

Taking action on economic inequality



“As a yearly meeting we are restless to take corporate action to change the unequal, unjust world in which we live.”

Minute 36, Britain Yearly Meeting 2015

The UK is one of the most unequal societies in the developed world, with a growing gap between the richest and poorest people. Between 2012 and 2014, the wealthiest 20% of the UK population possessed 117 times more wealth than the poorest 20%.¹ Indeed, some evidence suggests that the UK is now as unequal as it was in the 1930s.²

High levels of economic inequality present a fundamental challenge to Quaker testimony, and Quakers in Britain are increasingly concerned about its impact on our society. Drawing on action already being taken by Friends across the yearly meeting, here we outline five ideas for how you and your meeting could help to tackle inequality.

Support the Living Wage

In-work poverty is a growing problem in the UK, with increases in the cost of living and the growth of precarious forms of employment such as ‘zero hours’ contracts compounding the effects of low wages.

The Living Wage seeks to tackle this by ensuring that everyone is paid enough to live on. It is a voluntary hourly rate calculated according to the basic cost of living in the UK, currently £8.25 per hour, or £9.40 in London. This is still £1.05 more per hour than the UK government’s new ‘National Living Wage’.

Last year Lancaster Quakers launched a Quaker Living Wage Campaign. They are asking Friends to encourage Quaker meetings, schools, businesses and other organisations to become Living Wage employers.



¹ Total Wealth, Wealth in Great Britain, 2012 to 2014, Office for National Statistics, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/compendium/wealthin greatbritainwave4/2012to2014/chapter2totalwealthwealthingreatbritain2012to2014.

² Because of changes in data collection, comparable statistics are hard to obtain, but this view is borne out by various sources including the Paris School of Economics’ World Top Incomes database www.topincomes.g-mond.parisschoolofeconomics.eu and the Chartbook of economic inequality www.chartbookofeconomicinequality.com/inequality-by-country/united-kingdom.

How can you get involved?

- **Find out more** about the Quaker Living Wage Campaign by ordering a campaign pack. Contact Ellie Roberts at ellier@quaker.org.uk or on 020 7663 1056 to receive a pack by post, or download the pack from www.lancsquakers.org.uk/livingwagecampaign.php. Please note that QPSW will pass your contact details on to Lancaster Quakers.
- **Encourage** your local or area meeting to pay the Living Wage. Or, if your meeting already pays the Living Wage, seek accreditation from the Living Wage Foundation. Lancaster Quakers can support your meeting with the accreditation process and provide advice on how to start paying the Living Wage. Contact them at livingwage@lancsquakers.org.uk.
- **Work with others** in your meeting to encourage local businesses, schools, councils and other organisations to become a Living Wage employer. You can find resources to help you take action in the campaign pack.

Host a film screening of *The Divide*



Inspired by the bestselling book *The Spirit Level*, *The Divide* tells the story of seven individuals in the US and UK – where the top 0.1% own as much wealth as the bottom 90%.

The film is a thought-provoking exploration of economic and social division, and would be a good starting point for a discussion about inequality in your community. You can watch a trailer for the film and find a local screening at www.thedividedocumentary.com.

Your meeting could also host a screening by downloading the film from www.thedividedocumentary.com/organise-a-screening, where you'll find a guide to help you organise the screening. Your meeting will need to pay a licensing fee of £150 + VAT.

If your meeting would like to host a screening, you could consider inviting someone to speak and facilitating a discussion after the film. Might other faith groups, or people involved in tackling inequality locally, be interested in coming and exploring with you how you might take action together?

Support work in your local community

Do you know what's going on in your community to tackle inequality? Are there local campaigns or projects directly supporting those impacted, such as food banks, that you could support or get involved with?

The **Equality Trust** supports groups around the UK to build a movement for a more equal society, and might be a good place to start connecting with local action. You can find out what your local group is doing by going to www.equalitytrust.org.uk/local-groups or contacting Bill Kerry at bill.kerry@equalitytrust.org.uk.

Supporting your local **credit union** can be another small but important way to help address inequality and increase financial inclusion in your community.

A credit union is a member-owned, not-for-profit co-operative that provides loans and other financial services to its members. Because they aim to lend money on fair and reasonable terms, credit unions are often seen as an alternative to expensive payday lenders. As well as loans,

credit unions also provide a place to save³ money, and some offer current accounts too.



Members of Ludlow Meeting open accounts at their local credit union. Photo: Margaret Bennett

In Britain the credit union movement is growing. However, the number of credit union members is still small by comparison to other countries, and the network remains patchy nationwide. By joining, you can help to strengthen the credit union movement and build a more inclusive financial system.

To find your local credit union go to:

- Association British Credit Unions
www.abcul.org.
- Scottish League Credit Unions
www.scottishcu.org.

Challenge media stereotypes

The way the media reports on issues surrounding inequality can often stigmatise people living in poverty, particularly those in receipt of benefits, by using misleading information and negative stereotypes. This removes their dignity and can strongly influence society's perception of the people affected and the causes of the problem.

What can you do?

- **Look out** for stigmatising language in your local media, and challenge it by sending a letter to the editor. Remember to keep letters short (200–250 words) so they can be easily published, and to focus on one key message so you can make the best use of the space.
- **Provide an alternative** to the narrative portrayed in the media. If your meeting starts paying the Living Wage, for example, or is involved in another campaign or project, send a press release to your local media to tell them about it. If you would like advice on working with the media, contact Anne van Staveren, Media Relations Officer for Quakers in Britain, at annev@quaker.org.uk or on 020 7663 1048.
- **Call** for key decision-makers in the media to implement the National Union of Journalists' new guidelines for reporting on poverty. You can join Church Action on Poverty's email campaign by going to www.bit.ly/reportingonpoverty.
- **Wear** the welfare t-shirt, designed by Lancaster Quakers, to promote discussion about our social security system and counter misleading assumptions often portrayed in the media. Order a t-shirt for £5 by going to http://bookshop.quaker.org.uk/Welfare-T-Shirt_11350.



Lancaster Quakers in the 'welfare t-shirts'.
Photo: Lancaster Quakers

³ Most credit unions do not pay interest on savings in the traditional way. Instead, in years where they make a surplus they offer dividends to members. The amount you will

receive (if any) will therefore depend on the strength of the organisation in any given year.

Being an equal community

Has your meeting considered ways in which it can work to foster an equal worshipping community? This might be finding ways to avoid assumptions about what people in the meeting can afford. Your meeting could, for example, introduce a sliding-scale system to cover the cost of meeting events and trips, with some paying slightly more to enable everyone to participate.

Being Friends Together is a joint resource of Quakers in Britain and Woodbrooke Study Centre, which offers a wide range of readings, activities and ideas to help meetings explore and

develop their living communities. You can browse the resource at together.woodbrooke.org.uk/welcome.php.

Your meeting could start a conversation about equality by looking together at some of the resources available on economic justice, which you can find at together.woodbrooke.org.uk/resource.php?r=W1#

Please note that your meeting will need to pay a yearly subscription fee to access the resource.

We know that many Friends are involved with action to tackle inequality, both in their meetings and in their wider community and society. We hope this guide will spark new ideas and help to share some of what's already happening within the yearly meeting.

Below we outline some ways you and your meeting can connect with, and find support from, Quaker work on these issues.

Connect with Quaker work on inequality

- Find out more about QPSW's work on economic inequality by contacting Suzanne Ismail at suzannei@quaker.org.uk or on 020 7663 1055. Or go to www.quaker.org.uk/our-work/economic-justice.
- Sign up to receive monthly e-updates on our work, opportunities for action, and news from Quakers across Britain – go to bit.ly/earthandeconomy.
- Subscribe to our free paper newsletter so you can share Quaker work on these issues with your meeting – email Ellie Roberts at ellier@quaker.org.uk.
- Join the discussion about economics, our lives and the planet on Quakernomics, an online space for sharing and exploring ideas – go to www.quakerweb.org.uk/blog.
- Share action you've taken, and find out what other Quakers are doing, on the Our Stories blog – go to www.quaker.org.uk/our-work/our-stories.

Apply for a QPSW Sustainability & New Economy Grant to support your action

Do you have an idea for a project that will help to tackle inequality, create a more just form of economics, or build sustainable communities? You can apply for a QPSW grant of £100–£2000 to help you start or develop your project. Applications to receive a grant in 2017 are now open and will close on 3 October 2016.

For more information, including guidance notes, go to www.quaker.org.uk/sustainabilitygrants. Before applying, please contact Ellie Roberts at ellier@quaker.org.uk or on 020 7663 1056 to discuss your project.