

# The Welfare Charter



# Why we need a Welfare Charter

**The United Kingdom is one of the richest nations on earth, yet over 1 million people use foodbanks, more than a quarter of children live in poverty and 5.5 million adults go without one or more basic clothing necessities, like a warm, waterproof coat . We can end poverty in this country.**

There is no place for a system that sees pushing people into poverty, the threat of hunger and eviction as a legitimate punishment for not being in work. We need a social security system that enables everyone to have a safe, warm home, good food, proper clothing and being able to participate in society.

## **1. A political commitment to full employment achieved with decent jobs**

People are entitled to decent, stable and secure jobs that provide regular, guaranteed hours that allows them to also meet any caring responsibilities; not zero hours contracts in precarious jobs.

- People should be supported into appropriate work, not forced to take any work on threat of removal of benefits. Young people especially should be provided with positive routes into work, training or education rather than threatened.

## **2. A wage you can live on for all and a social security system that works to end poverty**

We need a National Living Wage that people can live on, not just survive on, that applies to all. This should be based on the nationally-recognised Minimum Income Standard which reflects people's own assessment of their needs and includes things like rent, clothing, food and drink, utilities bills and social activities.

- Having a legal National Minimum Wage below that which is considered a 'living wage' is society saying it is fine to work in poverty.
- We can drive up wages for everyone by enabling greater 'collective bargaining' - where workers organise together to win a pay rise for everyone - rather than be picked off individually by an employer. Where workers are in a trade union workplace wages are, on average, 8% higher .
- Better wages reduce the need for people to claim social security. However, there will always be the need for benefits to make sure that those outside of waged work do not fall into poverty, and people can cover any extra costs from disability or larger families. That's why measures such as penalising second earners and paying to a single person in a household under Universal Credit, introducing a delay before people can claim benefits after losing their jobs and placing an arbitrary cap on the amount of benefit a household can receive is so concerning. These measures punish people rather than deliver better living standards for all.

### **3. No work conscription – keep volunteering voluntary**

Forcing people to work for free on pain of losing benefits is simply providing free labour to organisations that should be paying workers proper wages. It doesn't matter what you call the scheme, the principle of work conscription needs to end and has no place in our social security system.

- Over 542 voluntary organisations and charities have declared they will not participate in a government scheme that forces people to work for free – because they believe people volunteering should stay voluntary.

### **4. Representation for unemployed workers**

Everyone should have access to an advocate to help them navigate the social security system and appeal adverse decisions.

- This is necessary because of the cruel, arbitrary and target driven sanctions policy - appealing benefit sanctions has been deliberately made harder; legal aid has been restricted and funding cut from a wide variety of advice-giving organisations including TUC Unemployed Workers Centres. This will continue as the Conservative party and government continue to plan to make further cuts.
- Membership of a trades union should be a long-term aim and entitlement for all unemployed workers and underemployed workers. This also means seeking collective representation on issues affecting claimants generally.

### **5. Appoint an Ombudsman for claimants**

A Claimants Ombudsman should be appointed to arbitrate on unresolved complaints, to ensure claimants are treated with respect and dignity.

### **6. Equality in the labour market and workplace; equality in access to benefits.**

The labour market and access to benefits continue to have deep structural inequalities that scar people and communities. This Tory government plans to cut young people off from some benefits entirely – such as Housing Benefit and threatening the withdrawal of Job Seekers Allowance. We need a labour market where structural inequalities are overturned and a benefit system that is accessible to people.

- Between 2010 and 2015 24 major cuts to equality and employment laws have been made – with hugely detrimental results. Women are still paid less, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people are over represented in National Minimum Wage jobs and long term BAME youth unemployment has increased by 50% in the last five years. Disabled people have reported increased hate crimes and more punitive attitudes from employers. The target-driven sanctions we have seen have disproportionately hit people with mental ill-health and led to distress for both benefit claimants and Jobcentre staff.

## 7. An end to the sanctions regime and current Work Capability Assessment - full maintenance for the unemployed and underemployed.

We need a non-means tested, non-discriminatory benefit payable to all, with housing costs met. This must be allied with the wide provision of low cost housing. Achieving dignity, independent living and the ability to participate in society must be cornerstones of our social security system. We must explore ways of achieving this such as growing the numbers of people who support the principle of a minimum Citizens Income for all.

- The current sanctions regime - where money is stopped so people have no financial support - is used exclusively to punish and coerce; it has no place in a social security system that should be about assisting and supporting people in living their lives. Over 1 million sanctions were imposed in 2014, and overwhelmingly the sanction applied was disproportionate to the "failure" such as not making an appointment. These sanctions impacted upon over 100,000 children and upon those in most need of support. Under the Tory government sanctions are going to be applied to workers who are deemed not to be working enough hours and humiliating Work Capability Assessments are set to continue.

## 8. State provision of high quality information, advice and guidance on employment, training and careers

- There must be a supportive and independent careers and job-broking service, not linked to conditionality or benefits, offering face to face advice. In addition to on-line services the government must maintain publicly delivered job centres or employment offices within each locality to ensure that people can access help for career advice and benefit queries by the channel of their choice. Everyone should have free access to the whole range of options offered by Further Education, Higher Education, vocational training and apprenticeships
- An apprenticeship scheme must provide the necessary underpinning technical knowledge and assessment of competence through a combination of college and work based learning. An apprenticeship must also result in a nationally recognised qualification and a guaranteed job in a recognised occupation.
- We support lifelong learning and assistance for those who wish to re-skill.



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