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# SOCIAL RIGHTS MONITOR 2020

## COUNTRY MONITOR: THE UNITED KINGDOM



The Social Rights Monitor for the United Kingdom shows how the Covid-19 pandemic has heavily impacted society and the economy, as in the rest of the world. Each section of this report considers the main changes that the crisis entailed, and the National Strategy Group identifies the three most pressing issues for the country during this period. Firstly, the aging population presents a great challenge for social provision and the National Health Service, while the decline in the working population and displacement of jobs caused by the pandemic will reduce tax revenues and the availability of funding. Secondly, the importance of the NHS and its accessibility to all has been made clear by the pandemic. Therefore, in the view of the NSG, it is of primary importance to reinforce this sector and ensure adequate guarantees of all kinds for its workers.

The third pressing social issue is the state of the British labour market and the consequent need for welfare interventions to mitigate the impact of Covid-19.

The Covid-19 crisis hit the country in a period of slow economic growth. Real GDP grew 1.4% in 2019, well below the post-crisis peak in 2014. Although the job market was performing well before the pandemic, employment growth was already starting to slow in 2019. More worryingly, the rates of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion or at risk of poverty and suffering severe deprivation have risen recently. Therefore, the UK has moved further from achieving SDG 10 (reducing inequalities). The Covid-19 aftermath thus represents a major challenge for the country with respect to the protection and strengthening of social rights.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> European Commission (2020) Country Report United Kingdom 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0527&from=EN>

	2018	2019	EU-28 2019
Gini index <sup>2</sup>	33.5	N/A	30.1
Unemployment <sup>3</sup>	4.0%	3.8%	6.3%
Gender Equality Index <sup>4</sup>	72.2 (2019)	72.7 (2020)	67.9 (2020)
In-work poverty <sup>5</sup>	10.4%	N/A	9.2%
Housing Overcrowding <sup>6</sup>	4.8%	N/A	15.6%
CIVICUS Civic Space Monitor <sup>7</sup>		NARROWED	N/A

**Selected indicators on the state of social rights**

## EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND ACCESS TO THE LABOUR MARKET

### WELFARE SYSTEM

The main novelty introduced by the British government with respect to the welfare system was the furlough scheme for salaried workers, followed by a Self-Employed Income Support Scheme. Under the Coronavirus Jobs Retention Scheme,<sup>8</sup> workers placed on leave were able to receive 80% of their pay, up to a maximum of GBP 2,500 per month, when it was introduced in March 2020. Almost 10 million workers who were unable to do their jobs had some of their wages paid by the UK government. There have been examples of employers that used their own means to top up the pay of furloughed employees whose regular salaries were more than GBP 2,500 per month. From July, furloughed employees were able to go back to work part-time if they were unable to work full-time. However, the scheme

finished at the end of October 2020. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) said it was a mistake to end the scheme and could push unemployment to 10% in 2020.<sup>9</sup> In November 2020, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an extension of the furlough until the end of March 2021. The Self-Employed Income Support Scheme was introduced only in May 2020, two months after the Coronavirus Jobs Retention Scheme, and self-employed people (estimated at 5 million), found themselves at the back of the line for support allocation. It is further expected that precariousness of work will increase significantly, and that there will be less permanent employment and a higher proliferation of the gig economy and zero-hour contracts. This will have a profound effect on the self-employed, whose numbers are expected to double to 10 million in the next five years.<sup>10</sup> The extension of

2 Eurostat (2020). Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income: [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&-dataset=ilc\\_di12](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&-dataset=ilc_di12)

3 Eurostat (2020). Unemployment by sex and age: annual data: [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une\\_rt\\_a&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une_rt_a&lang=en)

4 European Institute for Gender Equality (2020). Gender Equality Index: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020/UK>

5 Eurostat (2020). In-work at-risk-of-poverty-rate: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tespm070/default/table?lang=en>

6 Eurostat (2020). Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status – total population: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc\\_lvho05a/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_lvho05a/default/table?lang=en)

7 CIVICUS (2020). Civic space monitor – United Kingdom: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/united-kingdom/>

8 UK Government(2020) Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme>

9 BBC (2020) Closing furlough 'could lead to 10% unemployment' <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-53564388>

10 Duke, B. (2020) Back of the queue: Self-employed workers during and after the COVID-19 crisis <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/policyandpolicy/self-employed-workers-covid19/>

the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme has been accompanied by a new income-support grant for the self-employed that will increase from 55% to 80% of average profits – up to a limit of GBP 7,500.<sup>11</sup> There was a lot of uncertainty when the furlough scheme was introduced over what would happen if an employee was made redundant after a period of furlough. The pandemic meant there could be no guarantee that an employee could return to their post. Effective from 31 July 2020, the government introduced new legislation, according to which furloughed staff are entitled to receive statutory redundancy payments and notice at their full, pre-furlough, pay rather than at the reduced furlough rate. (This is subject to the previous eligibility conditions.)<sup>12</sup>

According to the National Strategy Group, the Covid-19 crisis will push the UK government to introduce additional welfare measures. In order to significantly raise the fiscal revenue to finance the furlough and other schemes and to invest in the National Health Service, the government needs to increase taxes or change thresholds in broad-based taxes, such as income tax, national insurance contributions and VAT. This will represent a major challenge for the Conservative government, as increasing income tax rates would break its election manifesto pledge.

Another change applied to welfare measures is the increase of the National Living Wage (NLW) for 2021 announced by the government in November 2020. The increase is part of a longer process that was started in 2019 and will last until 2024. Based on Low Pay Commission analysis, the NLW is due to rise to GBP 10.34 an hour by that year. However, in the light of the impact of Covid-19 on the labour market, the increase for 2021 will be lower than estimated

and the 2021 NLW will be GBP 8.91, instead of GBP 9.03 as initially planned. The Low Pay Commission, which recommended this rate, specifies that it is still modestly higher than the increase in consumer prices, which means that low-paid workers' living standards should be protected.<sup>13</sup>

## INCLUSION OF MIGRANTS

Even though the UK has a national interest in the integration of migrants, it does not have a national strategy on integration, either for the labour market or society as a whole. The Home Office is responsible for refugee integration and for settlement and citizenship policy, while the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government leads on community cohesion in England. Other departments lead on initiatives in their policy areas, such as education and adult skills. Integration is a devolved matter, and each of the constituent nations of the UK has developed its own approach, though responsibility for migration policy remains with the Home Office.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence, different strategic documents have been developed by the national governments. In Wales, the path towards the integration and inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers is defined by the Nation of Sanctuary – Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan, published in January 2019. The plan is aligned to the priorities defined by several legislative frameworks, including Prosperity for All: the National Strategy for Wales; Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Strategic Equality Plan 2016-20. The Nation of Sanctuary plan applies a collaborative approach, by involving refugees and asylum seekers in its own implementation. Furthermore, it aims to foster collaboration among different actors (private or public) and

11 UK Government (2020) Government extends Furlough to March and increases self-employed support <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-extends-furlough-to-march-and-increases-self-employed-support>

12 UK Government (2020) New law to ensure furloughed employees receive full redundancy payments <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-law-to-ensure-furloughed-employees-receive-full-redundancy-payments>

13 Low Pay Commission (2020) 2020 Report Summary of findings [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/937653/Low\\_Pay\\_Commission\\_2020\\_summary\\_of\\_findings.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/937653/Low_Pay_Commission_2020_summary_of_findings.pdf)

14 The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford (2020) Policy Primer: Integration <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/primers/policy-primer-integration/>

to promote a person-centred approach.<sup>15</sup> In Scotland, the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2018-2022 sets out a vision for a welcoming Scotland, where refugees and asylum seekers are able to rebuild their lives from the day they arrive. The Scottish government funds a wide variety of civil society organisations and foundations to support the integration of refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>16</sup> The Scottish integration strategy was quoted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Integration as an example of very good practice.<sup>17</sup> In England, the Integrated Communities Action Plan, published in February 2019, sets out a different way of working on integration, with new partnerships between all levels of government and civil society. The Action Plan, applicable only in England, touches on the following areas: strengthening leadership; supporting new migrants and local residents; education and young people; boosting English-language skills; places and communities; increasing economic opportunity; rights and freedoms; and measuring success.<sup>18</sup>

According to The Migration Observatory of the University of Oxford, the efficacy of the integration and inclusion policies targeting migrants in the UK is hindered by the multitude of policy approaches. There is also a lack of clarity on the division of responsibilities between national and local authorities and there are different interpretations of the concept of inclusion. In this last respect, there seems to be inconsistency between migrants' expectations and needs and the opportunities and services that are available. Another problematic aspect of the UK's integration policies is the reduced

data available on migrants, which jeopardises the monitoring and evaluation of integration processes that should inform future policies and practices.<sup>19</sup>

## EDUCATION AND YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Between 2011 and 2019, there has been a decrease in the early-school-leaving (ESL) rate in the UK, which fell from 14.9% in 2011 to 10.9% in 2019. Despite the improvement, this last rate is still above the 10% headline target set by the EU. The UK, when it was still part of the EU, was the only country that did not set a national target for its domestic I ESL rate. One interesting observation is that in most member states, ESL rates for foreign-born young people were higher than those for people born in the country – and significantly so in some cases, such as Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, Cyprus and Greece. But in the UK, the native-born ESL rate was slightly higher than that of the foreign-born group. Nevertheless, a gender gap can be observed, which is in line with many EU countries: in 2019 the ELS was 12.3% for men and 9.4% for women.<sup>20 21</sup> Policies that increase the variety of education on offer, by providing education and training opportunities beyond the age of compulsory education, can help reduce the ESL rate. In England, Opportunity Areas is a national, fixed-term programme focused on improving social mobility through education, and it includes measures to improve education and skills-training options for youths over 16. It includes delivery plans for 12 Opportunity Areas, which have been identified as those in greatest

15 Welsh Government (2019) Nation of Sanctuary – Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan [https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-03/nation-of-sanctuary-refugee-and-asylum-seeker-plan\\_0.pdf](https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-03/nation-of-sanctuary-refugee-and-asylum-seeker-plan_0.pdf)

16 Scottish Government (2018) New Scots: refugee integration strategy 2018 to 2022 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/new-scots-refugee-integration-strategy-2018-2022/>

17 All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Integration (2020) Interim Report into Integration of Immigrants <http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Interim-Report-into-the-integration-of-immigrants.pdf>

18 HM Government (2019) Integrated Communities Action Plan [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/778045/Integrated\\_Communities\\_Strategy\\_Govt\\_Action\\_Plan.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/778045/Integrated_Communities_Strategy_Govt_Action_Plan.pdf)

19 The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford (2020) Policy Primer: Integration <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/primers/policy-primer-integration/>

20 European Commission (2019) Assessment of the Implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation on Policies to Reduce Early School Leaving <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/72f0303e-cf8e-11e9-b4bf-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

21 Eurostat (2020) Early leavers from education and training by sex and labour status [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat\\_lfse\\_14/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_14/default/table?lang=en)

need: there, the UK government outlines how it plans to improve young people's knowledge and skills and provide them with the best advice and opportunities.<sup>22</sup>

Before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Higher Education Policy Institute in the UK published a report in March 2020, showing that the focus on graduate employment has fundamentally changed the way in which universities operate. It explored the recent focus by policymakers, students and employers on getting graduates into professional jobs, and it found some interesting statistics. For example, 76% of careers services had seen a change in student engagement with careers in the preceding three years, compared to 24% who saw no change. Moreover, 93% of careers services saw the increased policy focus on graduate outcomes as positive.

Clearly, the outbreak of Covid-19 has had, is having and will have important repercussions for youth employability. Before the pandemic, the rate of people up to age 24 considered as NEET (not in education, employment or training) was 10.5% in the UK in 2019.<sup>23</sup> The most recent Youth Unemployment Statistics briefing from the House of Commons, dated 11 August 2020 and based on the August Labour Force Survey, showed that the pandemic's biggest impact has not so far been on youth unemployment. However, other indicators do show that the pandemic is having a very significant impact on young people aged 16-24. For instance, as of 31 August, over 500,000 jobs held by people aged 24 or under were on furlough, or 13% of jobs.<sup>24</sup> More generally, one-third of 18-24-year-old employees have lost their jobs or been furloughed.<sup>25</sup> In addition, people in the 18-24 age group, including graduates as well

as students engaged in part-time employment, tend to work disproportionately in jobs that require face-to-face contact, so they are less likely to be able to work remotely. More young people report that they are likely to lose their jobs because of the virus than any other age group. Up to now, young people are also the most likely to have had their hours cut or lost their jobs.<sup>26</sup>

In July 2020 the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, announced the GBP 2 billion Kickstart Scheme to create more jobs for young people, as part of an emergency package to prevent mass unemployment, particularly amongst young people.<sup>27</sup> The Confederation of British Industry (CBI), praised the scheme as a much-needed down-payment on young people's futures, whilst trade unions said it was a good first step.<sup>28</sup> The scheme was eventually published on 2 September 2020 and forms part of the UK government's Plan for Jobs. It is aimed at 16-24-year-olds and funds employers to create six-month job placements (which are not apprenticeships) for people who are currently on Universal Credit and at risk of long-term unemployment. It is being delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and will initially be open until December 2021, with the option of an extension. It applies across England, Scotland and Wales (with the government providing additional funding to Northern Ireland for a similar scheme). For each job placement, the funding covers: 100% of the relevant National Minimum Wage for 25 hours a week; the associated employer National Insurance contribution; and employer minimum automatic enrolment contributions. There is also GBP 1,500 available per job placement for setup costs, support and training. The government also announced that there will be extra

22 UK Government (2018) Social mobility and opportunity areas <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-and-opportunity-areas>

23 Social Scoreboard (2020) United Kingdom <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/profile>

24 UK Parliament (2020) Youth Unemployment Statistics <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn05871/>

25 Resolution Foundation (2020) Young workers in the coronavirus crisis <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/05/Young-workers-in-the-coronavirus-crisis.pdf>

26 Higher Education Policy Institute (2020) David Willetts: We must stop young people losing out from the Covid-19 crisis <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/03/31/david-willetts-we-must-stop-young-people-losing-out-from-the-covid-19-crisis/>

27 UK Government (2020) Kickstart Scheme <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/kickstart-scheme>

28 BBC (2020) Coronavirus: Rishi Sunak unveiling 'kickstart jobs scheme' for young people <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-53324201>

resources available to support those people who have completed a job funded by Kickstart Scheme to further build their experience and help them move into sustained employment.<sup>29</sup>

Among the conditions that apply to employers that want to benefit from the scheme is that they aim to create a minimum of 30 job placements. This requirement could represent a problem for small enterprises. So, to prevent discrimination in this sense, the scheme

foresees partnerships between small enterprises and other organisations to reach this minimum threshold. However, SMEs have reported that there is little guidance for them and have claimed that the measure was conceived to benefit bigger corporations.<sup>30</sup> To respond to this need, the UK government in November 2020 added “Kickstart gateways” to the scheme, organisations that coordinate partnership agreements for employers that can only offer 29 or fewer job placements.<sup>31</sup>

## FAIR WORKING CONDITIONS

### WORKING CONDITIONS

After the UK went into lockdown in the spring, people were required to work from home wherever this was possible, with only frontline workers or those unable to work at home continuing to work in public-facing roles, albeit with additional health and safety measures. Regional and socio-economic differences were revealed by the Office for National Statistics’ Labour Market Survey. People in jobs requiring higher qualifications and experience were much more likely to work from home. Furthermore, residents of London were more likely to work from home than those in other regions: the proportion of people homeworking was 57.2% in London, compared to 35.3% in the West Midlands.<sup>32</sup> Currently, different guidelines are provided by central and local governments on workplace safety. These are constantly

updated in the light of the health situation and contain specific provisions for different business areas.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, there have been cases of specific business sectors where the health and safety of workers have not been sufficiently protected, such as the meat industry, in particular meat processing plants. This industry failed in its duty to protect employees and the wider public’s health, not only in the UK, but in the EU too.<sup>34</sup> In the UK, this led to more Covid-19 outbreaks and a consequent increase in risks for public health. The situation was exacerbated by on-site accommodation at many of these plants, where several workers live and sleep in each dormitory. They are transported to the worksite together in vehicles, after which they work and spend time together indoors throughout the day.<sup>35</sup>

29 UK Government (2020) Kickstart Scheme <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/kickstart-scheme>

30 Ruzicka, A. (2020) How does the Kickstart Scheme work? 10 key questions answered on the long-awaited £2bn plan to get young people into jobs <https://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/smallbusiness/article-8694325/Kickstart-Scheme-does-work-good.html>

31 UK Government (2020) Help employers apply for a Kickstart Scheme grant (Kickstart gateway) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/help-employers-apply-for-a-kickstart-scheme-grant-kickstart-gateway>

32 Office for National Statistics (2020) Coronavirus and homeworking in the UK: April 2020 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/coronavirusandhomeworkingintheuk/april2020>

33 UK Government (2020) Working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/updates>

34 The British Medical Journal (2020) Meat plants—a new front line in the covid-19 pandemic <https://www.bmj.com/content/370/bmj.m2716>

35 BBC (2020) Coronavirus: Why have there been so many outbreaks in meat processing plants? <https://www.bbc.com/news/53137613>

At the beginning of September, the government urged Whitehall bosses to get civil-service staff back into their offices faster. The government said it wanted 80% of civil servants to be able to attend their usual workplace at least once a week through rota systems by the end of September. This was met with criticism from trade unions, which branded this attitude as outdated, as workplaces have gone through lasting changes as a result of the pandemic. Unions said that ministers should better focus on adapting to a new world of work. The civil service union, FDA, stated that the number of civil servants returning to work had been steadily rising and that by the end of 2020 it would probably reach between 30% and 40%.<sup>36</sup>

According to the National Strategy Group, working arrangements will be transformed by the pandemic, not just for the long term but likely forever. With the new arrangements will come further changes to employment law, working conditions and labour rights. The NSG also draws attention to the impact of Covid-19 on absence from work and entitlement to pay. During the past months, the UK government approved many temporary changes to labour law, such as statutory sick pay (SSP), which is applied from day one for employees who have or may have Covid-19 or those who have to self-quarantine. This last point became particularly problematic for workers who had to self-isolate because they were returning from abroad. As the UK government, during the first wave, rapidly put different countries and regions on the quarantine-exempt list and then removed from the list and sometimes returned them to it, many people were caught out. That meant they were unable to return to work prior to the last-minute introduction of the quarantine requirement, but some did not have the right to SSP because they were feeling well.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, the National Strategy Group points out, this situation was unfair for many workers.

## PRECARIOUSNESS

Precarious work is a problem in the UK and has become an even more pressing issue as a result of the pandemic. It is expected to continue impacting working conditions in the country. According to an analysis by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in 2019, 3.7 million people were in insecure work because they were low-paid self-employed (1.85 million); agency, casual or seasonal workers (1.11 million); or else on zero-hour contracts (718,000). This represents one in nine of the UK workforce.<sup>38</sup> Earlier research from the TUC, published in 2017, sheds light on the labour market experiences of casual workers. Casual workers experience significant fluctuations in both their level of pay and the regularity of payment, so they struggle financially and suffer from considerable levels of anxiety over whether they can support themselves and their families. More specifically, workers in casual employment were more likely to be young, non-white and employed in an unskilled occupation. They were more likely to experience lower job and life satisfaction and to have low employment security and relatively high levels of anxiety and depression. In terms of mental health, perceived low employment security and working weekends were associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression. Anxiety levels tended to be higher among workers without regular work hours. A gender divide emerged from the study as well: women were more likely to leave employment than men and had a lower likelihood of securing a permanent contract. In addition, workers with at least one dependent child aged less than 16 were more likely to leave employment than those without dependent children.<sup>39</sup>

The NSG reports that in some of the most deprived areas of the UK, middle-aged men working in manual, low-skilled jobs in factories have been amongst the hardest hit by the Covid-19 crisis. Factory closures during lockdown led to

36 BBC (2020) Coronavirus: Civil servants 'must get back to offices quickly' <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-54035770>

37 UK Government (2020) Statutory Sick Pay <https://www.gov.uk/statutory-sick-pay>

38 Trade Union Congress (2019) Insecure work <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/insecure-work>

39 Trade Union Congress (2017) Living on the Edge <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/insecure%20work%20report%20final%20final.pdf>

job losses among people with very little prospect of retraining and reemployment in another industrial sector. The Understanding Society Covid-19 Survey and the briefing note on the economic effects of the pandemic support the feedback from the NSG. They show that, between February and April 2020, the fall in working hours was particularly large for men (and women) educated to less than degree level. The fall in hours was greatest for people whose employers set their hours without any minimum (i.e. zero-hour contracts), followed by self-employed people. Of those reporting a decline in hours worked, 43% were furloughed employees, and 14% had suffered a loss of self-employment business. Average household earnings fell by 8%. While there was a fall across all levels of earnings, the largest impact fell on the household earnings of the bottom 20% in terms of long-term income. Comparing household earnings before and after the pandemic, 23% of individuals reported a loss of more than 20%, and losses were particularly severe for single parents.<sup>40 41</sup>

## GENDER EQUALITY

Fifty years after the passage of the Equal Pay Act 1970 in the UK – which concerned overtime, paid leave and other benefits as well as basic pay – examples abound of unlawful, unequal pay, the NSG reports. In 2017, the UK government made it compulsory for companies with more than 250 employees to report their gender pay gaps, and the first set of figures was published in 2018. Data from the Office for

National Statistics (ONS) for 2019 show that the gender pay gap for all employees stood at 17.3% and was 8.9% for full-time employees. (The difference is because more women are in part-time jobs, and for gender-based reasons these tend to be lower paid.<sup>42</sup> Overall, the UK performs better on the Gender Equality Index than many countries in the EU: its general score for 2020 (72.7) is higher than the EU average (67.9), and it places sixth in the general ranking. In the domain of money, however, its position (14th) is much less positive.<sup>43</sup>

A report from The Equality Trust with respect to gender-based pay discrimination shows that overall, companies are not operating transparent pay structures. Also, the vast majority of companies do not advertise a pay rate for the role they are recruiting or even a salary range. This is a high-risk practice in terms of gender pay gaps. The reporting of gender pay gaps has shined a light on the extent of gender pay and bonus gaps within companies: the highest gender pay gap reported by a FTSE 100 company this year was just over 55%. But the reporting has not produced the cultural shift that would lead to action needed to rapidly close the gap. The 10 companies (or their subsidiaries) on the FTSE 100 reporting the biggest gender pay gaps all had gaps of over 40%. The gaps are even greater for bonuses, where the 10 biggest gender gaps exceed 75%: on average, for every GBP 1,000 a woman gets as a bonus, a man will receive over GBP 4,000. At the current rate of progress – the change in gap from 2018 to 2019 – it will take almost 200 years before the gender pay gap is eliminated.<sup>44</sup>

40 Understanding Society (2020) Covid-19 Survey <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/topic/covid-19>

41 Understanding Society (2020) Covid-19 Survey – Briefing Note Wave 1: April 2020, The Economic Effects <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/working-papers/2020-10.pdf>

42 Office for National Statistics (2019) Gender pay gap in the UK: 2019 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2019>

43 European Institute for Gender Equality (2020) Gender Equality Index – United Kingdom <https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/Equal%20Pay%20Report%202020.pdf>

44 The Equality Trust (2020) Fifty Years is Long Enough: A Report by The Equality Trust into Unlawful Pay Discrimination <https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/Equal%20Pay%20Report%202020.pdf>

## GOOD PRACTICE

### #EQUALPAY50 CAMPAIGN

In relation to not just gender equality in employment, but also equality of pay and non-discrimination across other groups and areas, the Equality Trust launched its #EqualPay50 campaign in May 2020.<sup>45</sup> This initiative brings together a range of stakeholders to increase the pressure on UK employers to meet their legal obligation towards equal pay. The key recommendations of the campaign focus on pay transparency and intersectional pay reporting, which includes ethnicity and disability, as well as eradicating risky pay practices that import gender discrimination and disadvantages. To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Equal Pay Act in May 2020, the organisation coordinated letters to over 100 MPs, and launched a video and a new platform featuring the stories of women who have experienced unequal pay.

Besides the gender pay gap, other forms of gender discrimination in the UK emerge from the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). The country's scores have decreased in the areas of knowledge, time and health since 2010. In general, the UK has improved slowly over the last three years, with an increase of 0.5 points to its overall score. On a positive note, the UK has registered a relevant improvement in the domain of power, where its ranking has improved two positions since 2010.<sup>46</sup> The gender employment gap, which is close to 10 percentage points, represents one

of the main challenges for the UK. Among the causes is inadequate provision of affordable childcare and social services. In 2018, 37.6% of women reported inactivity due to family and caring responsibilities, 5.8 percentage points above the EU average. This is particularly concerning with respect to the 25-49 age group, as is 61% of inactive women in this age group report that their inactivity is due to care responsibilities. The UK had one of the highest rates (42%) of women working part-time in the EU.<sup>47</sup>

## WORK-LIFE BALANCE

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), through its annual Good Work Index, provides evaluation and insight into the quality of work in the UK. The 2020 edition is based on surveys carried out just before the pandemic but is supplemented by additional surveys monitoring the effects of Covid-19. The key findings are that workers in managerial and professional occupations have the worst work-life balance. They are also more likely to report finding it hard to relax in their personal time because of the nature of their job.<sup>48</sup> The NSG points out that this result contrasts with the tendency for managerial and professional workers to have the greatest access to flexible working arrangements. The CIPD Index also reports on flexible working arrangements, including working from home in normal working hours. Before the pandemic, the most striking difference between occupational classes was around homeworking. There are also substantial variations in flexi-time arrangements. In fact, the overall results reveal that employees in lower occupational classes benefit much less from flexible work arrangements than their

45 Equality Trust (n.a.) #EqualPay50 <https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/equalpay50>

46 European Institute for Gender Equality (2020) Gender Equality Index – United Kingdom <https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/Equal%20Pay%20Report%202020.pdf>

47 European Commission (2020) Country Report United Kingdom 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0527&from=EN>

48 Championing better work and working life (2020) CIPD Good Work Index 2020 [https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/good-work-in-dex-full-report-2020-2\\_tcm18-79210.pdf](https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/good-work-in-dex-full-report-2020-2_tcm18-79210.pdf)

higher-skilled counterparts.<sup>49</sup> Work flexibility can represent a problem for workers when it is one-sided. In order to gather information on this phenomenon, the government launched consultations on one-sided flexibility and the establishment of a single enforcement body to stop workplace exploitation. The Taylor review found evidence of employers abusing one-sided flexibility arrangements. In some cases, they sent workers home when customer demand was low or they cancelled some work hours at the last-minute. In response, the government commissioned the Low Pay Commission to develop proposals to tackle these practices.<sup>50</sup>

Parental leave has been an area of serious debate in recent months. More than 236,000 people signed an online petition to extend maternity leave and statutory maternity pay by three months, saying that this would allow parents and babies to socialize and bond through baby

groups. These are vital for child development but were stopped during the lockdown due to social distancing.<sup>51</sup> The government rejected most of the Petitions Committee's recommendations, stating that the current arrangements are sufficiently generous.<sup>52</sup>

With regard to misuse of non-disclosure agreements (NDA), the previous government in 2019 proposed a law to prohibit the use of such agreements when they prevent people from revealing information to the police, doctors, social services etc., especially in cases of sexual harassment, racial discrimination and assault.<sup>53</sup> New guidelines for sexual-assault cases were also published by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in January 2020.<sup>54</sup> The guidance is not yet legally binding, but it could become so after feedback from the Consultation on Sexual Harassment in the Workplace,<sup>55</sup> which was launched in July 2019, is published.

49 Championing better work and working life (2020) CIPD Good Work Index 2020 [https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/good-work-in-dex-full-report-2020-2\\_tcm18-79210.pdf](https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/good-work-in-dex-full-report-2020-2_tcm18-79210.pdf)

50 Eurofound (2020) Living and Working in the United Kingdom <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/country/united-kingdom>

51 UK Government and Parliament (2020) Extend maternity leave by 3 months with pay in light of COVID-19 <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/306691>

52 UK parliament (2020) Government Response to recommendations and conclusions <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmcompetitions/770/77003.htm>

53 Eurofound (2020) Living and Working in the United Kingdom <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/country/united-kingdom>

54 Equality and Human Rights Commission (2020) New guidance calls for employers to step up and protect staff from harassment <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/our-work/news/new-guidance-calls-employers-step-and-protect-staff-harassment>

55 UK Government (2019) Consultation on Sexual Harassment in the Workplace <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace>

# SOCIAL PROTECTION AND INCLUSION

## LIVING CONDITIONS AND HOUSING

Living conditions have been hugely impacted by the pandemic and its economic consequences. The above-mentioned Covid-19 Survey by Understanding Society reveals that between February and April 2020, two-thirds of respondents reported reduced spending, and 25.9% had to resort to using their savings. In addition, significant percentages of people had to borrow from financial institutions, request a mortgage holiday, receive financial support from family or friends, or apply for universal credit. Those in the lowest 20% of household incomes were much more likely to ask for financial help from family or friends, as were single parents. The incidence of arrears was higher than in 2017 and 2018. Arrears on non-housing bills were largest for the lowest 20% of household incomes and single parents.<sup>56</sup> Data are even more worrying on the economic losses for the most vulnerable groups. In the highest income bracket, average earnings stood at GBP 832 a week in February 2020 and then fell by GBP 46. In the lowest income bracket, they fell by GBP 43 but from a far lower weekly average of just GBP 297. Single-parent households lost more than twice as much in earnings as households with children and more than one adult.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, twice as many people expect their financial situation to get worse (19.7%) than expect it to get better (9.3%). In the bottom quantile and among single parents, three times as many expect things to get worse as expect an improvement.<sup>58</sup> The National Strategy Group states that the impact of Covid-19 will have an impact on living conditions in the future, though

a lot will depend on factors such as vaccines, future waves of infection, improvements in test-and-trace procedures and government interventions to support citizens.

The UK is experiencing a housing crisis. According to Paul Cheshire and Christian Hilber of the London School of Economics, the real problem is unresponsive supply, and there is a need for radical changes to the apathy of UK housing policy. Since 2015, neither the successive governments in power nor the opposition has come out with any effective policy to tackle the housing crisis. Where there has been action, it has been ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. More precisely, demand-side policies have proved ineffective because they pushed house prices higher, especially in the least affordable areas where productive jobs are concentrated. Moreover, housing supply has been unresponsive, as restrictions on land and space have prevented cities from growing; local communities have virtually no incentive to permit residential development; and the planning system is dysfunctional. Young people suffer the most, and the ability of the under-40s to buy a house has continued to erode, increasing both inter-generational and inter-regional inequalities.<sup>59</sup> The affordability of housing has become a point of concern for trade unions as well, as high private rents and house prices have priced many public-service workers out of housing.<sup>60</sup> Younger would-be buyers, especially, are priced out of areas with productive jobs, and workers have to commute increasingly long distances from remote areas.

56 Understanding Society (2020) Covid-19 Survey –Briefing Note Wave 1: April 2020, The Economic Effects <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/working-papers/2020-10.pdf>

57 Institute for Social and Economic Research at University of Essex (2020) Single mothers and lowest paid hit hardest by loss of income in Covid-19 crisis <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/2020/05/29/single-mothers-and-lowest-paid-covid>

58 Understanding Society (2020) Covid-19 Survey –Briefing Note Wave 1: April 2020, The Economic Effects <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/working-papers/2020-10.pdf>

59 LSE (2019) The UK's housing crisis: what should the next government do? <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/housing-crisis-what-should-the-next-government-do/>

60 Unison (n.a.) Housing <https://www.unison.org.uk/at-work/community/key-issues/housing/>

The 2019 English Housing Survey showed that a staggering 93% of UK homes did not meet basic accessibility standards, and many developers were not building new homes suitable for people as they become older. According to the survey, one in five homes in the UK was deemed non-decent, and non-decent homes were disproportionately lived in by older people, many of whom have to cope with long-term health conditions or disabilities.<sup>61</sup>

The UK government, as part of its coronavirus measures, has introduced several provisions to protect housing. Minimum-notice periods have been extended. For notices served between 26 March 2020 and 28 August 2020, the minimum period was three months, but from 29 August 2020 until 31 March 2021 it is six months (with applicable exceptions). There were payment breaks for mortgage holders facing difficulties in repayment and measures to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping and to support those fleeing domestic abuse.<sup>62</sup>

## JUST AND GREEN TRANSITION

There has been increasing, ever wider support from civil society for decarbonising the UK economy. The most visible recent campaigns, strikes, disruptions have been led by the Extinction Rebellion, XR.<sup>63</sup> Greenpeace has estimated that the UK alone could help create 1.8 million jobs by investing in a green economic recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic. However, this will not happen without the commitment of time and financial resources from politicians and businesses. Greenpeace rightly

warns that if a transition to a greener economy is done without coherent policies and robust strategies, it could backfire by making things worse and losing public support for definitive action on climate change. In the view of the environmental NGO, three elements are necessary for these policies and strategies to work: collaboration between national and regional governments; a local approach to better adapt measures to local specificities; and money.<sup>64</sup> To properly support a just transition in the UK, the government needs to spend at least GBP 5 billion per year.<sup>65</sup> The European Commission observes that greater investments are needed to modernise and expand infrastructure networks.<sup>66</sup>

The UK government is legally bound to reduce overall CO2 emissions in 2050 by 80% compared with 1990 levels, and reducing vehicle emissions is a critical element. In addition, the government has pledged to stop the sale of all new conventional petrol and diesel cars and vans by 2040. But in 2019 only 1.1% of all new cars sold were electric,<sup>67</sup> as upfront purchase costs and the lack of availability of charging infrastructure are prohibitive for many potential customers. The current range of electric vehicles is also relatively narrow.

The European Commission in its Country Report notices that the United Kingdom has made good progress in decarbonising its economy. Nevertheless, more efforts are required to transition to a carbon-neutral economy. The country has achieved good results in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, which decreased by 21% from 2005 to 2018. Also, emissions

61 Centre for Ageing Better (2019) UK on verge of accessible housing crisis as poll shows Brits want homes to suit all ages <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-02/UK-Faces-Accessible-Housing-Crisis-As-Poll-Shows-Brits-Want-Homes-To-Suit-All-Ages-Centre-for-Ageing-Better.pdf>

62 Shelter Legal (2020) Covid-19: Protection for tenants [https://england.shelter.org.uk/legal/housing\\_options/covid-19\\_emergency\\_measures/rent\\_arrears\\_and\\_eviction](https://england.shelter.org.uk/legal/housing_options/covid-19_emergency_measures/rent_arrears_and_eviction)

63 BBC (2020) Extinction Rebellion protesters block newspaper printing presses <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-54038591>

64 Greenpeace (n.a.) The just transition <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/challenges/just-transition/>

65 Environmental Justice Transition (2020) Faster, Further, Fairer <https://www.ippr.org/files/2020-05/faster-further-fairer-ejc-interim-may20.pdf>

66 European Commission (2020) Country Report United Kingdom 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0527&from=EN>

67 BBC (2019) The five major challenges facing electric vehicles <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-49578790>

from non-ETS sectors will be 27% below the 2005 level by the end of 2020, exceeding the EU target by 9 percentage points. However, if additional measures are not implemented, the UK will miss its 2030 target (a 37% decrease) by 5 percentage points. In its 2019 annual report to the UK Parliament on progress in reducing emissions, the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) concluded that UK action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions was lagging behind what is needed to meet legally-binding emissions targets.<sup>68</sup>

## FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

In June 2020, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) published an analysis, 'Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK: 2020',<sup>69</sup> which provides a helpful insight into policies to eradicate poverty in the UK and puts them in the perspective of the Covid-19 pandemic. It shows that, when the pandemic hit the UK and the national lockdown and restrictions were introduced, income growth had already been extremely disappointing for several years. Median household income was the same in 2018-19 (the latest available data) as it was in 2015-16. The combined effect has been a decade of poor improvements in living standards, with average income before housing costs growing less than over any other decade since records began in 1961. The main reason has been price rises since 2016.

The analysis states that in recent years, income growth has stalled for people of all ages. Trends amongst low-income households have been the worst, with five consecutive years of income stagnation due to falls in income from working-age benefits and tax credits. Working-age benefits were frozen in cash terms, so the inflationary rise since 2016 reduced

their real value by 5%. Overall relative poverty, measured by income after housing costs (AHC), was 22% in 2018-19. Child poverty increased by 3%, the biggest sustained rise since the early 1990s. Moreover, the at-risk-of-poverty-or-social-exclusion rate increased by 1.6 percentage points to 23.6% in 2018, significantly exceeding the EU average of 21.9%. Both relative poverty and material deprivation rose. Severe material deprivation increased by 0.5 percentage point between 2017 (4.1%) and 2019 (4.6%). In 2018, the at-risk-of-poverty rate increased to 18.9% from 17% in 2017. As a consequence of social security system reforms enacted recently, the power of social transfers to reduce poverty effects decreased between 2017 and 2018, from 41.7% to 35.9%. As a result, income inequality after transfers increased.<sup>70</sup>

As has been evident from the earlier narrative, the workers who are most at risk from Covid-19 and whose livelihoods were made most precarious already tended to have relatively low incomes – and thus be relatively more likely to experience poverty – before the pandemic. The last striking finding from this IFS analysis is that, despite temporary increases in benefits announced by the UK government in response to the pandemic, the benefits system in 2020 still provides less support to out-of-work households than it did in 2011.

## HEALTHCARE

The health sector was, for obvious reasons, hugely impacted by the Covid-19 crisis. Among the consequences of the pandemic is the reorganization of work in the sector. In UK, this reorganization meant that many health services, particularly general practitioner (GP) services, were provided via phone or video.

68 European Commission (2020) Country Report United Kingdom 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0527&from=EN>

69 Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020) Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK: 2020 <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/R170-Living-standards-poverty-and-inequality-in-the-UK-2019-2020%20.pdf>

70 European Commission (2020) Country Report United Kingdom 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0527&from=EN>

This was crucial, as access to GP services and medication (ongoing and sporadic) available only on prescription was a vital area of intervention during the pandemic for people to feel some sense of health security. NHS figures from May 2020 revealed that 48% of GP appointments were carried out over the phone, compared with just 14% in February 2020.<sup>71</sup> In April 2020, 98% of those who needed prescription medications were still able to obtain them, and three-quarters of those who needed GP services or the pharmacist still received the services they required.<sup>72</sup> In addition, the British Medical Association completed a wide-ranging Covid-19 tracker survey in June 2020. This showed that, from March until June, 95% of GPs were providing remote consultations for their patients. GPs surveyed also remarked on the extent to which their ability to provide remote consultations for patients was limited by different factors, including internet speed, training and IT hardware and software.<sup>73</sup> Different GP practices faced different experiences and circumstances across the country, so the NSG assumes that there were regional and even local variations. These discrepancies have been widened by the prescription system in the UK. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, there are no charges for prescriptions for all patients registered with a GP, when the patient gets their prescription from a pharmacy in the same nation. But in England, there was a prescription charge for medication from the NHS of GBP 9.15 in April 2020. Free prescriptions are available only to certain groups of patients.<sup>74</sup>

The above-mentioned survey by the British Medical Association showed that the pandemic can be useful for learning about the NHS.

Over 55% of GPs who took part in the survey said that during lockdown, they felt much less burdened by bureaucracy. When asked about which changes in terms of delivery of services they felt should be retained in the longer term, 82% of GPs said the need to have less paperwork and bureaucracy; 89% of the respondents mentioned greater use of remote consultations.<sup>75</sup>

The National Strategy Group reports that in terms of accessibility and affordability, the NHS maintains the principles upon which it was founded: it meets the needs of everyone; it is free at the point of delivery; and treatment is based on clinical need, not the ability to pay. A lot has changed since its founding in 1948, and the NHS today faces many challenges. But the UK remains one of the few countries in which patient consultations with a GP are free. Even before the pandemic, however, the NHS has been challenged by lengthening waiting times for treatment, and in 2018 it fell short of the target of seeing 95% of patients in accident and emergency (A&E) departments within four hours. In some instances, especially in winter, it fell under 80%.<sup>76</sup> Some areas of healthcare provision were impacted during lockdown, such as A&E departments, cancer screening and diagnosis. In April 2020, 60% of those people who had expected or needed inpatient care did not have treatment, in most cases due to cancellation by the NHS. Of those who required outpatient care, 42% had their appointments cancelled. Even for people suffering from cancer, only 40% received treatment between February and April 2020; 53% had treatment cancelled; and the rest cancelled it themselves.<sup>77</sup> The Health Foundation looked in

71 The Guardian (2020) GP appointments by phone and video surge during coronavirus lockdown <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jul/05/gp-appointments-phone-video-coronavirus-lockdown-nhs>

72 Understanding Society (2020) Covid-19 Survey – Briefing Note Wave 1: April 2020, The Economic Effects <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/working-papers/2020-10.pdf>

73 the British Medical Association (2020) 1 June 2020 BMA COVID-19 tracker <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/2557/bma-covid-19-survey-results-for-gps-4-june-2020.pdf>

74 NHS (n.a.) NHS Help with Health Costs <https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/help-nhs-prescription-costs/free-nhs-prescriptions>

75 British Medical Association (2020) 1 June 2020 BMA COVID-19 tracker <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/2557/bma-covid-19-survey-results-for-gps-4-june-2020.pdf>

76 The Guardian (2018) NHS hospitals in England record worst ever A&E performance <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/feb/08/nhs-hospitals-england-worst-a-and-e-performance>

77 Understanding Society (2020) Covid-19 Survey – Briefing Note Wave 1: April 2020, The Economic Effects <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/working-papers/2020-10.pdf>

May at how Covid-19 had changed the use of emergency care.<sup>78</sup> A&E visits were 57% lower in April 2020 than the year before, with the fall being larger in minor A&E units (71%) than in major (48%). This is consistent with less-worrying conditions being directed to other NHS services or people choosing to avoid seeking medical help, due to the fear of contracting Covid-19 in a hospital environment.<sup>79</sup> The reduction in admissions for acute conditions such as stroke and heart attack have been the biggest concern.

In all four devolved nations of the UK, refugees and asylum seekers who have an active application or appeal in place are entitled to receive free primary NHS care. The situation faced by failed asylum seekers is more complicated and differs between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. For secondary care, all

refugees and asylum seekers with an active application or appeal can access the full range of secondary care services, cost-free, in all four nations. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, any person who has previously made a formal application for asylum, regardless of the outcome, is entitled to free secondary care. For asylum seekers who have been refused, the ability to access care in England will depend on whether the care is immediately necessary, urgent or non-urgent, and whether any exemptions might apply. In any case, refused asylum seekers must always receive treatment that is immediately necessary and urgent, regardless of their status or ability to pay, though they might be billed at a later date. For non-urgent treatment, NHS Trusts and some community services are required to charge refused asylum seekers before providing the care needed unless they qualify for an exemption.<sup>80</sup>

78 Health Care Foundation (2020) How is COVID-19 changing the use of emergency care? <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/charts-and-infographics/how-is-covid-19-changing-the-use-of-emergency-care>

79 NHS (2020) A&E Attendances and Emergency Admissions <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/ae-waiting-times-and-activity/>

80 British Medical Association (2020) Refugees' and asylum seekers' entitlement to NHS care <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/ethics/refugees-overseas-visitors-and-vulnerable-migrants/refugee-and-asylum-seeker-patient-health-toolkit/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-entitlement-to-nhs-care>

# CIVIC SPACE

## FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

The International Centre for Not-For-Profit Law has a very helpful Covid-19 Civic Freedom Tracker, which monitors government responses to the pandemic that affect civic freedoms and human rights, focusing particularly on emergency laws. In the UK, the Coronavirus Act 2020 gives the UK authorities emergency powers to address the pandemic, which include the possibility for the government to restrict public events and other gatherings.<sup>81</sup> The Coronavirus Act has impacted rights such as the freedoms of association, assembly and movement, especially during the full national lockdown. This curb on civic freedoms was introduced to fight the pandemic and protect lives. The National Strategy Group observes that if we were to look at freedom of association in the UK before the onset of the pandemic, it would be evaluated as generally respected and protected.

However, from the 2020 Civic Space Monitor published by CIVICUS, it emerges that there have been some obstacles to the full enjoyment of such rights in the UK. Occasional harassment, arrest or assault of people deemed critical of those in power are the main impediments to freedom of assembly according to the Monitor. Moreover, the right of peaceful assembly could be jeopardised by authorities denying permission due to security concerns and using excessive force.<sup>82</sup> An article in the Independent on 15 May 2020 revealed that

a review by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) found all prosecutions under the Coronavirus Act unlawful, although most charges under separate Health Protection Regulations were lawful. At that time, 44 charges brought under the Act were incorrect, and the review was launched by the CPS after miscarriages of justice were highlighted in the media.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, the pandemic has led to worries that many civil society organisations (CSOs) will have to close and cease operating, thus cutting off the voices of the people they represent, who are often in vulnerable situations. The government's support package for charities was welcomed but deemed not enough to prevent charities across the country from closing. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) stated further that many CSOs that survive will look very different in future: many will have severely reduced capacity to provide the support that so many people rely on.<sup>84</sup>

Despite the Act and the measures limiting peaceful demonstrations, many peaceful assemblies have taken place over recent months, especially after the murder of George Floyd in the United States and the subsequent global outcry and support for the Black Lives Matter movement. In the view of the National Strategy Group, this proved the importance of in-person demonstrations and showed that protesting and assembly will never be fully possible online. Human presence and peaceful assembly need to be protected, while of course balancing them with the need to protect people from the virus.

81 International Centre for Not-For-Profit Law (2020) COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker <https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/?location=133&issue=&date=&type=>

82 CIVICUS (2020) United Kingdom <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/united-kingdom/>

83 The Independent (2020) All prosecutions under new Coronavirus Act unlawful, review finds <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-act-unlawful-prosecutions-review-uk-a9516566.html>

84 National Council for Voluntary Organisations (2020) The impact of covid-19 on the voluntary sector <https://publications.ncvo.org.uk/impact-covid-19-voluntary-sector/key-points/>

## FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Freedom of speech and the press have been respected in the UK. But during the pandemic, groups such as Reporters Without Borders (RSF) have reported instances where media outlets voicing concerns over press freedom under the lockdown were dismissed by the government.

On 26th May 2020, a major scandal involving the prime minister's senior adviser Dominic Cummings was reported by the media. The Guardian and the Daily Mail reported that Cummings and his family had travelled 260 miles (420 km), during national lockdown, while his wife was experiencing symptoms related to Covid-19 and despite the government issuing guidelines for staying at home at the time. The media were subject to attacks on social media (especially on Twitter) through hashtags such as #ScumMedia. In response to the media coverage on the issue, the prime minister's office declared that the reports were based on "false allegations", "falsehoods and errors" and an "inaccurate article". They said they "will not waste time answering a stream of false allegations about Mr Cummings from campaigning newspapers".<sup>85</sup> The episode showed how the government and parts of society sometimes set out to discredit the media.

The UK is ranked 35th out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders' 2020 World Press Freedom Index. It had risen seven places in 2019, bringing it to 33rd after spending the previous two years at 40th. Despite the UK government's key role in promoting media freedom at a global level, domestic developments showed a darker side to the country. There have been serious episodes such as the murder of Lyra McKee and active threats to the safety

of journalists in Northern Ireland. Wikileaks founder Julian Assange has been detained and faces possible extradition to the US. These incidents have undermined the UK's efforts to protect and promote freedom of press.<sup>86</sup>

## INVOLVEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Active involvement of the voluntary and community sector is vital for the maintenance of high-quality social dialogue with the government, policymakers and decision-makers. Across the UK, there are sectoral umbrella bodies that help to coordinate CSO activities, especially around joint advocacy, visibility and voice. In England, NCVO is responsible for this; in Wales, it is the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA); in Scotland, it is the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO); and, across the Irish Sea, it is the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). All the councils are helpful channels of communication between the voluntary sector and the government. They advocate for increased involvement of civil society in the development of policies and programmes and for drawing upon the direct experiences and reach of civil society earlier and more widely.

Some improvements could increase the effectiveness of CSOs' participation in decision-making processes. The NSG points out that by working together transparently and in a mutually supportive manner, more can be achieved, especially in times of crisis, such as the current Covid-19 pandemic. One example is a report in June 2020, 'Beyond Us and Them' by the University of Kent with Belong, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, which looked at the perception of Covid-19 and social cohesion.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Reporters Without Borders (2020) UK: Press freedom under threat in lockdown as government dismisses reporting from "campaigning newspapers" <https://rsf.org/en/news/uk-press-freedom-under-threat-lockdown-government-dismisses-reporting-campaigning-newspapers>

<sup>86</sup> Reporters Without Borders (2020) RSF Index 2020: UK ranking declines following the murder of journalist Lyra McKee <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-index-2020-uk-ranking-declines-following-murder-journalist-lyra-mckee>

<sup>87</sup> University of Kent; Belong (2020) Beyond Us and Them <https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Research-Project-Report-July-2020-public-1.pdf>

## GOOD PRACTICE

### THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR EMERGENCIES PARTNERSHIP

The Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership<sup>88</sup> was formed in response to learnings from several 2017 national crises in the UK, including the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy. At the moment, the Partnership is responding to the evolving Covid-19 crisis. However, in the longer term, the goal is to establish a framework of response for future local or national emergencies. The partnership wants to add value for the most vulnerable communities and for the network of national and local voluntary and community sector organisations supporting them. The initiative focuses on four key areas: the creation of a national platform to dynamically gather intelligence on unmet and emerging needs; the request for support service, which enables organisations to ask the Emergencies Partnership for support, in case existing local networks are not sufficient; five multi-agency cells across England to help members of the Emergencies Partnership connect and share resources; and a national volunteer cell to maintain an overview of capacity across the sector and provide a single point of contact.

The NSG emphasises that a shift in understanding is needed over voluntary work: whilst it is given by people free of charge, it is not cost free to set up voluntary organisations, manage and evaluate them and ensure high standards of health and safety. Volunteering requires a robust infrastructure. If it is to continue to thrive and provide and coordinate volunteers and active citizens who can help respond to a crisis, it needs to be treated as a valued and properly resourced partner.

88 Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (2020) Our new support service <https://vcsep.org.uk/>

# COMPARISON WITH THE COUNTRY SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The European Commission's 2020 Country Specific Recommendations<sup>89</sup> for the UK are generally in line with what emerges from this Social Rights Monitor. However, the Commission has a stronger focus on the efforts that the UK needs to make to ensure an effective social protection system and a green and digital transition. Education and healthcare are identified as crucial sectors in the aftermath of the crisis, and an expansion of their capacity is recommended. As for other Country Specific Recommendations,

the Commission does not give space to some issues related to the European Pillar of Social Rights, such as gender equality. Moreover, the input on social protection is quite generic and, therefore, provides limited guidance. But the economic and financial recommendations are more specific and present a clearer direction. On a more positive note, cuts to the welfare state are clearly indicated as dangerous in this phase, and investments to support the most vulnerable groups are encouraged.

89 European Union (2020) Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on the 2020 National Reform Programme of the United Kingdom and delivering a Council opinion on the 2020 Convergence Programme of the United Kingdom <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0528&from=EN>

SOLIDAR's Social Rights Monitor 2020 has been developed in the framework of the Together for Social Europe programme co-funded by the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI). It provides an insight into the state of social rights in 17 European countries. The Monitor assesses the state of social Europe in terms of equality of opportunities, fair working conditions, social protection, inclusion and civic space based on the observations of Civil Society Organisations working on the ground in combination with statistical data and scientific findings. It does so on the basis of observations of National Strategy Groups set up in each of these countries by a SOLIDAR member or partner. The 2020 Monitor also analyses to what extent these aspects are reflected in the Country Specific Recommendations of the European Semester process towards a socially sustainable recovery after the Covid-19 crisis.

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