

# Quakers in Britain submission - Visit by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from 5 to 16 November 2018

*September 2018*

## Introduction

* 1. This submission is made on behalf of Quakers in Britain.[[1]](#endnote-1) It is informed by the longstanding and deeply held Quaker concern for equality. Led by our experience that there is something of God in all people, we deplore the vast inequalities that currently exist in UK society, and which leave many unable to contribute fully to society or live fulfilling and dignified lives.
  2. This submission draws on recent work carried out by Quakers in Britain on poverty and inequality, and on the experience of members of the Quaker community. In particular, much of the content is based upon our response to the Welfare Reform and Work Bill when this was being debated in 2015. Further additions reflect changes that have occurred since 2015, and the impacts of cuts to social security since 2012, which are now making themselves felt.
  3. As a faith group, we have a profound sense of the worth of every human being. We believe that every person’s life is sacred and in this we are all, fundamentally, equal. We believe that it is important that everyone is able to benefit from the social and economic wealth we in Britain have created together. We are therefore disturbed to note that the UK is one of the most economically unequal countries in the industrialised world.
  4. Over the last few years Quakers, who have been working to support food banks and other initiatives designed to mitigate the worst effects of poverty within our communities, have become increasingly aware of this reality. Our experience has shown us many of the negative effects that inequality can bring; both on individuals and on our ability to build thriving, cohesive communities. This reinforces for us the evidence of researchers that more unequal countries perform worse on a wide range of socio-economic indicators.
  5. The human and social cost of letting economic inequality continue to rise is incalculable. Yet, without concerted and deliberate action to narrow the gap between the richest and the rest, we fear that this is exactly what will happen.
  6. We have chosen to focus in our submission on the four of the suggested questions which relate most closely to Quakers’ work on these issues.

## The case against austerity

* 1. Quakers have been clear in our responses to the austerity measures implemented since 2010 that these measures are political choices, not fiscal necessities.
  2. In so many cases, cutting costs in the short-term has been shown to increase them in the long term through damage to health, reduced community resilience, higher crime rates and the need for emergency interventions of various kinds. A particularly stark example is the rise in rough sleeping, from 1,768 in autumn 2010 to 4,751 in autumn 2017,[[2]](#endnote-2) with the recent announcement that £100m of funding would be “reprioritised” to tackle the problem.[[3]](#endnote-3) We are dismayed that the government is giving so little consideration to the long term impacts of spending cuts on whole communities. Under-investment and short term accounting are putting the wellbeing of future generations at risk.
  3. The UK remains one of the world’s richest countries, but through mechanisms including wage stagnation and insecure work, tax dodging and erosion of public services, our collective wealth is becoming increasingly concentrated.

## The impact of austerity on vulnerable groups

* 1. Recent austerity measures have increasingly broken the all-important link between need and entitlement. The cuts to working tax credits, the ‘two-child limit’ on tax credits and universal credit, the working-age benefits freeze and the overall benefit cap fail to take account of the needs of claimants, with the result that tens of thousands of households have incomes that are insufficient to meet essential needs.
  2. The revised benefit cap introduced by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 disproportionately impacts on lone parents and their children, who are far more likely to be capped (approximately 67% of all capped families are lone parents) and are least likely to be able to avoid its effects due to the difficulty of combining paid work and caring responsibilities. These effects were entirely foreseeable and foreseen, and are now being documented in the first reports on the Act’s impacts.[[4]](#endnote-4)
  3. In our response to the Welfare Reform and Work Bill in 2015, we wrote of the working-age benefits freeze that:

“Coming on top of three years of below inflationary uprating during the last Parliament, the proposals would affect an estimated 13 million households and represent a significant 8% real terms cut in social security income between 2013 and 2020.[[5]](#endnote-5) There is already evidence to suggest that social security support does not enable many working age benefit claimants, (including many in paid work) to have an income which allows them to enjoy a minimally acceptable standard of living.[[6]](#endnote-6)

“Even in this period of low inflation, freezing benefits will weaken the ability to meet basic needs. Furthermore, in recent years, our economy has been subject to volatility and unanticipated price spikes for a number of basic commodities including food and fuel. It remains to be seen how households that are subject to a flat freeze on benefit rates would cope if such exogenous shocks were to hit the UK economy again.

“We are concerned that further weakening the link between benefit levels and the cost of living, will have the additional consequence of widening of the economic and social disparities between benefit claimants and the rest of the population. All evidence suggests that the UK should be seeking to reduce these inequalities, not introduce policies that will widen them.”

* 1. According to the Office for National Statistics’s composite price index, prices in 2018 are 7.67% higher than they were in 2015, when the benefits freeze was announced. With Brexit causing considerable economic uncertainty, further price rises are almost certainly on the way – but the government has confirmed the freeze will remain until at least April 2019. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has estimated that around half a million more people will be in poverty by 2020/21 as a result of the freeze.[[7]](#endnote-7)
  2. The government’s austerity measures have consistently and systematically been targeted at the poor rather than the well-off. This is not inevitable, as demonstrated by the introduction of numerous tax reliefs benefiting the wealthy during the same period: for instance, the government increased the ISA allowance by nearly £5,000 to £20,000 from 2017 as well as introducing a £325,000 nil-rate inheritance tax band for main residences.
  3. The Equality and Human Rights Commission report in 2017 showed unequivocally that changes to taxation and benefits since 2010 have disproportionately hit those with lower incomes, as well as women, disabled people and BAME households. The report found that households in the lowest decile lose around 10% of their net incomes by 2021/22 from the policy reforms. [[8]](#endnote-8)
  4. This policy of taking most from those who have least is anathema to Quakers. Our belief that all people are of equal worth underpins all our work and has led us to speak out repeatedly against cuts to social security, which have left many thousands of people unable to meet their basic needs or live with dignity.

## The effects of austerity on poverty and inequality

* 1. Since austerity measures began to make themselves felt around 2012, we have heard countless stories of hardship from Quakers around the country – either their own experiences of being affected by austerity, or their work with others who are affected, for example at food banks.
  2. Staffordshire Quakers recorded their deep anger and concern about the impacts of austerity at a meeting in July 2017. They noted that:

“We learn almost daily of the difficulties affecting our public services from reports written by official, authoritative, non-political bodies. The NHS, including Mental Health provision, is a "burning platform"; bed-blocking in the NHS happens because of a shortage of care facilities in the community (where care for the elderly has been greatly reduced); the police are short of officers and other staff; the prison service lacks so many officers that prisons are dangerous; state schools ask parents for money to support basic educational activities; social housing is grossly deficient and support for the youth service, libraries, parks, sports facilities and the arts is reduced or ended.

“All these public services are struggling to be viable; some have reached the tipping point. Yet we have often been told, particularly in the referendum debate, that the UK is the fifth richest country in the world. These two facts should not go together, but the society we have created is competitive rather than co-operative. It is clear that our public life is being impoverished by an ideology of selfishness when it comes to the funding of our public services. There is a risk that continued refusal to listen to these warnings, coupled with continued austerity, will seriously damage the fabric of community life in Britain and will create an even more unequal society.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

## Child poverty: causes and government response

* 1. There are a range of austerity-related factors which have contributed to child poverty in the last ten years, including cuts to social services and early years provision. We focus here on two issues: the abolition of child poverty targets, and the ‘two-child limit’ on entitlement to working tax credits or universal credit.
  2. Child poverty targets
     1. Since 2015, there has been a clear shift away from measuring and addressing child poverty. The 2016 abolition both of statutory targets on child poverty and of the requirement to produce a child poverty strategy signalled a downgrading of this issue (except in Scotland, which set statutory targets in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 and published a delivery plan this year). The previous relative income targets, which were set out in the Child Poverty Act 2010, were based on robust research and have a high degree of international acceptance.
     2. Ambitious targets are an important signal of intent and a vital tool around which to focus action. Removing them sends completely the wrong signal about the value we, as a society, place on our children. The government’s decision in 2016 to scrap the Child Poverty Unit similarly sent a worrying signal.
     3. The government’s focus on worklessness rather than income as a measure of poverty does not reflect the reality of poverty in Britain today, which is that of the 12 million working-age adults and children in poverty, 8 million live in families where at least one person is in work.[[10]](#endnote-10)
     4. Low income is a, if not *the*, defining feature of living in poverty and a major barrier to social mobility in itself. It is vital that statistics that reflect the number of children experiencing income poverty in a given period remain central to the public discourse and at the forefront of the minds of policy makers.
     5. While it is useful to measure additional factors affecting life chances, such as educational attainment, these should never be introduced at the expense of income-based figures, as the government initially attempted to do in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill.
  3. The ‘two-child limit’ policy
     1. Quakers in Britain campaigned alongside other faith groups in 2015 against the ‘two-child limit’ for tax credits and universal credit.
     2. We argued that the proposal would leave many families unable to meet their children’s essential needs, and increase the risk of poverty among children of larger families, who are already particularly vulnerable to poverty; and that it would penalise families forced to claim support because of bereavement, breakdown or the onset of ill health or disability.
     3. The government’s statistics show that 71,000 households lost entitlement as a result of the policy in the first year of its implementation.[[11]](#endnote-11)
     4. The two-child limit is based on the assumption that it will result in people on low incomes choosing to have fewer children, despite the government having produced no evidence to support this. The effect of this policy is to disadvantage children for their or their siblings’ very existence, and to imply that some children are more deserving of support than others, based purely on the order of their birth. This is an unacceptable message to send to any child and to society.

## Conclusion

* 1. Several years’ worth of evidence now shows that austerity, in the form of cuts to public services and social security, has exacerbated poverty and inequality in Britain. In order to tackle that poverty and its growing impact on fundamental human rights, the UK government must end these cuts and commit to policies that reduce inequality.
  2. Specifically and as an urgent first step, we call for:
* the reinstatement of targets for reducing child poverty, using internationally recognised income-based measures; and
* a return to a social security system where entitlement is based on need, including the abolition of the two-child limit, the working-age benefits freeze and the overall benefit cap.

1. Formally known as the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain. Registered with charity number 1127633. Around 22,000 people attend Quaker meetings in Britain. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. DCLG Rough Sleeping Statistics Autumn 2017. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/682001/Rough_Sleeping_Autumn_2017_Statistical_Release_-_revised.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-45162892> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ‘The impact of welfare reform and welfare-to-work programmes’. Equality and Human Rights Commission, March 2018. <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research-report-111-cumulative-impact-assessment-evidence-review-executive-summary.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ‘Benefit Changes and Distributional Analysis’.Institute for Fiscal Studies, July 2015 <http://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/budgets/Budgets%202015/Summer/Hood_distributional_analysis.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The extent to which social security income enables this varies greatly according to individual circumstances of claimants. For example, families with children received around 57% of what was needed to enjoy a minimally acceptable standard of living whilst single people received around 40% and pensioner couples received over 95%. Compared with Joseph Rowntree Foundations ‘Minimum Income Standards’ (MIS). These which are based on research into the income necessary to meet what members of the public think are necessary for a minimally acceptable standard of living. See *A minimum Income Standard for the UK in 2015* <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/minimum-income-standard-uk-2015> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/briefing-november-2017-budget> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/impact-of-tax-and-welfare-reforms-2010-2017-interim-report_0.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Staffordshire Area Meeting, held 8 July 2017. Minute 07/2017/8, ‘Concern about the Poverty of the public services in the UK’. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. ‘UK Poverty 2017’. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, December 2017. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2017> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/child-tax-credit-and-universal-credit-claimants-statistics-related-to-the-policy-to-provide-support-for-a-maximum-of-2-children-april-2018> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)