



## Includem Research: Poverty-Related Stigma

Includem welcomes the opportunity to respond to Cross Party Group on Poverty's inquiry into poverty and stigma.

This report is based on includem research involving the voices of 21 parents and carers from different towns and cities across Scotland, all with experience of being supported by includem. These individuals took part in in-depth telephone interviews in Autumn 2021, undertaken by peer researchers with lived experience of poverty and services working alongside academic researchers. The parents/carers were asked both about their experiences of living in poverty and using family support services. All but one interviewee were in working households – facing destitution alongside insecure work and low income conditions (in some cases with multiple jobs and over 35 hours per week). This report draws out more of the specific evidence about poverty, stigma and shame. The [full report](#) and [academic report](#) from the project were published in November 2021.

Prior to undertaking this research, includem had undertaken quantitative research in August 2020 to understand the impact of COVID restrictions on the families we support. 126 people completed a survey exploring themes around finances, poverty and destitution. This represented around half of the families being support at that time. The [report](#) was published October 2020 as part of Challenge Poverty Week.

This quantitative research provided us learning on how challenging many working in services find having discussions about poverty. There was a slow response at first to the research and after exploration of the barriers it was apparent that includem staff were reluctant to speak to families about their financial situation, citing the stigma associated with poverty making it difficult to know how to start the conversation. Staff needed support and training to gain confidence to have these conversations and to understand why knowledge about the financial challenges experienced by families is important in order to achieve positive changes and overcome structural barriers. This reluctance by staff mirrors the findings of the CWIP research which indicated that workers...

*“find it difficult to discuss poverty and finances, perceiving them as intrusive and potentially stigmatising. Yet, for individuals and families, not acknowledging their everyday reality is frustrating and can result in plans that are simply not feasible. Supporting social workers to become confident in talking about poverty, income and their consequences is a key organisational learning need.”<sup>[OB]</sup>*

Even when workers built confidence to have conversations about finances and experiences of poverty, they were had predominantly with parents and carers. Staff were reluctant to speak to children and young people about their experiences,



stating that they did not think children and young people would be aware of the extent of challenges or did not want to draw it to their attention. Includem are concerned that children and young people's views about their experiences of poverty are not routinely sought in consultations and research. Children and young people are not passive recipients of poverty and their views about solutions should be sought. Further work is required in this area, including exploration of what role stigma plays in not seeking the voice and experience of children and young people.

## Voices Research

In undertaking this research, we were struck by the power of using a **peer research model** to explore this particularly difficult subject, and the key themes around families **resourcefulness**, **'just missing out' on accessing support**, **constant stress**, **barriers to accessing wider services** and how **trusted relationships** can work as a powerful tool to ease this pressure.

### Countering Shame and Stigma: through Peer Research

In approaching this particularly sensitive topic with families, peer research methods helped develop and conduct interviews in ways that helped break down barriers often resulting from experiences of stigma and shame.

A key shared observation by all the researchers in this project was the initial reluctance of people to open up about their experience of poverty. The researchers approached this section of the interviews with sensitivity, advising people that they did not have to discuss their finances if they did not feel comfortable to do so. The project adopted a peer research model, with the intention of countering stigma from the outset. While we were careful about discussing this topic, initial responses could demonstrate the sensitivity around this subject. For example, one parent was keen to emphasise that she was managing her money well, but equally did not want to be perceived as being mean:

*I budget and I'm a saver, I don't squander it. We are careful with money and I don't go out. I'm not a tight belt! (Mary)*

One of the single parents we spoke to initially responded to being asked about her finances in a way that suggested she did not want to be judged:

*"I don't smoke, I don't drink, I don't take drugs". (Erin)*

These responses illustrate how societal perceptions and treatment of those experiencing poverty becomes ingrained, not only among the wider population, but in how those facing destitution perceive themselves.

The peer researchers using appropriate self-disclosure and opening up directly about their own past or current challenges related to poverty, seemed to help



counter the stigma, supporting people to recognise that they are not alone in their experiences. The information that parents and carers shared during the interviews inform the rest of this report. We also asked the peer researchers to share their reflections on this aspect of the research. Describing his reflections that sharing his own experiences helped families discuss the challenges they faced, Kevin (peer researcher) noted that:

*“This created a sense of unity and let conversations move in the direction of being an honest and true reflection of the reality of what it’s like to be living in poverty today. Living in poverty is trauma, every day...”*

Another peer researcher, Jane, noted that:

*“I’m just a woman, a mother trying to get through and give my kids all I can day by day. I feel this let barriers down, allowed people to speak more freely without any fear of judgment. The worries as a parent (as anyone) surrounding poverty are immense. Being able to level with others and allow them to feel comfortable to speak openly about these issues and worries meant to a huge deal to me...”*

### **Resourcefulness, ‘managing’ or doing without**

Often families described themselves as ‘managing,’ sometimes also commenting on how there were people ‘worse off’ than them. One family for example had been given money by Includem to spend on food, and they donated this instead to the food bank, feeling there were other families who needed it more. This demonstrates further how stigma feeds into how we qualify those worthy of support, and how the scale of poverty impacts the perception of those who may be struggling. Families described a range of resourceful ways in which they tried to keep on top of their budget, often referring to their food shopping and management while doing so. Strategies included using spreadsheets, shopping around or eating at their relatives’ homes.

*“I am a single parent, I don’t get any help from the kids’ dad and it has always been a struggle... I manage because I am strict. I have a spreadsheet and every month I look at what is coming in and what is going out and what I can manage.” (Tracy)*

*“Managing – I am good with money...I was always brought up to live by your means. With being a single parent it is about what I can afford... I think because we were working, we were ok ...Manage - I shop around...I have had to ask for help from my parents and go to theirs for dinner...I am smart with money.” (Paula)*

Getting support from family was more likely to be mentioned than formal sources of support such as the Scottish Welfare Fund:



*“I get paid on a weekly basis. I get by week to week. I budget my money. Sometimes I have to borrow money from my mum and dad.” (Cara)*

One parent who emphasised that their family managed, described their strategy of ensuring there were tins of food in for times when there was less money:

*“We manage. I always make sure I’ve got tins – even a tin of soup or a tin of meat (Jackie)*

Parents spoke in some cases about ‘doing without’ to ensure that their kids did not have to. One parent had come to normalise living on little food.

*“I sometimes struggle but I just get on with it...My kids would never go out, I would, but not them. Sometimes I only eat one meal a day.” (Vicky)*

Food and fuel were the two main day to day costs which were identified in accounts of ‘managing’.

*“I struggled during the pandemic – having [my son] at home all the time – there was loads more shopping than normal and I was spending more on utilities. That was a struggle. I did get help through the electric grant - I could have used a grant for gas too. That helped in the early pandemic. But going through it you were putting more and more in, as you are at home constantly.” (Morag)*

Another example of resourcefulness was from parents who were trying to retrain or get additional qualifications in order to obtain better paid or additional sources of work. One single mother described how she had done a flower arranging class which she hoped would bring in extra income after the pandemic, while another talked about a course with aspirations for better paid work longer term:

*“I did a health and social care course for working with older people and would like to work in a care home or day care but haven’t been able to use it, first because of the pandemic and second, getting into care homes with my limited hours.” (Morag)*

### **On the breadline and ‘just missing out’ on support**

Several people we spoke to who were on low wages resented that they often just missed out on support that was available to people on moderately lower incomes than them, such as grants for school clothes or free school meals:

*“I could have cried when I couldn’t get access to the uniforms. When you have a big bulk thing. Had I had had the £400. It guts me. What would I be benefitting if I could? I think they should look at how much people are actually earning and give more access to the uniforms and free school meals.” (Sharon)*



*“I wasn’t able to get access to anything! I don’t qualify for anything. I feel like my back is against the wall.” (Janet)*

*“I think it is £50 a month that I earn that means that I miss out on the free meals and uniforms. I am £50 a week making sure they are on par with everyone else. I feel like working isn’t always best. I am paying full rent, I get a bit of a discount for council tax. I am using all my money every month.” (Trish)*

A contrasting example came from a mother who was eligible for free school meals, had appreciated the continuation of meal payments during the holidays, and noted the significant difference this made to her peers:

*“In Scotland we are better off than in England. This year with the covid 19 and free school meals – everyone I speak to says how much better they are off in the holidays due to these payments... it is such a big help – during the summer holidays especially – its’ a lot to feed them.” (Louise)*

Another parent found that the limited support they received wasn’t enough and left them struggling to cover the educational needs of their children.

*“Sometimes kids need clothes and shoes and [the government] don’t think about that. They have to do with these things... I think with school coming up as well, you get your clothing grant...It is something they need to look at, they need a school bag, stationary, books, but it is all needing to come out of what I have. It doesn’t cover it.”*

These views reflect that support can be of considerable value to families who needs it, but that the thresholds for this type of support needs to be reassessed, taking into account the true cost of living and widespread low-income employment.

## **Poverty and Stress**

Half reported their situation as being a daily struggle, and a constant source of stress. The ‘big things’, such as getting new carpets, new footwear for children as they grew or winter clothes were often impossible without help for family, friends or taking out loans. One parent/carer explained that house maintenance, such as changing worn down carpets, was just not possible without support.

*“I was meant to get help with carpets for when we moved in but then I got the call to say that we are not getting help and I felt like smashing my head off a brick wall. Then she said that they could help and I was so relieved. You know big things like that I can’t afford without help.” (Cheryl)*

*“Big stress, big things like birthdays, it is hard. I have been at food banks before. It is the big things that I struggle.” (Trish)*



A family carer had received financial support from includem to replace the bed and bedding for the teenage girl she was looking after, who was frequently wetting the bed. She noted that finances were a worry and that this was the norm:

*“We do get by. I do worry about money. Everybody does.” (Mary)*

Others commented that ‘managing’ on a very limited income was a constant worry.

*“I am very careful with money. I have to make it work... Money is a stress” (Janet)*

While the mental health challenges from lockdown due to covid-19 were widely recognised, families reveal that poverty imposes a permanent state of lockdown, restricting families in what they can do or access - not ‘going out’ to restaurants, the cinema or engaging in social activities where costs were involved. One parent even described feeling locked down in their own home due to overcrowding, with them and their two children all sleeping in the same bed.

### **Stigma and accessing services**

There was a significant reluctance to ask for help, especially due to feeling judged when they do.

*“I did contact the food bank. I felt in there they were judging me. I wouldn’t go back.”*

*“I get a bus ticket from the council now and again to take the wee ones out because I am a carer...You feel like you are begging for things though.”*

One person explained that social work services had asked them repeatedly if they needed help with finances, but they said ‘no’ because they were worried this would be used against them in Children’s Hearings.

Importantly, how these services are accessed and delivered when help is needed can have a major impact on the dignity of families experiencing poverty. In trying accessing support for wider services when facing complex challenges, some families reported not being believed or listened to when asking for help, and others struggled with not seeing their social worker enough or getting appointments with services like CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services). These experiences of being disregarded added to their stress and increased distrust in public services – critical for those who do not have the option of financing private services to respond to their families’ needs.

### **The easing of pressure through trusted working relationships**



Families did not want to have to rely on outside support at all, but when it was given to them in a dignified way, through trusted sources, it was really appreciated, eased some pressures and could influence quality of life. Includem and two other voluntary sector agencies were identified as having provided grants or specific funding for much needed items. One mother identified that financial support to buy a new washing machine had made a big difference to her during lockdown as she had been hand washing clothes in the bath, and the volume of laundry had increased in quantity with everyone being at home more. Other examples were given of where relatively modest financial support could be life changing:

*“She messaged me last week and offered me a voucher for children’s clothing... We are in debt arrangement schemes, so we struggle quite a bit, includem saved us...One of the banks offered them money and Sarah managed to get my rent arrears paid off. She saved our house. It was about £400 and she got that for us.”  
(Sharon)*

Several parents commented in a wider sense of the importance of ‘not being judged’ by services as a founding stone of a working relationship with them. A few noted that the time and effort afforded to them by services like includem contrasted with what was seen as minimal time and a narrower focus from statutory services. The same parent who had received support to buy a washing machine made the following comment which was one of several made about the importance of not being judged:

*“[my includem support worker] works with me and I have a trusting relationship with him – he is not stuck up...He’s normal – he doesn’t judge. You can swear in front of him – he gets it and there are no tick boxes. He understands that things can be difficult when you have four kids and that’s just the way it is.” (Louise)*

## **Conclusion**

This report highlights the shame and stigma families experience when living in poverty – and how this impacts their own perceptions of being worthy of support.

The extent of this stigma was particularly striking given that poverty has become endemic in the UK through many years of austerity and cuts to services, followed by the additional financial impacts of the pandemic, and dramatic rises in the cost of living. Despite poverty now being a relatively normal aspect of life in the UK and wage stagnation meaning that employment often does not offer protections from destitution, many families have internalised stigma and shame about the hardships they face. To address this ingrained cultural stigma, it is essential that public sector workers, the public and those experiencing poverty are a part of changing these perceptions in partnership.



Particularly concerning is families feeling either undeserving or unable to access support due to stigma. Parents and carers should not have to choose between heating, food or their child's educational needs – and families should not carry the stress and consequences caused by the ingrained inequalities of the economic and political system they live in. Due to facing barriers to accessing the financial help that they need, at the level that is needed, there is a clear demand for change in how support is developed and delivered. Financial support should be developed to take account of the true the cost of living and widespread low-income employment. In particular, this research shows the importance of resources being available as entitlements rather than handouts, to counter the increasing poverty and related shame and stigma faced by families.

The families we spoke to described feeling judged negatively on multiple counts, including by wider statutory services. Experiences of not being heard, believed or respected when seeking help to complex challenges compounds the constant stressors faced by families in poverty. The fact that those who are least able to access and finance private services face such significant barriers to access public services when in critical need raises questions about the aims, design and delivery of these services. To mediate against growing distrust because of these experiences, services that have the capacity to develop more relational and responsive ways of working are key to begin to address poverty and stigma. This, along with support to address the wider challenges families face, offers far more opportunity to keep families together, and improve outcomes.

As from our own experience, it is critically important to actively work to break down silence around poverty and addressing stigma. Poverty should not be the shame of families, and this research illustrates the value of peer research models to begin to break down that silence. However, we must recognise children and young people as key stakeholders that have their own views and solutions. Further work is required to truly include them in the way forward – not just as the adults of tomorrow but as actors with lived experience and as rights holders now.