

Changing Futures

— Stoke-on-Trent —

Case Study: Beyond the Label: The Impact of Stigma on People Experiencing Multiple Disadvantage

Introduction

This case study explores the experiences of an individual with multiple disadvantage who has encountered persistent stigma from both professionals and wider society. The case highlights how assumptions linked to substance use, homelessness, disability, mental health needs and involvement with the criminal justice system can affect a person's ability to access services, have their concerns taken seriously and participate fully in community life. Personal details have been anonymised to protect identity.

Living with Multiple Disadvantage

"David" has lived with multiple and complex challenges for many years. His experiences include homelessness, substance use, mental health difficulties, disability and involvement with the criminal justice system.

Prior to receiving support through current services, David had been involved with other local support programmes aimed at people facing multiple disadvantage. Although living in supported accommodation, he remained technically homeless as he was residing in temporary accommodation rather than having a permanent home of his own.

David has also experienced periods of rough sleeping. During one period of street homelessness, he suffered a serious injury following an animal bite which led to severe illness and a prolonged hospital admission. The long-term impact of this experience resulted in a physical disability which affects his mobility and requires him to use a walking stick.

Experiencing Stigma in Everyday Life

Despite engaging with support services and working towards a more stable future, David continues to experience stigma on a regular basis.

One of the most frequent examples occurs when using taxis to attend appointments, meetings and involvement opportunities. Transport is often arranged and paid for in advance, removing any concern about payment. However, drivers have reportedly arrived, seen David and then driven away without completing the journey.

These experiences have left David feeling judged before any interaction has even taken place. The refusal appears linked to perceptions about his appearance, disability, accommodation setting and known history of substance use rather than any actual behaviour.

Stigma has also affected David's ability to use vouchers earned through participation in research and engagement activities. On a number of occasions, he has entered shops to spend vouchers he legitimately received, only to be challenged, dismissed or told that the vouchers held no balance. When checks were later made, the vouchers were found to contain funds.

For David, these incidents reinforce the message that he is viewed differently from other members of the public. Rather than being recognised for contributing to projects that improve services, he is often treated with suspicion.

Stigma Within Services

Perhaps most concerning are the examples of stigma experienced within support environments.

David reported occasions where he attempted to raise concerns or grievances but felt his voice was not taken seriously. In one instance, after reporting that a bicycle had been stolen, he felt his concerns were dismissed because staff focused on his history of substance use rather than the issue he was raising.

Support workers reflected that there can be a tendency for people with histories of drug use to be viewed through a single lens. As a result, legitimate concerns may be minimised, disbelieved or overlooked.

There is also concern that professionals and members of the public may incorrectly assume that David's physical disability is related to substance use. In reality, his disability resulted from serious health complications experienced while homeless. These assumptions demonstrate how stigma can lead people to create narratives about an individual without understanding their circumstances.

The impact of this can be profound. When people repeatedly experience disbelief, judgement or dismissal from professionals, trust in services can deteriorate and opportunities for meaningful support can be lost.

The Impact on Confidence and Self-Worth

The cumulative effect of these experiences has significantly affected David's confidence and sense of self-worth.

Support staff described David as often appearing resigned to poor treatment. When encouraged to challenge decisions or raise concerns through formal processes, he would frequently respond that there was "no point" because he expected to be dismissed.

Over time, repeated experiences of stigma appeared to have led to a belief that discrimination and unfair treatment were simply normal parts of daily life.

This has affected David's willingness to advocate for himself and challenge inappropriate behaviour. It has also reduced confidence in situations where he may need to question decisions, such as when using public transport or accessing community services.

The case demonstrates how stigma is not simply a matter of hurt feelings. It can directly affect a person's ability to exercise their rights, engage with services, build independence and develop positive self-esteem.

Looking Forward

Despite these challenges, David continues to demonstrate resilience and ambition.

One of his primary goals is to move into suitable semi-independent accommodation where he can enjoy greater stability and independence. He has shown a clear understanding of his needs and has been willing to advocate for appropriate housing when proposed options have not been suitable.

David has also become actively involved in systems change and co-production work. He has contributed to projects designed to improve services for people experiencing multiple disadvantage and has expressed enthusiasm for sharing his experiences to help professionals better understand the realities of stigma.

More recently, he has participated in a drama-based programme that supports individuals with lived experience to develop and deliver training for professionals. Through this work, he has an opportunity to influence attitudes, challenge stereotypes and help create more compassionate services.

Key Learning

David's experiences highlight the significant impact that stigma can have on people facing multiple disadvantage.

The case demonstrates the need for:

Greater awareness and training for professionals around stigma and unconscious bias.

Trauma-informed approaches that recognise the wider context of a person's experiences.

Services that actively listen to and validate the concerns of people with lived experience.

Opportunities for individuals to build confidence, self-advocacy and assertiveness skills.

A stronger focus on challenging stereotypes associated with homelessness, substance use, disability and criminal justice involvement.

Most importantly, this case reminds us that people experiencing multiple disadvantage are more than the labels often attached to them. When assumptions replace understanding, opportunities for recovery, inclusion and empowerment can be undermined. By listening to lived experience and addressing stigma wherever it occurs, professionals and communities can play a vital role in helping people rebuild confidence, independence and hope for the future.