Social Rights Monitor

2021

Country Monitor:
United Kingdom

solidar

TOGETHER FOR
SOCIAL EUROPE

The National Strategy Group for the United Kingdom identifies different issues having an impact on the cohesion of society. First of all, poverty – growing due to the retrenchment of welfare and the decline in the economy – is affecting an increasing share of the population and also creating a hostile environment for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Brexit had a strong impact on the 6 million EU citizens living in the UK, resulting in emigration to other EU countries. The impacts included shortages of social-care and medical staff, recorded throughout 2020 and 2021.

	2018	2019	2020	EU-27 2020
GINI index[1]	33.5	N/A	N/A	30.1
Unemployment[2]	4.0%	3.8%	N/A	6.3%
Gender Equality Index[3]	72.2 (2019)	72.7 (2020)	N/A	67.9 (2020)
In-work poverty[4]	10.4%	N/A	N/A	9.2%
Housing Overcrowding[5]	4.8%	N/A	N/A	15.6%
CIVICUS Civic Space Monitor[6]	NARROWED	NARROWED	NARROWED	N/A

Selected indicators on the state of social rights in Europe

Missing data for 2020 are not available at the time of publication of the Social Rights Monitor 2021.

Equal opportunities and access to the labour market

Significant changes to the welfare system in the UK were undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic. **The introduction of enhanced Universal Credit payments**[7] **was particularly welcomed as it benefited people with scarce resources.** It consisted of a payment made once a month, the amount of which varied according to factors such as disabilities, health conditions, housing situation, and the number of children to take care of. For a limited time, the allowance was extended to individuals on precarious contracts, but this measure was rescinded in October 2021.

In March 2020, the government introduced the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS),[8] **which provided a legal basis for the so-called "flexible furlough".** This allowed employers to modify and reduce the working hours of their employees, while getting a CJRS grant to cover the hours not worked.

According to the National Strategy Group, the UK is experiencing increasing inequalities, and the welfare system is not providing the necessary safety net for all. There seems to

1 Eurostat (2021). Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&dataset=ilc_di12

2 Eurostat (2021). Unemployment by sex and age: annual data: https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une_rt_a&lang=en

3 European Institute for Gender Equality (2021). Gender Equality Index: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/

4 Eurostat (2021). In-work at-risk-of-poverty-rate : https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tespm070/default/table?lang=en

5 Eurostat (2021). Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status – total population: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_lvho05a/default/table?lang=en

6 CIVICUS (2021). Civic space monitor - UK: https://monitor.civicus.org/country/united-kingdom/

7 UK Government (2021) Universal Credit: https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit/what-youll-get

8 UK Parliament (2021) FAQs: Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8880/

be an overreliance on food banks and charities to alleviate hardship, which has become even more pressing due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the rising cost of fuel, food, and energy related to the Brexit agreements.

INCLUSION OF MIGRANTS

The National Strategy Group finds the inclusion environment increasingly hostile, as newcomers arriving by boat are often denied access to the country before arrival and immediately detained in dedicated centres. **These fast procedures are an increasing concern, as they do not allow for proper processing of asylum applications.**[9] In addition, refugee organisations fear the government's use of false narratives around migratory flows. For example, the Home Secretary declared that the vast majority of individuals arriving to the UK by boat are not asylum seekers but economic migrants.[10]

EDUCATION AND YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

All students and learners missed considerable learning hours and schooling opportunities in 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Studying and learning from home has exacerbated inequalities and made discrimination more visible. There were wide differences between the prosperity of different societal groups, including between different ethnicities and different regions. In addition, educational performance varied significantly according to socioeconomic background.[11] These inequalities are likely to worsen some of the UK's structural problems, such as low intergenerational income mobility.[12] While a quarter of students had no formal schooling or tutoring during the lockdown in Spring 2020,[13] children from high-income households were provided with online learning facilities and had adequate learning environments and devices, as well as parental support during the school day. This was particularly true for primary school pupils, who have a greater need for supervision to provide guidance and motivation. A study carried out by the Department for Education, finds that **primary school students were an average of three months behind their learning schedules, while secondary school students were around two months behind.**[14] The existing education inequalities related to students' socio-economic backgrounds were confirmed by the finding that those eligible for free school meals lagged behind more than average and recovered more slowly once schools reopened.[15]

As school absence related to Covid-19 continues to be high in the 2021-2022 academic year[16] – with more than 100,000 children staying at home in just one week in September 2021 – educational support methods have to be revised in order to ensure education recovery for all.

9 The Guardian (2021) Home Office 'acting unlawfully' in rush to deport asylum seekers: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jul/11/home-office-acting-unlawfully-in-rush-to-deport-asylum-seekers

10 The Guardian (2021) Priti Patel urged to justify claim that most boat migrants are not real refugees: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/nov/02/priti-patel-urged-to-justify-claim-most-boat-migrants-not-real-refugees

11 IFS (2021) Inequalities in education, skills, and incomes in the UK: The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic: https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BN-Inequalities-in-education-skills-and-incomes-in-the-UK-the-implications-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Department for Education (2021) Pupils' progress in the 2020 to 2021 academic year: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1029842/Understanding_progress_in_the_2020-21_academic_year_Report_3_October2021_.pdf

15 Ibid.

16 The Guardian (2021) Record Covid absences cause concern in England's schools: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/22/its-scary-record-covid-absences-cause-concern-in-englands-schools

Fair working conditions

The pandemic led to numerous and unexpected changes in working conditions, and the situation has often become unstable and unclear, the National Strategy Group reports. In occupational health and safety, even when government regulations did not legally require workers and customers to wear face masks, some employers – such as Transport for London – still asked them to. Another recent example identified by the National Strategy Group is the use of the so-called Covid Pass. There is no clear regulation for it, and its implementation is therefore not uniform across the country.

For some jobs, **the use of teleworking solutions increased steadily throughout 2021. These arrangements are likely to become a permanent feature of work, often in a hybrid form,** in which staff divide their working weeks into office and telework days.

Some changes in workers' rights were introduced after the UK ceased to be a member of the European Union on 31 January 2020. Since then, the country has no longer been bound to adhere to EU employment law, and parliament has the last word in adjusting and eventually overturning legislation derived from EU law. One of the largest effects, according to the National Strategy Group, is that the UK is no longer able to refer cases to the Court of Justice of the European Union (ECJ),[18] which used to be able to provide guidance to UK courts and tribunals.

PRECARIOUSNESS

It has been proven that people working under low-paid and part-time contracts – hence in less-secure forms of work – are more likely to lose their jobs, have their hours reduced, or be furloughed.[19] Among people laid off or temporarily dismissed at the beginning of 2020, six out of 10 were able to return to work by the end of 2020. But, of the people who lost their jobs in 2021, half remained unemployed.[20] The situation of these people is the most worrying, as many of the most vulnerable people have

---

17 Volunteering Matters (2021) Family Supporters in Edinburgh: https://volunteeringmatters.org.uk/app/uploads/2021/10/FSE-Year-1-Impact-Report-5.pdf
18 Court of Justice of the European Union: https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/jcms/j_6/en/
19 JRF (2021) People in low-paid, insecure work faced a rising tide of employment uncertainty in 2020: https://www.jrf.org.uk/file/58715/download?token=ADc1QW2b&filetype=briefing
20 Ibid.

experienced multiple shocks, and their risk of long-term unemployment is growing. Data from the Labour Force Survey makes it clear that **the employment conditions of younger workers – normally in the early stages of their careers and in more precarious situations – were particularly affected by the pandemic, and these workers suffered unemployment or pay reductions more often than others.**[21]

Workers on so-called zero-hours contracts and those employed by an agency on fixed-term or casual contracts were the most likely to lose their jobs in 2020. Of people employed on permanent contracts, 9% suffered from job losses or reductions, but the figure for workers on zero-hours contracts was 25%.[22] Self-employed workers were also three times more likely to stop working during 2020 and 2021 than people with permanent contracts.[23] This indicates that a country in which a large number of the jobs are precarious can easily suffer from unemployment in a crisis or economic downturn. That means it should be a priority to develop long-term support measures in order not to leave people behind. The National Strategy Group reiterates that an insecure job is often the starting point for accepting poorer living conditions, renouncing social life and continuous education, and fostering poverty and inequality among adults and children.

GENDER EQUALITY

As in the rest of the world, women in the UK are most likely to work in the economic sectors that have been most affected by the Covid-19 crisis. In particular, women with children and women from a migration background were more likely to be furloughed in 2020 and 2021.[24] **In general, women's employment has sharply fallen since the outbreak of the pandemic,** and 232,000 fewer were employed at the end of 2020 compared to the beginning of that year.[25] **The drop in women's employment can be explained by the 212% increase in redundancies for women from the beginning of 2020 to the end:** they rose from 46,000 to 143,000.[26] In a trend common throughout Europe, more women than men held jobs that were eligible for furlough through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.[27] According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, women were one third more likely to work in a sector that was severely affected by the pandemic, such as hospitality, retail, or tourism.[28] Moreover, women have left or lost their jobs more than men since the beginning of the pandemic, which can be explained by the lack of childcare support while schools were closed.[29]
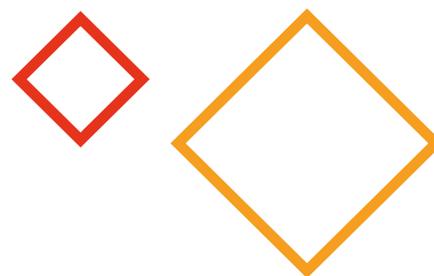
21 JRF (2021) People in low-paid, insecure work faced a rising tide of employment uncertainty in 2020: https://www.jrf.org.uk/file/58715/download?token=ADc1QW2b&filetype=briefing
22 Ibid.
23 JRF (2021) What the first COVID-19 lockdown meant for people in insecure, poor-quality work: https://www.jrf.org.uk/file/58016/download?token=aPUf22aK&filetype=briefing
24 UK Parliament (2021) How has the coronavirus pandemic affected women in work: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/how-has-the-coronavirus-pandemic-affected-women-in-work/
25 ONS (2021) Labour market overview - Table A02: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/previousReleases
26 ONS (2021) Redundancies levels and rates: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/redundancies/datasets/redundancieslevelsandratesseasonallyadjustedred01sa
27 UK Parliament (2021) FAQs: Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8880/
28 IFS (2020) Sector shutdowns during the coronavirus crisis: which workers are most exposed? https://ifs.org.uk/publications/14791
29 Ibid.

Social protection and inclusion

HOUSING

The housing situation put increasing pressure on UK households, as they experienced the acute economic downturn due to the pandemic. Decent and affordable housing has been a pressing concern during the most intense phases of the Covid-19 crisis, and it should be prioritised by the government. However, the average price of houses in the UK increased by 10.6% from 2020 to 2021,[30] and it has continued to increase on a month-to-month basis. Housing and mortgage starts felt dramatically in the second quarter of 2020, touching an historic low.[31] **Poor housing conditions are a longstanding issue, especially in the private rented sector.[32] In England, 23% of homes – a total of around 1.1 million – do not meet decent standards.[33]** Poor housing conditions are affecting residents' physical and mental health, and they have a strong impact on people's work and learning outcomes. This was particularly the case during the pandemic and the isolation policies imposed.

In the UK, local authorities are responsible for housing conditions and management.[34] However, the National Strategy Group reports that low levels of enforcement of decent housing standards are a widespread problem throughout the country. The UK parliament has suggested that local authorities be supported by a national system of benchmarking and indicators to raise awareness of the issue and increase the political will to address it.[35]

JUST AND GREEN TRANSITION

There has been increasing, ever-wider support from civil society for decarbonising the UK economy. Moreover, the government is legally bound to reduce the country's overall carbon dioxide emissions by 80% from 1990 levels by 2050. According to the European Commission's 2020 Country Report, the United Kingdom is expected to made good progress in decarbonising its economy, but additional measures are needed to reach the target for 2030. In 2021, the London School of Economics and the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment found that the transition to a net-zero, green economy could affect approximately 6.3 million jobs around the country, either positively or negatively.[36] However, **data suggests that moving to a green economy has the potential to increase the number of UK jobs overall,[37] if people whose jobs are at risk can be upskilled appropriately.**

30 UK Government (2021) UK House Price Index: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn02820/
31 Ibid.
32 House of Commons (2021) Housing conditions in the private rented sector (England): https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7328/CBP-7328.pdf
33 MHCLG (2020) English Housing Survey 2019 to 2020: headline report, Annex Table 2.2: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-housing-survey-2019-to-2020-headline-report
34 House of Commons (2021) Housing conditions in the private rented sector (England): https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7328/CBP-7328.pdf
35 House of Commons (2019) Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Private rented sector: Fourth report of Session 2017-19, https://old.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/communities-and-local-government-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/inquiry1/
36 LSE (2021) Green economy: how the transition to net-zero could affect UK jobs across the country: https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/news/green-economy-how-the-transition-to-net-zero-could-affect-uk-jobs-across-the-country/
37 PCAN (2021) Just transition jobs tracker: https://pcancities.org.uk/sites/default/files/Just Transition Jobs Tracker 05.03.21_0.xlsx

FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

In 2020, 11.7 million people – 19% of the population – were living in households with an income 60% or lower than the median income in the UK.[39] Though average levels of poverty have been stable in recent years, the proportion of children and elderly people living in poverty is higher than five years ago.[40] Other signs of inequality are that **poverty hits relatively more Pakistani and Bangladeshi households,**[41] as well as beneficiaries of social allowances.

The situation has pushed an increasing number of people to claim the Universal Credit, and 4.6 million households were receiving the allowance in August 2020, an increase of 90% from January 2020.[42] Households with children are overrepresented among the claimants, meaning that an increasing number of young people are exposed to the risk of poverty. Moreover, **employed people asking for social benefits have drastically increased too, and they represent eight out of 10 people asking for the benefit.**[43]

HEALTHCARE

Access to healthcare in the UK in terms of availability, affordability, accessibility, and quality is positively evaluated by the National Strategy Group. However, it is difficult not to take into consideration the impact and direct effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has increasingly restricted access to healthcare. There is also evidence that some people did not seek treatment as a result of the pandemic:[44] **in July 2021, a record-high 5.6 million patients were waiting to be hospitalised for treatment for conditions other than Covid-19.**[45] Many of these people were left unable to work or carry out daily tasks. In addition, around 75,000 people with disabilities were waiting for assessments[46] to qualify to receive care and support, often while their families and close friends struggled to combine support with daily activities. However, the rapid expansion of remote consultations in some cases helped limit the disruption caused by the pandemic, the National Strategy Group reported.

In the UK, as across Europe and beyond, the demand for mental-health care has significantly increased due to the pandemic. **The Centre**

38 PCAN (2021)Tracking local employment in the green economy: https://pcancities.org.uk/tracking-local-employment-green-economy-pcan-just-transition-jobs-tracker

39 UK Parliament (2021) Poverty in the UK: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07096/

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 JRF (2021) Uk Poverty report: https://www.jrf.org.uk/file/57306/download?token=iru3hRZ0&filetype=full-report

43 Ibid.

44 Care Quality Commission (2021) State of Care 2020/21: https://www.cqc.org.uk/publications/major-reports/soc202021_01a_pandemic-impact

45 NHS (2021) Consultant-led Referral to Treatment Waiting Times Data 2021-22: https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/rtt-waiting-times/rtt-data-2021-22/

46 Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (2021) Sprin Survey 2021: https://www.adass.org.uk/adass-spring-survey-21

for Mental Health expects up to 10 million people (around 20% of the population) including 1.5 million children to be in need of additional mental health support for stress caused by the health crisis.[47] In particularly, the National Strategy Group says services directed at transgender people are appalling. In April 2021, it emerged that thousands of patients at the NHS Specialist Gender Identity Clinic (GIC) have been on a waiting list that is now over five years long.[48] Only seven GICs in England and Wales are able to offer a health-care specialist, while the estimated population of transgender people is half a million.[49] The situation has been worsened by the pandemic.

Civic space

In the last year, civic space has narrowed dramatically,[50] and the UK has been put on the CIVICUS Watch List for countries experiencing a serious and rapid decline in civic freedoms.[51] In addition, the National Strategy Group reports that, due to lockdowns and restrictions on people's movement and public gatherings, there were not that many peaceful assemblies in 2021. However, **the Judicial Review and Courts Bill**[52] **raised many concerns over the increased powers given to police to crack down on protests.** In particular, protestors experienced police brutality during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd in the US by a police officer and during the demonstrations that followed the murder of Sarah Everard by an officer of the London Metropolitan Police. BLM.[53] **This police brutality was denounced but not prosecuted.**[54] The National Strategy Group believes that different standards are applied to demonstrations than to other situations. Football matches, for example, are characterised by little police presence, and there are no reports of police brutality.[55]

One concern related to freedom of speech is the **2021 Draft Online Safety Bill,**[56] a proposed act of parliament intended to improve internet safety. It follows the 2019 Online Harms White Paper[57] and, if passed, would give the relevant secretary of state the power to designate and address a wide range of potentially harmful content. This might include online discrimination, illegal pornography, and some forms of internet fraud. The bill would create a new duty of care for online platforms towards their users, requiring them to take action against harmful content. Platforms failing in this duty would be liable to fines of up to €21 million or 10%

47 Centre for Mental Health (2020) Covid-19 and the nation's mental health: October 2020: https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/covid-19-and-nations-mental-health-october-2020
48 Pink News (2021) NHS gender clinic apologises to trans patients for shameful five-year waiting time: https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2021/04/20/nhs-gender-clinic-the-laurels-waiting-list-time/
49 Ibid.
50 CIVICUS (2021) Civicus Monitor – UK: https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/5413-a-decline-in-civic-freedoms-is-anything-but-silly
51 Ibid.
52 Government UK (2021) Judicial Review and Courts Bill: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/judicial-review-and-courts-bill
53 BBC (2021) Boris Johnson 'deeply concerned' by footage: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-56396960
54 The Guardian (2021) Sarah Everard vigil report strongly defends police's use of force: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/mar/30/police-handling-of-sarah-everard-vigil-appropriate-says-watchdog
55 BBC (2021) Rangers' title celebrations: Police condemn club's lack of support: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-56321426
56 Government UK (2021) Online Safety Bill: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/draft-online-safety-bill
57 Government UK (2020) Online Harms White Paper: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper

of their annual turnover, whichever is higher. It would also empower Ofcom (the UK communications services regulator)[58] to block access to particular websites. In addition, the bill would oblige large social media platforms not to remove – and to preserve access to – journalistic or "democratically important" content, such as user comments on political parties and issues.

However, the draft bill has come under strong criticism for including proposals to restrain the publication of "lawful but harmful" speech. This effectively creates a new form of censorship of otherwise legal speech and thus curbs the right of freedom of speech. The draft is currently going through pre-legislative scrutiny in the parliament by a joint committee, made up of members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The committee will report back by 10 December 2021, after which the government will look at the report and see if any changes are needed. The bill will then be formally introduced to the parliament, so that it can become law.

CIVIL DIALOGUE

The UK has a strong culture of cooperation between civil society organisations, according to the National Strategy Group. Despite the ongoing pandemic restrictions and lockdowns of 2021, **the CSO sector in the UK, just like its counterparts in the EU, has proven to be a flexible, resilient, and cooperative stakeholder.** It has been able to adapt and continue to provide services to those in the most vulnerable situations. Across the UK, there are sectoral umbrella bodies that help to coordinate activities between civil society organisations,

especially around joint advocacy, visibility, and voice. In England, it is the NCVO[59] that is responsible; in Wales, it is the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA);[60] in Scotland, it is the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO);[61] and across the Irish Sea, it is the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA).[62] All the councils are very helpful channels of communication between the voluntary sector and the government. They advocate for better involvement of civil society in the development of policies and programmes, so that the direct experiences and reach of civil society can be drawn upon earlier and more widely.

As in other parts of Europe, **volunteering charities pulled together in the UK and delivered many vital services to vulnerable communities and people who would not otherwise have been able to access fundamental services during the pandemic and lockdowns.** Therefore, the National Strategy Group strongly emphasises that civil society organisations need a robust system of financial support and should be valued as relevant partners at all levels of the negotiation and implementation of policies and programmes.

A positive practice for CSOs' involvement in civil dialogue was developed in London as part of the London Recovery Programme.[63] The partners involved agreed on the main priorities to be addressed by the city and came up with nine missions to "build back better" its economy and society. The consultations also gave rise to a report, "After the Storm", proposing priorities[64] for funders to act on. This report, by London Funders, says that funders need to plan flexibly, change their ways of working, and support more capacity building.

58 Ofcom: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/what-is-ofcom
59 NCVO: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/
60 WCVA: https://wcva.cymru/
61 SCVO: https://scvo.scot/
62 NICVA: https://www.nicva.org/
63 London Councils (2020) London recovery programme: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/recovery_programme_overview.pdf
64 London Funders (2020) After the storm: https://londonfunders.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/After%20The%20Storm.pdf

SOLIDAR's Social Rights Monitor 2021 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 16 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. This information is provided by National Strategy Groups that are set up in each of the 16 countries by a SOLIDAR member or partner. The 2021 Monitor also analyses to which extent civil society and social partners have been involved in the design of the national Recovery and Resilience Plans, integrated in the 2021 European Semester cycle.

volonteurope