



Post-pandemic futures: Social security reimaged

A [Covid Realities](#) Briefing Note, August 2021

**Ruth Patrick, Jim Kaufman and Maddy Power, with
participants of Covid Realities**

We're asking for a fundamental change in the way we are seen and treated within the system.

We want to be respected enough to not have to prove ourselves at every single turn.

We want enough money to live on so we can concentrate on improving our lot.

We want the common courtesy of advanced notice, clear explanations, appointments on time, and reciprocal understanding when things don't happen as planned.

We want work coaches to actually support us, encourage us, and believe in us.

We want to be met with dignity and respect, as equals.

If society sees the government viewing us differently, supporting us properly, treating us well, caring about us, then slowly it will too.

Remove the stereotypes and talk to us as equals.

Not scroungers. Not lay-about. Not uneducated.

But as human beings, just like you, trying to do the best for our families, just like you.

Catherine, Covid Realities participant, extract from speech at parliamentary event,
March 2021

Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated the shortcomings of the UK's social security system. As we move out of the pandemic, there is a need to grasp this opportunity to debate and start planning for a new and better social security settlement. In this briefing note, aimed at campaigners, policy makers, and those

engaged in anti-poverty work, we argue that this must be an expansive debate that has the expertise of people with experience of poverty and social security at its centre. We reflect on the participatory work of Covid Realities, and on the ambitious and radical proposals for reform developed by its participants. We contrast these with the more modest proposals that typically emanate from think tanks and policy-makers, and argue that excessive deference to ‘social attitudes’ unhelpfully inhibits the policy imagination. More work needs to be done leveraging specific issues – such as the impending £20 cut to Universal Credit – into a broader anti-poverty narrative, and as the basis for more systemic reform. People with expertise by experience have an essential role to play in this process, as do those engaged in policy and research by creating more inclusive and participatory platforms and spaces.

Introduction

In March 2021, parents and carers living on a low income met with parliamentarians over Zoom to mark a year of lockdown. At the meeting, facilitated as part of the Covid Realities research programme, parents shared their experiences of lockdown life and set out what they believe needs to change if the future is to be a better one for all of us. One of the parents, Catherine, explained what she and the other parents working on Covid Realities are calling for: ‘fundamental change’ to the system, so that people receiving social security benefits can be seen and treated as ‘human beings’.

Catherine’s powerful call for change, reproduced above, echoes calls that she and others taking part in Covid Realities have been making since the research programme began in April 2020 (see Methodological Appendix for further details). Claimants have been subject to social security cuts and increased conditionality in recent years and often experience benefits stigma (Wright, Fletcher, and Stewart 2020; Garnham 2020; Redman and Fletcher 2021). Against this context, Catherine’s plea for the recognition of social security claimants’ common humanity is at once modest and yet ambitious and perhaps difficult to realise, given the extent to which it goes against the current agenda of recent policymaking.

In this briefing note, we critically explore ongoing debates about the post-pandemic future of social security. To these debates, we add the calls for change made by Covid Realities participants themselves. We reflect on the tension between the need to ensure that temporary improvements to social security (most notably, the £20 increase to Universal Credit) are sustained, while at the same time calling for broader, more radical change. We argue that, while it is important to discuss the substantive change that needs to be made, it is also essential that we attend to the nature of this conversation, and to whose voices are included and whose are excluded from debates. Further, we call for political leadership in this policy domain; as Catherine suggests above, if politicians show progressive leadership in their policies and rhetoric on poverty and social security, this could lead to wider societal and attitudinal changes. As we gradually emerge from the pandemic, we have a unique and time-limited opportunity to ask fundamental questions about the nature of our social settlement; this should include critical reflection on who gets to have a say in deciding its shape.

Covid-19 and social security: from crisis to change?

The pandemic exposed and exacerbated the shortcomings with the UK's social security system, which entered the crisis in poor health (Garnham 2020). A decade of cuts had left the social security 'safety net' unable to provide security in normal times, and wholly inadequate to protect family incomes and security in these new, unpredictable times of lockdown and pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, single, working-age benefit levels were at the lowest level since the early 1990s, providing just over a third of what is judged necessary to achieve the Minimum Income Standard (Brewer, Handscomb, and Shah 2021; Davis et al. 2020).

The UK Government was quick to provide temporary improvements to social security, most notably through a £20 increase to Universal Credit (Mackley, Hobson, and McInnes 2021). This was initially introduced for a year, and later extended for a further six months, until September 2021. The Government additionally increased housing support, suspended the Minimum Income Floor in Universal Credit, and temporarily suspended conditionality and sanctions, as well as the recovery of some (but not all) debt deductions from claimants (Hobson 2021). Most significantly of all, the Government introduced ambitious and generous earnings replacement schemes - the Job Retention Scheme (JRS) and the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) - which provided high rates of earnings replacement for those eligible (HM Treasury 2020). That these schemes - where financial support is paid to the employer but directly benefits the employee - are not commonly described as forms of social security is itself part of a long standing problem. Over the past three decades it has become increasingly normal for politicians and the public to consider social security as a residual form of support received by a small minority of 'welfare dependants' (Lister 2013; Morrison 2019). The furlough scheme was arguably an opportunity to challenge this conception of social security, as well as assumptions about who relies on it and ultimately benefits from it - an opportunity that has, to date, not been realised.

The pandemic and the resultant economic crisis have provided an unsparing demonstration of our interdependence, while also highlighting the extent to which many of those working the hardest, and doing the most vital work (both paid and unpaid), are among the poorest in our society (TUC 2021a, [b] 2021; Richardson 2021). During long lockdowns the vital labour of care workers and supermarket workers received uncommon recognition, and those of us who struggled with homeschooling, or simply with having children at home all the time, certainly came to recognise (if we didn't already) the essential work of those employed in child care, or undertaken by those who prioritise their own parenting over paid work. This collective reappraisal of the worth attributed to different kinds of work provides an opportunity to consider (and change) how we value varying kinds of work financially, through the tax and benefit system. It also provides space to consider how far we value and make possible care work, something long called for by prominent social policy scholars (Tronto 1993; Williams 2001, 2018).

Indeed, Government intervention on a massive scale - exemplified by furlough - has demonstrated the possibilities of state action when the political will is there. Since the crisis began the Government has spent £340 billion in its Covid response, £111

billion directly targeted at protecting households' incomes (Brewer, Handscomb, and Shah 2021). Taken together, the scale of government intervention, discursive shifts in the worth attributed to different kinds of work, and temporary changes to social security have created the opportunity for a new and much-needed public discussion about the future shape of social security. As Brewer et al (Brewer, Handscomb, and Shah 2021) argue:

there are very few upsides to what has happened over the past year but one of them is that it has reminded us of the extent to which purposeful public policy can ensure greater economic security for families.

As we move out of the pandemic, there is a need to grasp these opportunities to discuss and start planning a new and better social settlement for the future. And although such an opportunity has arisen in a moment of emergency, it would be a mistake to think of its relevance as confined to that moment. As many are coming to realise, the 21st century will be defined by our response - or lack thereof - to enormous social challenges, from ageing populations and growing inequality to climate change (Marmot 2020; IPCC 2021). Social security has an essential role to play in any adequate and effective response to these problems. Furthermore, we must recognise that the problems revealed in the current emergency are not wholly defined or caused by it. With such considerations in mind, Bratton (2021) argues that we should be less wary of a continuing sense of crisis, than of the return of earlier 'dysfunctional norms' once 'the coast is declared clear'. The space to have the conversations about what needs to change may close just as quickly as it has opened. There is also the danger, as we will discuss below, that such conversations simply repeat the old exclusions and elitisms of the past. As important as discussion and planning for a new social settlement is making sure that any such discussion is open, inclusive, and involves a diverse range of voices.

We can enter and begin this dialogue armed with evidence suggesting that the public are receptive to the social security system becoming more generous than it is currently, with the majority of the public supporting calls to keep the £20 increase to Universal Credit (Abey and Harrop 2021). However, as argued persuasively by Baumberg Geiger (2021), this may not be evidence of a substantial shift in public attitudes, but simply evidence that the public have realised and reacted to the scale of recent cuts. Furthermore, there is evidence that suggests that rather than shift attitudes, the coronavirus crisis has rather accentuated and hardened pre-existing attitudes (Duffy et al. 2021). So, we also need to think about the role of wider efforts to 'win hearts and minds' on the need to address widespread poverty in the UK (Scott Paul 2018), something we return to later in this briefing.

First though, we focus on the £20 increase- and impending cut - to Universal Credit, and how the debate surrounding this issue reveals a real poverty of imagination when it comes to social security policy. We reflect on the need to make the case for the £20 increase's continuation and indeed extension, whilst at the same time seeking more ambitious and fundamental change.

The £20 Universal Credit increase

The £20 weekly increase to the standard allowance of Universal Credit was an immediate reaction by the UK Government to the dramatic increase and changing composition of the claimant population as the pandemic hit the UK. It represented a sudden and dramatic reversal of thirty years of retrenchment to unemployment benefits, boosting affected household incomes by £1000 per year (Brewer and Gardiner 2020). This was a substantial and very welcome increase, and for claimants without children represented the first significant real increase in half a century (Waters and Wernham 2021). The £20 increase provided vital support to households during difficult times. Gracie, a mother of two in part-time employment, explained the difference it made to her family:

My partner and I have been on a tight budget so the extra UC payment went straight towards rent and bills. A little extra is always helpful (Gracie, mother of two, Southern England).

However, as has been well documented, the £20 increase was only available to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit claimants, not those on legacy benefits such as Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance. A flat rate increase, it is the same amount whether you are a single-person household or a family of six. It is also of no help to those whose benefits were already capped before the pandemic began, who have seen no increase. Other households have been hit by the Benefit Cap because the £20 increase pushed them over the threshold.

The swift decision to introduce the £20 increase to Universal Credit implied some awareness of the wider issue of benefit (in)adequacy. As Caroline Rice, a participant in Covid Realities, put it:

I'd like people to think about why it was necessary to introduce a £20 uplift at the start of covid. Surely this is an acknowledgement in itself that the support given to low-income households just isn't enough for them to live on (Caroline, mother of one, Northern Ireland).

As Caroline points out, the level of benefits was inadequate prior to the arrival of Covid-19. Rightly and understandably the anti-poverty sector has focused its campaigning efforts on keeping and extending the £20 increase, in the 'Keep the Lifeline' campaign led by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. This activity peaked in the weeks prior to the April 2021 budget, when there were fears that the £20 increase would be cut, or - as was proposed at one point by treasury sources - replaced with a one-off £500 or £1,000 payment. These efforts were partially successful, and the increase was extended, but only for six months. There is now a £20 cut scheduled for the end of September 2021, coinciding with the end of the JRS and SEISS. Justifying the decision to end the increase in autumn 2021, Boris Johnson argued:

I think that the best way forward is to get people into higher wage, higher skilled jobs. That's the ambition of this government and if you ask me to make a choice between more welfare or better, higher paid jobs, I'm going to go for better, higher paid jobs (cited in Heffer, 2021).

Johnson's statement drew widespread criticism, especially for its deployment of the familiar yet false distinction between 'welfare' and 'work' - more than a third of

Universal Credit recipients are in paid employment (Department for Work and Pensions 2021). Covid Realities' participants also reacted angrily to Johnson's comments. Aurora, who is subject to the Benefit Cap and so hasn't received the increase, took to her diary to write:

Just listened to Boris when questioned on the removal of the £20 uplift. Although we do not qualify - I would like to say how angry his response has made me. It's as if we could all find better paid work. There is never any real consideration for the lowest paid in society, there are people who need to take these jobs on to feed their families. Social mobility is hard enough without a global pandemic. (Aurora, mother of two, London)

Despite the Government's insistence that the increase will end from the end of September 2021, campaigners are gearing up for another, final round of activity, seeking to build on public backing for the increase and to make it a permanent fixture of social security support.

Through our work on Covid Realities, we have been exploring the impact the £20 increase has had on individual families' lives, while also speaking to those who have not received the increase at all. What this evidence shows us is that the £20 increase is at once incredibly welcome (vital, even) but at the same time often insufficient to address the extent of hardship that families routinely face (see Power et al, 2020). The £20 increase is characterised by campaigners as a 'lifeline', and has indeed been critical in helping families navigate the past 12 months and the increased spending pressures so many have experienced (Brewer and Patrick 2021.). However, it does not enable many families to escape poverty. Parents still report going without, and experiencing the daily anxiety induced by the impossible challenge of managing on a limited income below the poverty line. As Enzo puts it:

I am struggling to cope with all the issues I'm facing involving the money that will be taken away. If they chose to take the £20 a week away, I already get less money than I was getting on legacy benefits and it's very tough already. I don't think I'll manage very well if the money is reduced (Enzo, mother of one, South England)

While those who have received the £20 increase are still struggling, there are many families who did not receive it in the first place for whom talk of the £20 increase can feel exclusionary and neglectful. This is the experience of Eric who is on Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and so not eligible for the £20 increase:

I am on long term ESA due to health problems. After my partner left over four years ago the child tax credits we were receiving stopped. I currently get ESA and child benefit, but get no financial support from my previous partner which does not give me enough to get by. I have not received any help financially due to coronavirus from the government. As a whole I receive less in benefits now than I received previously. Thankfully I do now receive help from a local food bank. Times are desperate. (Eric, father of one, Southern England).

These lived realities do not translate easily into campaign messaging, but are nonetheless important to record, perhaps most critically because they represent the

scale of the challenge if we are to effectively transform our social security system into a system that works for all and is worthy of that name.

Alongside the inadequacy of the £20 increase, its implementation has also been a reminder of varying governmental approaches to those in secure well paid employment and those in low paid, often insecure employment or not in work. Through its lack of clarity and transparency around policy making, the Government has exacerbated the broader insecurity faced by low income families; this has been particularly acute in the case of decision making around the £20 uplift. Families faced a cliff edge of uncertainty in April 2021, and now face a second cliff edge at the end of September 2021. This makes longer-term planning even harder to accomplish, planning which can be critical if aspirations around paid employment, for example, are to be realised. Anxieties about how they will cope when £20 is cut from their weekly budget are already having a negative mental health impact on families.

Caroline, a new claimant who received Universal Credit for the first time during the pandemic, is busy worrying about how she will manage if the increase is not extended for a second time. She told a parliamentary event about the impact this was having on her and her child:

The constant worry about how I will survive coming into the winter is already taking its toll on me. I'm stressed, I'm irritable and not sleeping well, I can't buy my child little things, I'm penny pinching trying to put aside for heating but the never-ending stream of bills and just sustaining a home right now makes it impossible to save. This is all having an impact on my physical and mental health. What will it be like when our government takes nearly £90 support away from us right before the cold dark nights set in?
(Caroline, mother of one, Northern Ireland).

As campaigners rightly call on the Government to extend the £20 increase to Universal Credit, they should also call on them to make a broader pledge to never again suspend the poorest in our society in insecurity and fear. The creation of uncertainty through policy, such as that surrounding the £20 increase (Summers et al. 2021), is ineffective but more importantly represents policy-making which fails to respect the needs and wellbeing of families. In the context of the pandemic, with its other uncertainties and insecurities, this type of policy making, lacking clarity and empathy, is very difficult to excuse.

While it has been heartening to see a wide range of voices calling for the extension of the £20 increase to Universal Credit, some of the arguments made in its favour have drawn on regressive and problematic distinctions between new (post-Covid-19) and existing (pre-pandemic) claimants of social security. Sir David Freud, key architect of Universal Credit and former DWP minister, called for the £20 increase to be made permanent on the following basis: 'When you've got lots of people who are not normally in the welfare system needing to subsist, the rates aren't good enough' (Savage 2021). The implication is that rates of Universal Credit were good enough for existing claimants, but not for those turning to social security because of the pandemic. Such arguments, clearly constructed around an implied distinction between the deserving and undeserving, do nothing to address the

problems with the social security system revealed by the pandemic, and moreover assist the return to such ‘dysfunctional norms’ once ‘the coast is declared clear’ (Bratton 2021).

That the £20 increase to Universal Credit was motivated by the need to improve the lot and experiences of new claimants, rather than a recognition that the social security system was simply failing to support all claimants, has been acknowledged by those involved in the decision making. Neil Couling, a senior civil servant and head of Universal Credit, set out the thinking behind the temporary increase at a Resolution Foundation event:

I wanted to help people affected by the pandemic and what I said was that meant I couldn’t create a new class of benefit claimants pre-covid and post-covid on Universal Credit, so for want of a better phrase, there was a kind of windfall gain for existing Universal Credit claimants (cited in Abraham, 2020).

The £20 increase to Universal Credit, and the surrounding campaign to keep it, is an opportunity for a wider debate and discussion about the (in)adequacy of the social security safety net, and the need to do much more if benefit payments are to be an effective part of an anti-poverty strategy. Campaigners have tried, with some success, to shift the debate onto questions of adequacy. Here, there is a difficult but important message about how the £20 increase has provided a partial but still inadequate fix. The reality is that, even with the £20 increase accounted for, families are £10.5 billion a year worse off in aggregate during the pandemic than they would have been had the 2010/11 system been in place (see Arnold et al, 2021). The New Economics Foundation are calling for a new social security settlement that offers a ‘living income’ to all, and here we ought to be looking forward, and mobilising the £20 increase debate as a stepping stone toward broader and more ambitious proposals.

Perhaps one of the best ways to improve the quality and scope of this debate is to expand the range of voices that are heard, and to make policy discussions more inclusive and democratic. Here we need to ensure that discussion draws from a wider range of expertise, including the expertise that comes from experience. Not only does this expertise provide essential insight into where change is most needed, it also has a vital part to play in any attempt to shift the discourse on poverty and social security in the UK (see Poverty2Solutions, 2021; Patrick & Kaufman, 2021).

Why we need a new conversation about social security

As part of wider calls to ‘build back better’, and to navigate a path out of the crisis, some have argued that we need a new Beveridge Report for new times (Booth 2020; Harris 2021; Heins and Chung 2021). Such arguments are persuasive, rightly directing attention to the need for comprehensive reform of the social settlement. They also recognise the indispensability of social security for post-covid recovery activity, and threaten to provide some content for otherwise empty promises to ‘level up’ (Johnson 2021). However, as others also acknowledge (Heins and Chung 2021), a Beveridge 2.0 feels reductive and retrograde as a mechanism for seeking

solutions for change: to build back in a meaningful and inclusive way will require more radical, inclusive and imaginative initiatives. Indeed, the reformist impulse needs to be turned not only to social security, but to the policymaking process itself. There is a linked need to find new ways to intervene in the wider public conversation about poverty, inequality and post-covid recovery.

The parents and carers we have been working with through Covid Realities talk about the importance of speaking out: of sharing experiences and developing policy recommendations; but also of the importance of finding a space to connect with others who are going through similar experiences of hardship. Above all, Covid Realities' participants are motivated by what they see as an urgent need for policy change, and by the desire to make a radical difference to their own lives, and the lives of millions of other families:

Having struggled on a very low income throughout the pandemic and with our particular circumstances, I'd wanted to voice my opinion of what life was really like for people like me, who'd found themselves in a predicament where ends did not meet. Covid Realities has given us a platform to express and air our concerns, where otherwise I felt we'd been ignored, especially by the government. It has helped with feeling like a participating member of society, where we do matter. (Aurora, mother of two, London)

It has been good to feel like I have a voice and my opinion is heard. Over the last year I've enjoyed being part of Covid realities. It feels like a community. Hearing other people's life experiences and thoughts and opinions is helpful. Knowing other people are going through similar to you makes you feel like you are not alone. Knowing we're trying to make a difference between us to everyone's lives is also empowering! Together we are making a difference. (Isla, mother of two, South West England)

Politicians, policymakers, researchers and those who hold the spaces where conversations about the future of social security take place all need to do more to include a diverse range of voices. They need to think imaginatively about how to create inclusive spaces that can undermine existing differences of power and status, rather than reinforce them. Here, a great deal can be learned from the work of groups led by people with lived experience of poverty and social (in)security, who have broken new ground in recent years in their efforts to influence and inform policymaking (e.g. Poverty2Solutions, 2021). Even at the height of the pandemic, the APLE Collective - a network of groups all led by those with lived experiences of poverty and social security - were lobbying hard for greater action to address the fallout from the digital divide. They were concerned about how this would play out and potentially worsen inequalities during the pandemic (Goldstraw et al, 2021). In building a new conversation, policymakers can also learn from their Scottish colleagues who have been pioneering a new approach to engagement with claimants as part of the development of new devolved powers on social security (Mackley and McInnes 2021). The resultant 'Experience Panels' (Social Security Scotland 2021) are a perhaps imperfect mechanism for greater engagement, but they signal a valuable willingness and effort to more widely engage and involve claimants in policy development.

In sum then, efforts to build back better and ‘level up’ must attend not only to substantive policy content, but also to the policy process and who is heard in the policy discussion. We need action to open these debates up, and to create mechanisms to support genuine and meaningful involvement, with the potential to then develop policies that, at the very least, meet people’s needs and reflect their real experiences.

Imagining a better future for social security: Covid Realities’ vision and principles

During a series of Big Ideas group meetings (monthly online discussion groups), participants in Covid Realities worked together to develop this vision for the future of social security in the UK. Their vision is underpinned by a set of principles co-produced in these same meetings, and around which they are developing a set of specific policy proposals. This vision, and related principles are set out below:

Our collective vision is for a social security system that is understanding and compassionate, treats people with dignity and respect, and offers meaningful opportunities and support.

Key Principles:

1. **Security** - the system should provide security and stability
2. **Adequacy** - the amount provided should be enough to live decently
3. **Rights and Respect** - the system should promote dignity not stigma
4. **Transparency and Accountability** - the system should be easy to understand, use and challenge
5. **Empowerment and Opportunity** - the system should offer people real and meaningful choices and support, giving people control over their money and choices
6. **Inclusive and user-led** - the system should reflect and be rooted in local communities, and developed in collaboration with the people who use it
7. **Compassionate** - the system should be flexible and person-centred, adapting to individual needs and circumstances

The Covid Realities’ vision is notable for its breadth and ambition, and has a marked focus, not only on material improvements, but on the relational dimensions of engagement with the social security system. The work of developing this vision and principles was not easy. Over the course of several meetings, participants began by working in small groups to discuss their priorities and ideas for how the system might be changed. These ideas were then discussed, refined and amended by the whole group. This process involved input and expertise from participants, members of the research team, and from staff at CPAG. Through this process we

compiled a long list of priorities and principles which were narrowed down and further refined by the group using online voting tools. This was a process of seeking consensus, and here the research team took an active role in identifying common themes and ideas. The final version of this vision statement and key principles, however, is grounded in the experience and priorities of Covid Realities participants.

Collaborative online engagement of this sort has obviously been possible for a number of years, but has not been widely adopted. A welcome consequence of the necessary adoption of such methods during Covid-19 is the practical demonstration of their creative possibilities. Doing this kind of work online is difficult. Certain tasks and forms of interaction become much more time-intensive, sometimes emotionally draining, and require careful forethought and planning. However, working online in this way also opens up new horizons for participatory research, allowing people from across the UK to connect, and share their knowledge and experience. It has long been a problem of participatory and lived-experience-led activity that these are inherently (and often necessarily) local activities. Resource constraints, wider familial commitments, and the personal circumstances of participants too often prevent travel across the UK, and are barriers to learning from other experts in different communities. To some extent these barriers to connection were broken down by the rush to Zoom that many of us (although not all) experienced during Covid-19.

The enthusiasm of Covid Realities participants for this form of engagement suggests new possibilities for online engagement and participation, but at the same time it also makes it all the more important that we attend closely to the problem of digital exclusion. In Covid Realities, we have sought to address this by providing financial resources to participate online, but there is a wider campaigning call (championed by the APLE Collective) to create a truly inclusive online space by acting firmly to close the digital divide (APLE Collective 2021; The Bevan Foundation 2020).

The Covid Realities research programme runs until the end of 2021, and our current task is working with parents and carers to develop specific policy recommendations, informed by the core principles. We are already some way through this activity, and what has already become clear is the difficulty of connecting the breadth and ambition of participants' proposals to a political context in which even incremental improvements can seem ambitious, the best that can be hoped for, and the only realistic aims. In the next section of this briefing, we consider this problem in more detail, setting out how the anti-poverty sector can perhaps most effectively lobby for change in the current political climate.

Why realistic recommendations for change can still be radical

When we survey the public and political discourse on social security, we can see that much of the current debate is narrowly (and understandably) focused on efforts to extend the £20 Universal Credit increase. In addition to the limitations of this debate outlined above, it is vital to recognise the extent to which this policy issue dominates the social security arena. The debate leading up to the April 2021

budget was entirely focused on what might happen to the £20 increase, and has since remained so, leaving little space to address broader questions, or those other policies which also need urgent attention, such as the benefit cap and two-child limit. There are good reasons for this: it is an issue with purchase on the public and media imagination. Broad campaigns that focus on too many issues are also easy to ignore. However, the risk of focusing too narrowly on single issues, at this unique moment, is a lost opportunity to expand the horizons of this debate, and to connect it to longer standing failures of the social security system.

Rather than allow debate to be confined to specific problem policies - and thus contained and controlled - there is a need to mobilise specific issues to make broader points about poverty, adequacy and social security. The fragmentation of policy and poverty discourse was a problem before the pandemic (Crossley, Garthwaite, and Patrick 2019). The taxonomic representation of poverty in terms of various types - food poverty, fuel poverty, period poverty - effectively obscures the structural relationships that produce and reproduce poverty more generally. Now, more than ever, it is essential that policy-makers, anti-poverty campaigners, and researchers are all engaged in the work of making connections that illuminate these relationships, structures and systems. This is not abstract knowledge, but part of the everyday fabric of peoples' lives. The debate regarding the £20 cut is a valuable opportunity to have a wider conversation about adequacy, but also to articulate the connections between the system we currently have, food bank use and rising destitution. As such, calls to stop the £20 cut should be seen as a stepping stone for wider mobilisation.

However, it remains the case that many of the proposals that emanate from think tanks and politicians are, with notable exceptions (see: Arnold et al; (Brewer, Handscomb, and Shah 2021; Statham, Parkes, and Gunson 2021), routinely piecemeal and moderate, if not conservative and retrograde. Too often, centrist proposals for social security are arguably inadequate to the task of addressing the realities and challenges that people in poverty face. The conservatism of centrist policy development is defended with reference to pragmatism, in the form of deference to public opinion. There is an inherent logic to this, especially given the extent to which this current government appears to be swayed by shifts in public opinion, as evidenced by recurrent u-turns on important policy areas, not least on Free School Meals holiday provision (Syal, Stewart, and Pidd 2020). However, there are risks with focusing too singularly on public opinion. Rather than ground proposals in analysis of the problem, such an approach often proceeds from the analysis of 'public' attitudes, to discern what is judged affordable and politically palatable. Abey and Harrop (2021) describe this in terms of 'going with the grain'.

This approach is in stark contrast to the proposals developed by those with direct experience of poverty, who call for ambitious and far-reaching change. However, the proposals made by participants of Covid Realities, for example, should not be dismissed as utopian or out of step with political realities. Participants are politically aware, and are willing to temper their immediate ambitions in order to increase political buy-in, and in pursuit of longer term aims. Here, the participants in Covid Realities are keen to learn from and engage with different forms of expertise - the sorts of expertise held by policy-makers, campaigners and

researchers. The opportunities for this kind of exchange stand to benefit all groups involved, and there is untapped potential for those with more traditional forms of policy expertise and authority to lend themselves to those with expertise from experience, as has been trialled through the work of the Commission on Social Security (see Summers in press)

Where is action needed? Remembering the need for relational as well as redistributive change

In our efforts to develop a better social security system for the future, it is vital that we attend to both the redistributive and the relational planes. As Ruth Lister (Lister 2020) and Nancy Fraser (Fraser 2009) remind us, poverty is a site of both relational and distributive injustice, and so corrective action needs to be focused on both. In the current debates about post-Covid futures, there is rightly a great deal of focus on the need to avoid a return to austerity, and in favour of fiscal measures that provide financial support to those suffering hardship. However, we also need to attend to the relational domain, and most especially - in social security policymaking - how people who derive income from social security are characterised by politicians and the media, and treated by officials.

These relational dimensions of social security are sometimes neglected and treated as secondary to the material. However, the past decade of austerity and cuts has also been accompanied by an increasingly stigmatising and punitive rhetoric targeting 'welfare dependents' and so-called 'skivers'. This has been a feature of political discourse, but has also been popularised and made into a form of entertainment in the genre 'poverty porn' (Jensen 2014). At the same time, welfare conditionality and sanctions have been made more stringent, but also extended to new groups of claimants. As a result, an atmosphere of fear and threat permeates the social security encounter with work coaches and frontline JobCentre Plus advisers for many claimants.

Participants in Covid Realities return again and again to the relational domain, and to the harm that stigmatising narratives and hostile encounters can do:

Also spoke to my universal credit advisor today, the usual two week phone call. I didn't sleep a wink last night. I was so worried I'd not done enough and would be sanctioned. (Victoria, mother of two, North East England)

I have been claiming benefits for a number of years due to mental health issues, what really gets to me is having regular health assessments where they ask you all sorts of awkward questions about hospital appointments etc. These people do not try to make you feel at ease and regard all your answers with suspicion. (Erik, father of one, Southern England)

Action to alter the relational character of social security interactions would be welcomed by claimants, and would signal a shift toward a more humane and supportive approach to policy in this area. Even prior to institutional and organisational reform, change here can be led by politicians who have a critical role to play in terms of their use of language and rhetoric. Here, rather than simply 'going with the grain', politicians can actively shape public discourse, the language used

and the stories that are told. This is a point made by Catherine in the speech that opens this paper:

If society sees the government viewing us differently, supporting us properly, treating us well, caring about us, then slowly it will too. (Catherine, mother of two, Northern England)

Too often, politicians have ratcheted up rather than challenged negative representations of social security claimants in the media. As Catherine suggests, it takes political leadership as well as a shift in public attitudes to bring about change, and perhaps here there is sometimes rather too much focus on the need to win ‘hearts and minds’ when what is needed is for politicians to rediscover and champion the positive social value of a functional social security system. The possibility to do just this was recently exemplified by United States President Biden framing child tax credit as a ‘giant step’ to reduce child poverty (Pilkington 2021). We also need a broader conceptualisation of work to include the hard and societally valuable (if not always valued) work of parenting and caring.

What role for shifting public opinion on poverty and social security?

Much has been made of a suggested softening of public attitudes towards social security, and an increased recognition that benefit rates have fallen too low. It is undoubtedly to be welcomed that the majority of the public now support making the £20 increase to Universal Credit permanent (Abey and Harrop 2021). It is also notable that polling by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS 2021) found a majority of the public favoured suspending the two-child limit, at least during the pandemic.

However, there is a question about whether we must wait for public attitudes on social security to shift before we can expect more progressive and redistributive policymaking from our political leaders. Here, it is instructive to look at attitudinal work by Hudson and colleagues (Hudson, Lunt, and Hamilton 2016), which casts a critical eye at glib characterisations of a post-war ‘golden age’ in which the welfare state enjoyed widespread and enthusiastic popular support. Examination of available polling data across this period shows that there has always been strong censure for benefit claiming populations among the public, who make distinctions (as has happened since at least the Poor Laws) between those judged ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ of state support. Returning to the contemporary period, and looking to Scotland again, we can see a Government that has ushered in progressive, reformist policies despite there not being a marked difference in public attitudes to ‘welfare’. Another reason to be sceptical of strategies that prescribe ‘going with the grain’ is that there is also evidence to suggest that policy itself - and the message it communicates - plays a role in shaping attitudes and opinions (Sage 2012).

What this suggests is that we do not always need, nor perhaps should we expect, a radical shift in public attitudes to social security, and that this is not then a necessary precursor to positive policy change. This is not of course to say that public attitudes do not matter, or that we should not think carefully about the

language we use to talk about social security and welfare, or the way that our arguments are framed (Lister 2013; Hawkins 2018). It is also not to ignore the fact that we are currently operating in a political space where public attitudes would seem to hold considerable sway. This is illustrated by the capriciousness of current government policy, apparently influenced as much by electoral considerations and public opinion as by ideology. Rather it is to say that we should not over emphasise the importance of ‘public attitudes’, which are in any case contradictory and ambiguous (Beedle and Taylor-Gooby 1983). What is most needed is political

leadership ready to act on social security as part of a wider reform programme (for example as currently being witnessed under Joe Biden’s administration in the USA), and a movement able to exert the necessary pressure to achieve this.



Zine page by Sal Widdop (2021)

We should work to undermine these static categorisations, building a sense of the value of decent social security provision for all of us, regardless of our current need at this point in our life course.

Here, language and framing are especially important, as is mobilising the growing body of evidence on the extent and nature of hardship experienced by millions of households across the UK (TUC 2021b; McNeil et al. 2021; CPAG 2021). There is a wealth of evidence of the impact of this contained within the Covid Realities

archive, which includes over 2,000 entries from parents and carers living on a low income over the last year (Covid Realities 2021). We have also worked directly with parents and carers to generate more creative, arts-based outputs including a zine and audio recording of parents sharing their experiences.

These are affecting and have an emotional range and power which mean they have a great deal of potential to make an impact on public discourse and debate.

Participants' outputs also make important critical and analytical points, like the zine page by Widdop (2021), shown above, which makes a point about the need to denaturalise 'the economy'. There is untapped scope to do more to bring the expertise and everyday experiences of poverty and hardship into the public narrative and conversation in imaginative ways.

What needs to change?

This briefing has explored the need for a new approach to social security, setting out the vision and underpinning principles developed by parents and carers participating in the Covid Realities research. It has called for a new and more inclusive conversation about social security, arguing that a change in the discourse and policymaking process is as much needed (and could be as radical in its impact) as changes to the policies themselves.

Below, we set out the tangible changes that we believe are required.

1. It is vital to campaign to continue the £20 Universal Credit increase. Where possible, this needs to be as part of a broader discussion of benefit (in)adequacy and the need to provide support to all social security claimants.
2. The policymaking space on social security needs to be opened up and made more inclusive. We must do more to value the expertise that comes with experiences of (poverty and) social security, and bring it into policy making discussions and processes.
3. The pandemic created virtual opportunities for experts by experience to connect with others in similar situations, and policymakers from across the UK. As the pandemic (hopefully) recedes, we must continue to harness the opportunities virtual meetings can provide to connect people with expertise of experience both with each other, and with those with other forms of expertise, while simultaneously acting on the digital divide.
4. In terms of substantive policy changes on social security, it is important to look at the need to do more to improve how claimants are treated by the social security system; for example, seeking to improve experiences of contact with DWP and with frontline advisers.
5. The anti-poverty and think tank sectors should explore how they can better work with the expertise of those with experiences of social security and

poverty, drawing on existing expertise among lived experience groups for best practice here.

6. Politicians should be encouraged to show leadership in calling for reforms to social security, drawing on solidaristic conceptualisations of social security as a force for good for us all.

Conclusion: building a better social security future together

We expect that almost all of you who have got to the end of this briefing - or just skipped forward to read our conclusions - will recognise the need for changes to be made to our social security system. This was patently evident before the pandemic began, and the flaws with current provision have only been further exposed since (Garnham, 2020). There is a moment - that may quickly pass - to have these conversations about where and how we change policy to create a post-crisis future that improves on what came before. We need to make sure that this moment is realised, and that we capitalise on the opportunity to talk frankly and imaginatively about what needs to change and why. But, and this is the main argument underpinning this paper, we also need to make sure that this conversation is a genuinely inclusive one drawing on and learning from diverse forms of expertise, expertise that is often more imaginative and radical than its equivalent in the traditional policy making community. This will make it a better conversation, and one with more scope to deliver change of the radical scope required. The time to start that conversation is now, and we can all play a part: talking to colleagues and friends, and calling out elitist and exclusionary conversations for what they are. Only then, will we start the work to build back better. Together.

Acknowledgements



The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Visit www.nuffieldfoundation.org

We would also like to thank the wider Covid Realities project team, including Geoff Page, Katie Pybus, Kayleigh Garthwaite and Rosalie Warnock, as well as all the Covid Realities participants, whose involvement and input is the backbone of the Covid Realities research programme and who have been instrumental in this report. Finally, we would like to thank staff at the Child Poverty Action Group, Covid Realities project partner, who have given their time generously to provide feedback and advice on this briefing note.

Methodological Appendix: Covid Realities: a participatory research programme

This paper is drawn from our work on the Covid Realities research programme, funded as part of the Nuffield Foundation's rapid response to the Covid-19 pandemic. A key aim of the programme, which runs from April 2020 to December 2021, is to ensure that the voices of parents and carers living on a low income are better included in policymaking processes and discussions, and explore how this might be achieved (Power et al. 2020). Covid Realities has a number of strands but its centrepiece is participatory research with parents and carers living on a low income through the pandemic. Through online diary entries and written responses to 'big questions of the week' over 100 parents and carers from across the UK have been sharing their experiences of everyday life in an extraordinary time. Monthly 'Big Ideas' virtual discussion groups bring parents together to discuss ideas for change, and to co-produce policy recommendations. The parents participating in Covid Realities regularly take part in media interviews, speak at parliamentary events and academic webinars, and seek to be part of the wider discourse about poverty and social security - both during and as we emerge from the pandemic.

Participants in Covid Realities place a high value on the support, solidarity, and recognition they gain from the group. But equally important is the opportunity to discuss ideas and be part of efforts to create social change:

It has been good to feel like I have a voice and my opinion is heard. Over the last year I've enjoyed being part of Covid Realities. It feels like a community. Hearing other people's life experiences and thoughts and opinions is helpful. Knowing other people are going through similar to you makes you feel like you are not alone. Knowing we're trying to make a difference between us to everyone's lives is empowering. Together we are making a difference. (Isla)

Having struggled on a very low income throughout the pandemic and with our particular circumstances, I'd wanted to voice opinion on what life was really like for people like me, who'd found themselves in a predicament where ends did not meet. Covid Realities has given us a platform to express and air our concerns, where otherwise I felt we'd been ignored, especially by the government. It has helped with feeling like a participating member of society, where we do matter. (Aurora)

Through shared experiences, participants find common purpose in pushing debates and discussions forward, facilitated by the Covid Realities research team. They do so while facing considerable hardship and a routine struggle to get by, which they document through diary entries and other methods. This writing and discussion, and participants' commitment to and enthusiasm for it, might be best understood as a form of 'getting organised' (Lister 2004) and as an exercise in individual and collective agency. By writing these entries, parents and carers seek to ensure multiple accounts and lived realities of the pandemic and of social security receipt are available, accounts which frequently challenge dominant media and governmental narratives.

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