



STATEMENT FROM IMHN AND OUR MEMBERS - 02/04/2024

This statement was Co-produced together. As an organisation we work together collectively and with equity irrespective of being in work or a claimant of benefits.

IMHN is concerned about the recent rhetoric espoused by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Mel Stride, in regards to mental health.

As a mental health charity that prides itself on empowering those with lived experience, we disagree with the statement Mr Stride made, stating that “*mental health culture has gone too far*”. This kind of statement only serves to further stigmatise those who have mental health conditions. At a time when society has made progress to open up conversations about mental health, having a Secretary of State invalidate lived experience in this manner, risks causing regression and an unpicking of the hard-won progress made.

His suggestion that work is the best way to boost mental health is a generalisation that ignores the nuanced and often complex nature of living with a mental health condition. We recognise that professionals - such as doctors, psychiatrists - and those with lived experience are often better placed to decide whether the individual is fit to work than politicians and civil servants. Employment is not something anyone living with a mental health condition should be coerced into - whilst it may empower some people, others will have their mental ill health exacerbated.

We recognise that this is a time of economic turmoil and that there are difficult decisions to be made in regards to sustainability of the public purse, but we are clear that benefit claimants and those with mental health issues/disabilities should not be scapegoated, whilst politicians aim to cut costs. Vulnerable people must be protected - whatever the path taken when it comes to managing the economy.

Indeed, the cost-of-living crisis borne from the economic situation is a big contributor towards increased mental health issues - and it is unfortunate that the Secretary of State didn't make that connection.

To reduce economic inactivity, rather than stigmatise people with mental health conditions, we suggest the following:

- **A welfare system that acts as a true safety net** and operates in a way in which claimants are supported to get what they need, and receive the assistance they require for their recovery - and ensuring that the system is not just predicated on work. There needs to be a much more holistic approach to recovery support, which brings in a more tailored approach for individuals, and recognises the value that voluntary roles can have. In addition, some claimants may fear taking the plunge and going back to work, fearing that if they do take work, and it ends up being detrimental to their health and they have to resign, they'll have to go through the demeaning work capability assessment again. There should be safeguards to allow people to try working, with a cooling off period where their benefits won't be affected should it not work out.
- **Making the Universal Credit system less rigid and anxiety-inducing.** As it stands, benefits are often inconsistent amounts due for those who earn varying wages each month. If, for example, there are payroll errors, someone may end up being sanctioned or receive a £0 award if they earn too much. It is all done online which alienates vulnerable people who may not have internet access
- **Support businesses to do more to support those with mental health conditions to remain in work** - it's all well and good helping people get jobs but without the right accommodations and support, it can be near impossible to maintain a job, especially for those whose condition varies day-to-day. These are often the biggest barriers to getting back into work.
- **Early intervention and more funding to prevent worsened mental health.** We recognise the overstretched and underfunded NHS - and believe that there should be more investment in talking therapy provision at an earlier stage. If we can help people in their recovery before they reach crisis point, it may mean they do not have to give up work.