

Our response to the UK government's welfare cuts

About See Me

See Me is Scotland's national programme to end mental health stigma and discrimination. Our vision is for a fair and inclusive Scotland, free from mental health stigma and discrimination. See Me is hosted by SAMH and the Mental Health Foundation.

More: www.seemescotland.org

Introduction

See Me is deeply concerned about what these cuts will mean for many people in Scotland living with mental ill health. Disability charities across Scotland have said that the UK government's planned cuts "seek to balance the nation's books on the backs of disabled people"¹. We agree.

There is widespread public opposition to the cuts and we would draw your attention to the research carried out by 'More in Common' in March 2025: with 83% of the public having heard of the planned cuts, 3 in 5 (58 percent) think they are a bad idea². When the public are asked for their view if this meant that some people with long-term mental health conditions losing out on support, this opposition increases to 64%.

Unless the proposed changes are mitigated, they have the potential to be extremely damaging, perhaps even life-changing or – in the most extreme cases – life-ending for some of the most marginalised people in our society. People will be pushed to the brink.

Notwithstanding the financial hardship, we believe a dangerous narrative is emerging from the UK government to justify these proposed cuts. It is being driven by stigmatising language intent on demonising people with mental health problems, using blame tactics to stir up social discontent and point the finger at those most marginalised in order to detract from the impact of years of austerity. We would also argue that assumptions are being made that someone living with a mental health problem does not work or does not want to work, and this is simply not the reality.

¹ Leonard Cheshire joint letter to the UK government https://www.leonardcheshire.org/about-us/our-news/press-releases/our-joint-open-letter-uk-government-planned-welfare-cuts?utm_source=chatgpt.com

² Joseph Rowntree Foundation [Where will cuts to sickness and disability benefits fall hardest? | Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#)

See Me is opposed to the changes proposed in the UK government's consultation paper and the Universal Credit and Personal Independent Payment Bill in its entirety.

We ask you to consider the following:

Discrimination and a stigmatising narrative

We believe these proposals as they stand would amount to further discrimination in an existing system that already discriminates against people living with a mental health problem³. This is a view shared by the NUJ's Disabled Members' Council⁴.

From our research, people tell us they already experience stigma and discrimination in the existing welfare benefits system⁵. The proposals contained in the consultation paper will only make things worse. The Scottish Mental Illness Stigma Study (SMISS)⁶ told us:

- Just over half of respondents (53%) reported experiences of stigma and discrimination related to welfare and financial support in the past 12 months.
- One in ten (11%) reported experiencing this frequently and 16% very frequently.
- Stigma and discrimination had also been experienced due to respondents' physical disabilities (45%).
- 91% said agreed they should receive additional consideration when accessing, retaining, or using welfare benefit and financial support services.
- Only one fifth (19%) agreed they have had positive experiences when accessing, retaining, or using welfare benefit and financial support services.

Dangerous stereotypes and stigmatising language are becoming more frequent as discussions continue around people who claim benefits. With political peers and other people in positions of power deeming certain members of society 'less worthy' of support, their conditions less serious and more suited to employment, we are noting an increased

³ National Union of Journalists Disabled Members' Council https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-s-disabled-members-council-expresses-grave-concern-over-proposed-welfare-reform.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁴ NUJ Disabled Members' Council https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-s-disabled-members-council-expresses-grave-concern-over-proposed-welfare-reform.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁵ The Scottish Mental Illness Stigma Study <https://www.seemescotland.org/media/11118/see-me-scottish-mental-illness-stigma-study-final-report-sep-2022.pdf>

⁶ SMISS <https://www.seemescotland.org/media/11118/see-me-scottish-mental-illness-stigma-study-final-report-sep-2022.pdf>

legitimisation of stigma, discriminatory language and harmful stereotypes becoming more prevalent.

The language used by senior public figures is making this worse. We are seeing Westminster politicians speak of welfare benefits as 'pocket money'. We've heard complaints of the 'overdiagnosis' of mental health problems. If people in high profile positions are saying these things, demonising people for accessing help and support for struggling with their mental health, it contributes to the public stigma and negative discourse surrounding mental ill health which we already recognise as a problem in Scotland (figures obtained by Censuswide for the UK Anti-Stigma Alliance):

- 28 per cent of people in Scotland would not want someone with experience of a mental illness to look after their child.
- 15 per cent say they wouldn't want to be in a relationship with someone with experience of a mental illness.

SMISS described that people had experienced mental health stigma and discrimination across 14 areas of their life, and in most of the services they come into contact with, including in employment.

Financial impact

Evidence shows that when governments change or tighten eligibility for welfare benefits, people's mental health worsens (Centre for Mental Health).

On the run up to the announcement of such changes, worry will set in for thousands of people, also impacting on their mental health. It is crucial that the government engages with, and really listens to, the people claiming these benefits to understand the real impact of what losing such support could mean for Scots.

Finances are already tight for families and individuals in Scotland, with the cost of living only increasing further still. Increased council tax, utilities bills and food bills are putting real strain on people's bank balances. More people are accessing food banks just to exist⁷. When people are relying on welfare benefits and charities to meet these everyday costs, the thought of losing this support is terrifying.

Re-balancing the UC health element and the standard allowance will push more people living with mental ill health into poverty. We do not agree with re-balancing the UC health element and the standard allowance, and we would draw your attention to the [UK government's own equality analysis](#)⁸, which shows that disabled people claiming UC will be worse off:

⁷ Trussell Trust <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/news/our-response-to-social-security-cuts-for-disabled-people>

⁸ UK government's equality analysis <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/pathways-to-work-reforming-benefits-and-support-to-get-britain-working-green-paper/spring-statement-2025-health-and-disability-benefit-reforms-equality-analysis>

- a rate freeze for existing claimants of the UC health element, with 2.25 million current recipients facing an average loss of £500 per year
- a rate reduction for new claimants, with 730,000 future recipients facing an average loss of £3,000 per year.

We would draw your attention to a report from Citizens Advice which shows the reality for people who are claiming disability benefits⁹: “when we polled people receiving disability benefits earlier this year, over 4 in 10 were struggling to afford their essentials, with half having to use savings. A quarter were avoiding medical costs, and almost a third were skipping meals to pay their bills. Cuts will push many further into hardship.”

In relation to how this will impact the adult disability payment (ADP) in Scotland, we are concerned about the plans to use the personal independent payment (PIP) assessment for the UC health element. This would mean that the single PIP assessment would be used to assess eligibility for the UC health element. Ineligibility for PIP daily living would deny people access to the UC health element. This will impact people in Scotland because ADP does not use the PIP medical assessment. It is concerning that there is a lack of clarity from the UK government around how Scottish UC claimants will be assessed for the health element, and both the UK and Scottish governments should protect eligibility for the UC health element through the ADP.

We are also worried that the UK government could in the future consider that PIP and ADP are no longer equivalent. This could impact people receiving ADP which we know acts as an automatic entry point into other benefits.

‘Back to work’

There are several issues relating to the suggestion that the solution lies in getting people ‘back to work’. This idea over simplifies the complexities of living with and managing a mental health problem or severe and enduring mental illness, and the marginalisation and discrimination people experience in workplace settings.

This narrative also makes the assumption that people living with a mental health problem do not work or do not want to work. That is simply not the reality.

“Everyone wants a job or to be valued in some way. To be part of society again because you were so excluded all the time. I don’t care what anyone says... we’re still excluded, excluded from the job market you know” (SMISS participant)¹⁰.

⁹ Citizens Advice report

https://assets.ctfassets.net/mfz4nbgura3g/1pboZluAZyi1OC0edSS3cM/d840a0baba49119004cd3a5711b25684/Pa-thways_to_Poverty_How_planned_cuts_to_disability_benefits_will_impact_the_people_we_support.pdf

¹⁰ The Scottish Mental Illness Stigma Study [see-me-scottish-mental-illness-stigma-study-final-report-sep-2022.pdf](#)

The Scottish Mental Illness Stigma Study (SMISS)¹¹ told us that **71 per cent of people had experienced discrimination in employment**. Only 27 per cent of people reported positive experiences in employment.

Stigma and prejudice have been identified as contributory factors for exclusion. For example, there is evidence that employers can be hesitant to take on people with mental health problems. People living with severe and longer-term mental illnesses are likely to be more greatly disadvantaged in this regard. An English survey found a 40% employment rate for those with severe mental health problems, in comparison to a 64% employment rate for those with common mental health problems and a 74% rate for those with no mental health problems. In addition, a German study, found strong negative reactions in response to people with psychosis returning to work.

The Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2013 found that 37% of people who identified as having a mental health problem had experienced some form of negative social consequence such as being verbally or physically abused or turned down for a job¹².

This is reflected in the Scottish Mental Illness Stigma Study¹³ which looked at employment as one of the life areas:

- Nearly two thirds (246 or 71%) respondents reported that they had experienced stigma and discrimination in the employment life area within the past 12 months.
- 29% reported it was experienced frequently or very frequently. This life area was selected by 125 (36%) of respondents as one of up to three in which the stigma and discrimination they experienced had the greatest impact on them.
- Over two thirds (77%) of respondents agree that they had been treated unfairly in the workplace, with 71% reporting being treated unfairly by employers, supervisors or managers, and 57% agreed with the statement about being unfairly treated by work colleagues.
- Similar proportions of respondents expected to be treated unfairly in the workplace. One fifth (20%) agreed to some extent that they had been unfairly asked to leave employment. 49% agreed they expected to be unfairly asked to leave employment, while 44% agreed that they had left employment before they were ready.

¹¹ SMISS [see-me-scottish-mental-illness-stigma-study-final-report-sep-2022.pdf](#)

¹² Scottish social attitudes survey [Attitudes to Mental Health in Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2013 - Research Findings - gov.scot](#)

¹³ SMISS [see-me-scottish-mental-illness-stigma-study-final-report-sep-2022.pdf](#)

- A high proportion of respondents also agreed that they had withdrawn from opportunities to apply for employment (85%) or job promotion (71%) due to stigma and discrimination about their mental illness.
- Respondents described losing or being denied opportunities, both in work and when trying to access employment. This included experiences of being marginalised at work and seeing their responsibilities reduced, as well as stigma and discrimination following periods of absence or after disclosing their conditions. Another common theme was workplace practices. Much of the feedback related to experiences of sickness absence, but also to responses to requests for reasonable adjustments. Workplace culture and attitudes towards mental illnesses were also mentioned. Respondents described harmful attitudes and stereotypes in the workplace and a lack of understanding from colleagues and employers.
- Several respondents reflected on the impact of their experiences of stigma and discrimination in employment on their overall wellbeing.

It is important that people living with a mental health problem are supported into work only when they feel able to do so. For many people, finding and staying in work is not straightforward. Stigma and discrimination continue to be significant in many workplaces across Scotland and can create barriers for people with mental health problems. For instance, SMISS also told us that stigma was linked to a particularly high level of withdrawal from opportunities such as applying for employment or a job promotion, and discussion of mental health needs and experiences in the workplace.

Mental health also fluctuates, and mental illness can be episodic in nature, meaning people might be well one week and not so well the next.

If people are to be in work safely, we must make sure we have the infrastructure in place to help them on that journey. We need to have employability support and services in place to help people on their job search, to apply for work, attend interviews and get started in the workplace – some of which can be incredibly complex when you have a mental health problem or mental illness. Career coaches and advisers, training providers and HR professionals all need to have better knowledge of mental health problems and disability more widely to support people through this.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, we fundamentally question the government's rationale of the economic benefit and the lack of real evidence these proposals are based on, and we would draw your attention to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's evaluation¹⁴ of the current position:

¹⁴ Joseph Rowntree Foundation [Where will cuts to sickness and disability benefits fall hardest? | Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#)

A key part of the Government's rationale for these cuts is that they will support more disabled people into work. However, the Government did not provide the OBR with enough information or analysis to enable it to estimate the employment impacts of the package. This seriously undermines the Government's case that its proposals are about helping people into work.

The OBR did estimate the employment impact of recent proposals by the previous Government (since scrapped) to cut benefits for disabled people by tightening eligibility for the UC health element via changes to the Work Capability Assessment criteria. Despite cutting benefit income by around £5,000 each for 424,000 disabled people (alongside increased conditionality), this was projected to increase employment by just 13,900 (3%).

Separately, the Government's package includes an additional £1 billion for employment support by 2029/30. The OBR was not able to estimate an employment impact for this due to insufficient policy detail from the Government. However, new analysis of employment support outcomes by Learning and Work Institute (funded by JRF) finds the extra investment could help 45,000-95,000 more disabled people into work. That is between 1% and 3% of the people having their benefits cut. This finding is echoed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) who conclude we might expect increases in employment in the tens of thousands.

The public are also sceptical about the Government's rationale that these reforms are primarily designed to help people into work. From our work with More in Common, nearly half say (47%) these measures have been taken to fill a gap in the budget, rather than to support people into work (33%).

Whatever the size of the positive employment support investment effect, these gains should not be conflated with any possible employment gains from the benefit cuts. Cutting disabled people's incomes, particularly when many are already unable to afford the essentials, will just make it harder to manage health conditions or move towards work."

Conclusion

There is overwhelming opposition to these proposals. There is also clear evidence from a range of sources that the proposals contained in this consultation will push more people living with a mental health problem into financial hardship. See Me remains opposed to the proposals.

We ask that the UK Government does not push ahead with the changes contained in the consultation and we urge MPs to vote against the Universal Credit and Personal Independent Payment Bill in its entirety.

Enquiries: fiona.brown@seemescotland.org

Fiona Brown, Programme Manager for Communications and Public Affairs