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SUII Knowledge Exchange Programmes

*Peace of Mind: Exploring Basic Income's Potential to  
Improve Mental Health*

**Final Report**

September 2021



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## Programme Team

The programme team was led by Professor Mike Danson, Chair of Basic Income Network Scotland and Heriot-Watt University and Professor Matt Smith of the University of Strathclyde.

Team members included colleagues from Basic Income Network Scotland, Basic Income Conversation, The RSA Scotland, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (NHSGGC), University of Manitoba, Social & Public Health Science Unit and University of Glasgow

Our sincere gratitude to everyone that contributed to this project, particularly those sharing their personal experiences.

## Background and rationale for the programme

There are clear and proven links between poverty and mental illness. Most responses to the current mental health crisis have focussed on what individuals, rather than society, can do to improve their mental health. This project examines the question: *Could a basic income safeguard mental health and prevent mental illness?*

The Peace of Mind project also considered how basic income could accelerate progress towards the specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) “No Poverty” and “Good Health and Well-being”.

It brought together mental health and social care professionals, mental health charities, people with lived experience of mental illness, benefits recipients, basic income advocates and young people to explore how basic income could improve mental health and how this relates to the SDGs.

## Main objectives and context

The project had four components:

- Context: Two workshops where ten expert speakers talked about various aspects of basic income, mental health and the sustainable development goals.
- Discussion: Two workshops where participants considered the links between money and mental health and whether the security of a basic income would improve money related impacts on mental health.
- Stories: Workshops run by creative methods practitioners Kitrina Douglas and David Carless to help participants tell stories of their experiences with money and mental health.
- Action: Two workshops to consider the implications of the links between money and mental health found so far, the relevance to basic income pilots and what the participants wanted to see happen next.

In the first two workshops the group heard from various experts to provide context to the discussions on basic income, money and mental health. The speakers presented some of the history of basic



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income looked at the current level of interest in basic income in Scotland and globally. They considered the role of the COVID pandemic in increasing interest in basic income and how this could be seen to have accelerated the debate on basic income by a matter of years. They noted that influential thinkers from Thomas More to Martin Luther King Jr had considered the concept.

They talked of the investigations into basic income in Scotland led by local authorities in Glasgow, Edinburgh, North Ayrshire and Fife and funded by Scottish Government. This research project looked at the feasibility of basic income pilots. Wendy Hearty, one of the leads of the feasibility study project outlined their findings which established the context for the programme of workshops. After overviews of Basic Income, Dr Marcia Gibson who, as part of the Scottish feasibility study, developed a scoping review framework that samples interventions relevant to the Scottish context reported on the 27 studies of nine interventions that were deemed relevant. The evidence presented in Dr Gibson's review was drawn from across the globe and showed that the effects of the interventions on health were mixed. There were strong positive effects on some outcomes but no effect on others. Some studies showed basic income had a large positive effect on mental health and suggested mechanisms underlying these improvements. These included reduced stress, improved parenting quality, and reduced financial strain.

## [An account of the insights resulting from the programme \(including lessons around the theme of the Sustainable Development Goals\)](#)

During the discussions held throughout the project some key themes emerged, each addressing the specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) "*No Poverty*" and "*Good Health and Well-being*".

### Money and Mental Health

People made it clear that there are links between money and mental health. This was reinforced by people speaking from personal experience and mental health practitioners in various roles. Often the conversations with people who had lived experience led back to the same two, linked questions:

"How am I supposed to look after my mental health when I don't have any money?"

and

"How can I think about earning money when I am struggling with my mental health?"

### The System

Many spoke of the flaws with the current social security system. How the process of claiming financial support exacerbated mental distress or did not function for people experiencing severe issues with their mental health.

The issues with the current system were largely centred around:

- The level of financial support that could be claimed being too low
- The conditions put on claims, including compulsory medication
- A lack of support for navigating the system



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- Absence of fit for purpose support for people to make choices about their health and work

The practitioners who provide services to help people navigate social security spoke of the frustrations and stress their staff experience in this work due to the inadequacy of the system.

## The Mechanism

The discussions about the impact a basic income could have on mental health were theoretical but provided interesting insights.

The sum of money paid as a basic income was considered and most felt that it needed to be fairly substantial to have an impact on mental health. It was made clear that its interaction with other benefits needed to be carefully considered and that it would be detrimental if a basic income led to people's incomes reducing as a result of changes to the benefits system. It was not expected that a basic income as an increase in income would directly improve mental health. Instead the mechanisms for impacting mental health were expected to be:

- Removing people from the means tested benefits system
- As a universal policy, reducing the stigma associated with receiving money from the social security system
- The peace of mind that a guaranteed income, of any level, would provide
- The regularity of the payment
- A social security system that is more compassionate and user friendly
- An income provided that does not require a claims process
- Earned income being retained in addition to the basic income
- A changed relationship to paid work

## Systemic Solutions

The discussions around mental health and money made it clear that these problems were not easily addressed and required systemic solutions. It was felt that putting the onus on individuals to solve their own financial concerns was unworkable when mental illness was properly considered.

Many felt that a basic income could be an appropriate systemic solution. But it was clear that this would only be the case if the basic income was at a high enough level to improve people's financial circumstances and if it interacted with other forms of targeted benefits appropriately. It was also noted that, unless the conditions placed on the payments of other benefits were reduced, then people would still be subjected to the assessment processes that are such a significant cause of stress and distress. This is a particular concern for those receiving disability benefits.



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## Main outcomes and (expected) impact

The participants worked with creative methods practitioners Kitrina Douglas and David Carless to share their stories in various ways. The video outputs of these sessions can be found on this YouTube playlist<sup>1</sup> and again our many thanks to all participants for sharing their stories so honestly and freely.

### One Word Stories

Participants were asked what words were evoked when they thought of poverty and mental health. Recognising the importance of voicing our experiences, the aim of this collaborative workshop was to explore some of the many faces of poverty and mental health.

### Participant's Stories

The storytelling workshops also worked with the participants to capture their stories in various formats. These included short poems and spoken word pieces.

We highlighted two of the stories shared by participants: "*Windows*" by Simon and Louisa's story. Please note these stories talk candidly about suicide.

Smith was invited to a Scottish Government Citizens' Panel on Covid-19 Recover Expert Witness Hearing to discuss basic income and mental health. The Panel recommended considering basic income as part of Scotland's Covid-19 recovery<sup>2</sup>.

## Key recommendations for end user / policy communities and Actions

Since the end of the project in February 2021 a group of participants have been working with the Basic Income Conversation team to consider what they want to see happen next on basic income and mental health. This group decided to address an open letter to Ministers concerned with mental health across the UK during *Mental Health Awareness Week* 10 – 16 May 2021. The purpose of this video letter<sup>3</sup> was to share the reality of mental illness and the impact this can have on finances. The group feel that more could be done to look for systemic solutions to the common issues people experience when struggling with their mental health and that this should include a basic income. We had 2,500 members of the public co-sign the letter during Mental Health Awareness Week and we have secured invitations to meet from the offices of mental health ministers in Scotland and Wales and the group will be putting meetings in with those civil servants in due course to continue pushing forward this work.

The group want mental health charities to start looking at basic income and talking to their teams and service users about it to discuss how it might work for them. They are calling on policy makers, mental health charities and politicians to seriously consider basic income as a preventative mental health measure.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://youtu.be/KzEPqvgpdfY> <https://youtu.be/1wH2ZWkc1a0> <https://youtu.be/gMR4atqYHQ>  
<https://youtu.be/lcs9iHMk9g8> <https://youtu.be/ro96xEB5wt4>

<sup>2</sup> <https://archive2021.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/currentcommittees/116947.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <https://basicincomeconversation.org/page/basic-income-for-peace-of-mind>



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## Planned follow up activities

As well as being showcased at Mental Health Awareness Week, the outputs from the workshops were broadcast at this summer's Basic Income Earth Network World Congress in Glasgow which was led by Basic Income Network Scotland. As the theme of the Congress was *Idea to Reality* these Scottish Universities Insight Institute workshops on Peace of Mind: Exploring Universal Basic Income's Potential to Improve Mental Health offered real insights and hope for many around the world. With over 250 speakers and more than 1000 participants this was the biggest ever conference on Basic Income anywhere in the world. Addresses from senior politicians, including First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, panels on mental health and caring and carers, on the work by Pope Francis and other faith leaders on Basic Income, and with presentations from representatives from the UN, UNIDO, UNESCO, IMF, and many other organisations from across the world, the SUII project was highlighted in plenaries as well as the stories being available for watching and downloading throughout. Several of the SUII workshop team were involved in organising the Congress while a number of participants acted as volunteers in chairing, moderating and otherwise contributing significantly to the success of this global event<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://whova.com/portal/webapp/bienc\\_202108/](https://whova.com/portal/webapp/bienc_202108/)