



Brunswick House
51 Wilson Street
Glasgow
G1 1UZ

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First Minister
Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Dear Mr Swinney

Your recent summit highlighted four key themes, one of which was tackling inequality and discrimination. That's why we are writing to you in light of recent proposals from Westminster to cut certain welfare benefits designed to support disabled people to live more independent lives.

See Me, with the backing of six prominent Scottish mental health organisations – all members of the Scottish Mental Health Partnership (smhp.scot) – is deeply concerned about what these cuts will mean for many people in Scotland with experience of poor mental health and mental illness.

During the ministerial statement on 2 April, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government opened by saying the UK government's spring statement "seeks to balance the nation's books on the backs of disabled people".

We agree. But we also know that Scotland has the chance to do things differently as an inclusive, fair and progressive nation. That's why we're asking the Scottish Government to build on the steps already taken and use its powers to protect the most marginalised people in our communities.

We know there will be an impact on Scotland's budget. We urge you to ensure that the approach we take in Scotland is fair, equitable and protects everyone who is experiencing mental health problems and mental illness.

The UK Chancellor's proposed cuts, outlined in the Pathways to Work green paper, would likely see people with mild and moderate mental health problems sidelined and deemed unworthy of help. Unless the proposed changes are mitigated, they have the potential to be very 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's 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 vulnerable in order to detract from the impact of years of austerity.

We ask you to consider the following:

Discrimination

We believe Westminster's proposals as they stand would amount to discrimination. By removing financial support, those already among the most marginalised in society will become even more disadvantaged – because their mental health problem isn't considered to be 'serious' enough or doesn't tick enough boxes in an assessment.

Many people with a diagnosed mental illness already face stark inequality in respect of quality of life and life expectancy. People in this population group experience poorer health and economic outcomes overall and can die 20 years earlier than people with no diagnosis.

Stigma and stereotypes

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 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.

Public stigma creates shame, it stops people from being open about their mental health, from speaking to their family, their friends, their coworkers and employers. It's what stops people from getting help until it's too late.

See Me's Scottish Mental Illness Stigma Study research (SMISS) carried out in 2022 described that people with lived experience of mental illness experience stigma and discrimination across 14 areas of their life, and in most of the services they come into contact with, including in employment.

We know that early intervention is key to managing mental health problems more effectively. If someone sees people like themselves being judged or treated unfairly in the media and politics, they're more likely to hold back from getting that help.

Tackling mental health stigma is foundational to better mental health for all. Some of the recent publicity in relation to the reforms run the risk of undermining the work that many have put in to creating positive discourse that empowers to speak up and seek support, and in creating environments that are inclusive to all without prejudice or judgement.

Financial impact

We must also consider the 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 and other forms of community-based support to get by. When people are relying on welfare benefits and charity to meet these everyday costs, the thought of losing this support is terrifying.

Back to work

There are several issues relating to the suggestion that the solution lies in getting people 'back to work'.

While we support the idea of helping people into work who are well and able, this doesn't take into consideration the fact that many people simply aren't able to work; that for many their mental illness isn't static and they have periods of being unwell and require personalised and flexible working arrangements to access and stay in work. Many people describe having had poor experiences in the past which have put them off returning to employment too. The Scottish Mental Illness Stigma Study (SMISS) told us:

9 in 10 people with long-term, enduring mental illnesses had suffered stigma in relationships, nearly eight in 10 in healthcare services, and 71 per cent in employment.

It is important that people who have experience of mental health problems or illness are supported into work when they feel able to do so. For many, finding and staying in work isn't always 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 return to 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.

While there are lots of incredibly supportive employers in Scotland, there are many more who simply aren't geared up to offer the support, flexibility and understanding which many people with experience of poor mental health require to get into and to stay in work. Research from Deloitte has shown that for every £1 employers spend on supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their workforce, they get, on average, £4.70 back in increased productivity, showing there's real benefit to investing in anti-stigma work and increased mental health support.

Widening the gap

All of this combined will, simply put, widen the gap between the richest and poorest in our society. People with experience of mental health problems will be on the back foot, further than they are now.

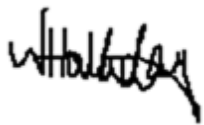
If similar cuts are made in Scotland, we'll undo some of the incredibly positive work being done by the wider movement to end mental health stigma and discrimination in Scotland, backed up by the work of See Me.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we saw a real move towards more support for people experiencing mental health problems. In lockdown, people were struggling, and we saw a greater understanding for how many people were already feeling. However, as we've moved back to 'normal', a lot of this good will has faded. Once again, people who experience poor mental health are being forgotten about.

Scotland has always been known for its progressive politics, inclusivity and compassionate values. But it's clear that the worrying shift in global politics is impacting here in the UK. It's a reminder that we cannot be complacent in championing for those most marginalised in society. Indeed, your recent summit on safeguarding democracy feels timely with its focus on combating inequality and all types of discrimination.

We hope that whatever impact Westminster's decisions have, that the Scottish Government takes steps to mitigate the harm this will cause and show the most marginalised people in our society that they are valued, and that they matter.

Yours sincerely



Wendy Halliday

Director, See Me

With support from:

Billy Watson

Chief Executive, SAMH
(Scottish Action for Mental Health)



Lee Knifton

Director of Scotland, Wales
& Northern Ireland, Mental
Health Foundation



Jayne Laidlaw

Chief Executive Officer,
Bipolar Scotland



Dr Jane Morris

Chair of the Royal College of
Psychiatrists in Scotland and
Vice Chair of the RCPsych



Ellen Dunn

Policy and Research
Manager, UK Council for
Psychotherapy



Natalie Stevenson

Manager, Voices of
Experience (VOX) Scotland



