of forming these recommendations. As a result we appreciate the need for personal and collective change.



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“When I started the work I felt sad as I realised I had suffered...and hadn't processed it, but as we progressed with the work the sadness turned into resilience... it made me feel empowered. The empowerment gave me hope.”

“Shame makes people want to hide it, I want to scream that 'I'm not ashamed, it's not me, it's not my fault, it's the system, why should I feel shame?'”

“You soak up the stigma, the negativity and stereotypes and all things people say about us ... this becomes your inner monologue.”

“Stigma divides people, and works like a form of coercive control... working to destigmatise poverty is important to build solidarity and collectively mobilise to tackle poverty.”

“We internalise stigma and let it keep us down.”

“We are all creators and perpetrators of stigma.”

“The first step to resisting stigma is to know it's not your fault, that it is caused by things beyond you, that you are not alone and that we can stand up against it.”

“This is the system, using shame to keep people quiet, prevent people from sharing things. If we can enable people to share, then stigma can be turned into a shared cause for action.”

“People in poverty themselves and those who consider themselves allies also reproduce this stigma.”

2. KNOW-HOW AND TOOLS TO RECOGNISE AND CHALLENGE STIGMA

Build the know-how and tools for people and organisations to recognise poverty stigma, such as ideas about who is 'deserving' and 'undeserving', and challenge it where it occurs, for example in policy, service delivery and the media.

Some of the many ways poverty stigma is created and reinforced...

The UK is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, but since the 1980s there has been an unprecedented rise in poverty in Britain, with current levels of poverty being around 50% higher than in the 1970s.

Yet poverty is a condition of economic injustice - an outcome of policies that have been deliberately designed through political choice. People are not poor, rather millions are forced to live in poverty because they are being failed by the state, by government policies and by welfare systems.

Poverty stigma is used by those in power to make such high levels of poverty seem socially and politically acceptable.

Stigma is also present in the charitable systems of support that have rapidly increased since 2010 to plug gaps, including foodbanks and other emergency forms of aid.

The stigma associated with seeking or receiving 'relief', whether that 'aid' takes the form of government benefits or charitable gifts, has been a central feature of welfare provision in the UK for over 500 hundred years.

Welfare entitlement has been demonised by politicians, government officials, think tanks, media executives, journalists and television producers.

The roll-out of 'austerity' cuts to the UK welfare and benefits system from 2010 onwards was accompanied by unprecedented levels of stigma directed towards benefits claimants.

Words with connotations of battles and confrontation such as 'combating' public spending on Universal Credit, or descriptions of 'frontline' services pits public service workers against people trying to access services.

The words, graphics and visual images that organisations use when communicating and sharing poverty data and research. For example, an overreliance on statistics distances us from the human impacts of poverty.

Technical language, such as housing associations building 'units' rather than homes, and the DWP referring to people as 'claimants', alienates people who use services and dehumanises them to disguise the impact policies and services have on people.

3. LIVED EXPERIENCE TRULY PART OF DECISION-MAKING

Recognise the expertise of people with lived experience of economic injustice and poverty stigma; and create systems where they can work in coalition with others on shared decision-making about the allocation of resources.

Poverty stigma is used as a tool for rationing resources. Even organisations and services set up to help people living in poverty may (purposefully or inadvertently) reproduce the stigma that keeps poverty in place.

In developing a way of working together as a team, we wanted from the outset to model approaches that both acknowledged our diversity as a group and put into practice the kinds of methods we believe are required to address a problem as complex and multifaceted as poverty stigma.

We came to define this approach as...

Coalitional working

Includes people with current experiences of poverty.

Moves away from top-down versus bottom-up approaches.

Goes beyond tokenistic or extractive forms of 'lived experience' or 'service user' inclusion.

Functions through deep listening and relationships.

Acknowledges that all forms of expertise are required to eliminate poverty stigma.

Honours collective sense-making and knowledge.

Holds space for generative conflict - for people to learn into tensions and disputes.

Develops practices that can sustain change.



4. IMAGINING NEW SYSTEMS WHERE WORK DOESN'T DEFINE WORTH

Document existing and imagine new systems where work doesn't define people's worth, so that everyone's inherent value is recognised.

While we can and should attempt to design poverty stigma out of our current systems, we also need to look beyond them to create new systems that don't require stigma to function.

Eradicating poverty and stigma includes recognising and valuing everybody's worth - whatever their relationship to paid work.

No-one is a burden or should be defined by their relationship or ability to work. We need to break the association that work equals worth.

Work does not equal worth. We have value in the world beyond our socio-economic status.

WE DEMAND...

Leadership by those most impacted.

Those most impacted by poverty stigma are closest to the solution but the furthest away from resources. We demand recognition and resourcing of the expertise and leadership of people with lived experience.

Abundance versus scarcity. We've long been told there are not enough resources and that only some people are deserving of support. We reject ideas of deservingness and demand collective decision-making about resources for our communities.

Generosity versus hoarding. Powerful systems allow the resources we need to be hoarded and kept for only a few. Instead, we demand to co-create systems for sharing and redistributing resources so that we can all thrive.

Interdependence versus independence.

Poverty and stigma make us feel alone while being told we should strive for independence. But we know we all need each other, and no one is a burden.

Life-affirming systems that allow us to be in relationship with each other and the earth, and to move towards collective freedom. We rely on each other. We need each other.

Freedom. We strive towards freedom through deep personal and collective healing and structural transformation.



We invite you to imagine with us:
how would it feel to live in a world
free of poverty and stigma?

**Instead of systems
based on...**



Scarcity
Hoarding
Independence
Individual striving



**Systems
based on...**



Abundance
Generosity
Interdependency
Collective freedom



WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Watch to find out more about poverty stigma:

[Poverty Stigma Explained](#)
[The Power of We](#)

Access our learnings:

[Learnings video](#)

Read this report:

[Poverty stigma: a glue that holds poverty in place](#)

Read these blogposts:

[Can stigma help to eradicate poverty?](#)

[Stigma Sucks: addressing stigma to overcome poverty](#)

[Visual empathy: capturing poverty through a stigma free lens](#)

[On the 'frontline' of poverty: how public services reinforce stigma](#)

[Reflections on stigma and poverty in the UK](#)

[How we can flush out poverty stigma from our systems and services](#)

[Building power and hope for social change - what are the magic ingredients?](#)



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