

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SOCIAL INSECURITY



The devastating human rights impact of
social security system failures in the UK

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Amnesty International UK, Human Rights Action Centre,
17-25 New Inn Yard, London EC2A 3EA

www.amnesty.org.uk
sct@amnesty.org.uk

Executive summary

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and two international covenants, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), outline a framework for human rights, encompassing civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. The ICESCR emphasises fulfilling basic needs like food, housing, healthcare, and education, which governments must ensure through laws, policies and public services.¹

The UK ratified the ICESCR in 1976 but, unlike civil and political rights, economic, social, and cultural rights are not legally enforceable in the UK. The Human Rights Act (1998) and the European Convention on Human Rights protect civil and political rights, but there are no similar comprehensive legal safeguards for economic, cultural and social rights.² This lack of enforceability makes it difficult for individuals to seek justice for violations of their economic, social, and cultural rights.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR) has repeatedly urged the UK to make these rights justiciable.³ However, the UK government insists that a mix of policy and legislation is sufficient protection of these rights. The devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have taken steps to protect these rights, with Scotland working towards passing a Scottish Human Rights Bill to provide legal effect to the ICESCR.⁴

Despite this, the UK government's fragmented approach to policy and legislation fails to recognise the interconnectedness of human rights resulting in harmful consequences, such as those from the social security system, which exacerbate inequality and poverty.

Amnesty International's report *Broken Britain: Voices from the frontline of the fight for everyday rights* documents how marginalised communities in Britain experience clustered violations of their rights due to systemic discrimination and the failure of social security systems to meet human rights standards (for example, social security failures impact on health and access to food).⁵

This report examines this phenomenon. It sets out the international frameworks for the right to social security and examines the compliance of the UK's social security system with them.

1 UN General Assembly Resolution 2200A (XXI), International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (1976), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>

2 UK government, Human Rights Act 1998, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/contents/enacted>

3 UN CESCR Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (March 2025), para 6, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=E%2FC.12%2FGBR%2FCO%2F7&Lang=en

4 Amnesty International UK, Press Release: Scotland: Failure to deliver Scottish Human Rights Bill is 'unjustifiable', say Amnesty International, 4 September 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/scotland-failure-deliver-scottish-human-rights-bill-unjustifiable-say-amnesty>

5 Amnesty International, Broken Britain Voices from the Frontline of Everyday Rights, 2024 <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/our-everyday-rights>

It further examines the evidence of clustered violations of economic, cultural, and social rights triggered by violations of the right to social security and where the legal protections of ICESCR rights within the UK are failing to prevent this. The report stresses that social security protections (income protections) are vital for ensuring people's rights to an adequate standard of living, and when these systems fail, it triggers cascading effects that restrict other rights.⁶

Amnesty International makes recommendations to the UK government to address failings in the UK social security system, as well as ICESCR justiciability, and urges it to act so that social security is recognised as a fundamental human right, not merely as a form of charity or 'welfare'.

To assess the UK's compliance with international human rights standards, Amnesty International commissioned a literature review by Dr Koldo Casla and Lyle Barker. This review was supplemented by first-hand accounts from social security claimants and their advisors gathered on behalf of Amnesty International by Society Matters (a community interest company linked to Citizens Advice):

- Online surveys and individual/group interviews were conducted with 782 participants, overseen by Amnesty observers.
- Face-to-face interview: 216 (England: 162, Wales: 34, Scotland: 13, Northern Ireland: 7)
- Online survey: 419 (England: 322, Wales: 27, Scotland: 61, Northern Ireland: 9)
- Advisor online survey: 147 (England: 115, Wales: 11, Scotland: 12, Northern Ireland: 9)

The focus was on working-age claimants (16-64 years old), particularly those on carer's allowance, universal credit, employment and support allowance, and personal independence payment. Amnesty International also engaged with civil society organisations and individuals with lived experience to shape the analysis and recommendations. The sample size from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is limited and may not fully represent the broader population, but the trends observed suggest systemic issues that warrant further investigation.

International human rights obligations and the right to social security

The right to social security is outlined in Article 9 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), ratified by the UK in 1976. It is also recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and other treaties, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 102 (1952).⁷

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) defines the right to social security as protection from income loss due to sickness, disability,

6 Amnesty International UK, *Broken Britain report: Voices from the frontline of the fight for everyday rights*, 2024, https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2024-09/ESCR_Briefing%20FINAL.pdf?VersionId=n7hzU8voMI3kPxI5Yq9V4b5EGxL3uS.u

7 United Nations, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1966, Article 9, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>

unemployment, and other factors. This right is integral to reducing poverty, promoting social inclusion and ensuring basic needs like healthcare, food, and housing.⁸

Social security systems can be contributory (insurance-based) or non-contributory, and they should be universally accessible. The European Social Charter (1961) also guarantees this right, but the UK has not fully accepted all of its provisions.⁹

The CESCR defines three core elements of the right to social security:

- **Availability**
Protection against social risks.
- **Adequacy**
Social security schemes must ensure an adequate standard of living.
- **Accessibility**
The system must be accessible, transparent and non-discriminatory.¹⁰

States are required to progressively realise this right using available resources. Austerity measures that reduce social security access are considered retrogressive, which is incompatible with the ICESCR.¹¹ Amnesty International has argued that the UK's austerity policies violate these obligations.¹²

The UK's social security system

The UK social security system has evolved through key legislative reforms. The National Insurance Act 1948 established contributory social security, moving away from means-tested Poor Laws, and introduced national insurance contributions for employed people.¹³ The Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992 formalised the current structure, including the state pension and non-contributory schemes like income support.¹⁴ The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced universal credit, replacing six means-tested benefits with a single payment.¹⁵ The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 added measures like benefit caps and the two-child limit.¹⁶

In March 2025, the UK government published the Pathways to Work Green Paper, which set out proposals to reform with implications for the availability, adequacy and availability of sickness and disability social protections (alongside support into employment). These proposals were affirmed in the government's Spring Statement. While these are proposals, we examine the potential implications of them in the relevant sections.¹⁷

8 CESCR, General Comment No. 19: The Right to Social Security (Article 9), UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/19 (2008), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/618890>

9 European Social Charter, 18 October 1961, ETS No. 35, Status of ratification, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-social-charter/signatures-ratifications>

10 CESCR, General Comment No. 19: The Right to Social Security (Article 9), UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/19 (2008), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/618890>

11 Ibid

12 Amnesty International, UN Report: Bleak conclusions on UK poverty action echo Amnesty warning of 'devastating domino effect', 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/un-report-bleak-conclusions-uk-poverty-action-echo-amnesty-warning-devastating>

13 National Insurance Act 1948, c. 65.

14 Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992, c. 4.

15 Welfare Reform Act 2012, c. 5.

16 Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, c. 7.

17 Government, Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/pathways-to-work-reforming-benefits-and-support-to-get-britain-working-green-paper> and Spring Statement 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/spring-statement-2025>

Devolution has led to variations in social security policy across the UK. In Scotland, the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 devolved powers to create new social security schemes, including the best start grant and adult disability payment.¹⁸ In Wales, while social security is reserved, the Welsh government runs its own grants, like universal free school meals and the basic income pilot.¹⁹ In Northern Ireland, social security is largely devolved, but it maintains parity with Great Britain's system, with specific mitigation measures in place for welfare reforms.²⁰

The UK social security system includes contributory schemes (eg state pension, employment and support allowance), non-contributory schemes (eg personal independence payment) and means-tested schemes (eg universal credit, child benefit). Local authorities also provide discretionary support for low-income households.

According to the latest DWP data, there are 24 million social security claimants in Great Britain, including:

- 13 million state pension age;
- 9 million working age;
- 750,000 under 16s receiving disability living allowance.²¹

In Northern Ireland, there are around 1.1 million active claims. The UK government's social security spending for 2024-25 is projected at £315.8 billion, with £167.6 billion for pensioners and £138 billion for working-age welfare. Scotland's projected social security spending in 2023-24 is £19.5 billion, increasing to £8.0 billion by 2028-29.²²

Conclusions on the availability of social security in the UK

The UK's social security system faces challenges in aligning with international human rights standards, outlined in CESCR General Comment No. 19 concerning availability.²³ A significant failure to comply lies in the lack of an explicit, transparent cohesive national social security strategy that sets out steps to progressively realise the right to social security.²⁴

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) outcome delivery plan has goals such as maximising employment and financial resilience. These are weighted towards employment engagement rather than constituting a strategy focused on adequate and accessible social security to ensure an adequate standard of living.²⁵ Monitoring

18 Scottish parliament, Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018, Section 1, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2018/9/section/1>

19 Welsh Affairs Committee, The Benefits System in Wales, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/dwp-benefits-statistics-february-2025> and [change the date](#)

20 UK government, Northern Ireland Act 1998, Section 87, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/contents>

21 Department of Work and Pensions, DWP benefits statistics, February 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/dwp-benefits-statistics-february-2025>

22 Department for Work and Pensions, Guidance and methodology: Benefit expenditure and caseload tables, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/benefit-expenditure-and-caseload-tables-information-and-guidance>

23 CESCR, General Comment No. 19: The Right to Social Security (Article 9), UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/19 (2008), pp.5-7, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/618890>

24 CESCR, General Comment No. 19: The Right to Social Security (Article 9), UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/19 (2008), para 47-51, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/618890>

25 Department for Work and Pensions, Outcome Delivery Plan: 2021-2022, July 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-work-and-pensions-outcome-delivery-plan/department-for-work-and-pensions-outcome-delivery-plan-2021-to-2022>

and data infrastructure are also inadequate, with limited information on take-up, insufficient disaggregation, and technical barriers to designing and assessing the impact of reforms.²⁶

Potential claimants do not get enough information about their rights and entitlements and limited support to make claims. This in addition to stigma associated with making social security claims, and rigid eligibility criteria that create financial hardship for those near qualifying thresholds. Together, these systemic barriers are manifested in a social security uptake gap meaning that formal availability of social security schemes does not reflect their ‘material’ availability.²⁷

The UK **falls short** of fulfilling the ICESCR requirements for availability due to:

- Significant failures to address the material unavailability of social security because of the impact on the uptake of social security due to limitations in information and advice about eligibility and failure to prevent and address stigma.

The UK **fails to meet** ICESCR’s obligation for strategic planning and transparency due to:

- The absence of a statutory requirement to set a clear, long-term and publicly accessible social security strategy which limits both transparency and the ability to hold the government accountable for ensuring an adequate standard of living.

The UK **does not comply** with the ICESCR call for robust monitoring and data infrastructure due to:

- The failure to collect and analyse data comprehensively, which prevents the government from assessing and improving social security.

Conclusions on the adequacy of social security in the UK

To fulfil the right to social security, governments are directed by the CESCR in General Comment 19 to ensure that social security levels are adequate to enable people to access the right to an adequate standard of living (including food, housing, utilities and so on), healthcare and education. Social security payments should be paid for an appropriate duration to mitigate social risks such as disability, illness or unemployment.²⁸

The method that the government uses to set social security payments at an adequate level should be laid out clearly within legislative frameworks along with regular monitoring to ensure affordability of goods and services. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) calls upon member states to act to establish social protection floors. Its Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 No. 202 defines social protection floors as nationally determined social security guarantees that, at a minimum, should provide access to essential healthcare and basic income security for all in need over the life cycle; ‘basic income security should allow life in dignity’.^{29, 30}

26 House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, Benefit levels in the UK Second Report of Session 2023–24, March 2024, p 30, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43979/documents/217876/default/>

27 Deven Ghelani, Rachael Walker, Policy in Practice; Missing out 2024: £23 billion of support is unclaimed each year’, 2024, p 5-7, <https://policyinpractice.co.uk/missing-out-2024-23-billion-of-support-is-unclaimed-each-year/>

28 CESCR, General Comment No. 19: The Right to Social Security (Article 9), UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/19, 2008, para 22, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/618890>

29 International Labour Organisation, C102 - Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952, https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312247

30 ILO, General Recommendation, R202 - Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) para 8, https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:3065524

In the UK, the methodology and measures applied are a decision left by statute to the discretion of the secretary of state, leading to change and flux as governments change and both the political choices and public finances evolve. There is no legislatively defined universal social protection floor such as the one recommended by the ILO.³¹ Uprating of social security is not approached in the same way for all schemes available across Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

There are changes proposed by the Pathways to Work Green Paper 2025 that will require new legislation underpinning the uprating methodology. This will allow the secretary of state to implement a proposed freeze and cuts to social security rates for disability and incapacity schemes, removing some of the legislative protections which are in place to protect against political whims.³² If implemented, the extensive reforms proposed in the Pathway to Work Green Paper would further undermine the compliance of the UK social security system with the principle of adequacy, and would be a deliberately discriminatory, disproportionate and retrogressive violation of human rights.

Amnesty International's findings demonstrate that the UK's social security system does not legally guarantee essential social security payments that ensure access to basic needs such as healthcare, housing, food and education. The absence of a legally defined social protection floor (in line with ILO recommendations) leaves social security vulnerable to political discretion allowing for cuts to be made without a legal point of reference.³³ This results in disparities and insufficient support, particularly for groups that are vulnerable to marginalisation and discrimination. Social security's uprating methodology does not account for the actual rising costs of essential goods and services, therefore there is a rising disconnect between social security payments and living costs.³⁴

It is clear that policies like social security freezes, caps, and deductions, removal of the spare room subsidy (bedroom tax) and two-child limit have deepened poverty and disproportionately harmed children, disabled individuals and low-income families. Despite increased social security spending, poverty rates remain unacceptably high, with claimants reporting severe hardships, including reliance on food banks and struggles to afford basic needs like heating and rent.³⁵

Universal credit, disability social security schemes, carer's allowance, and support for asylum seekers remain particularly inadequate, failing to meet minimum thresholds for a dignified standard of living. Without a transparent monitoring mechanism or legal guarantees of social security adequacy, the system remains misaligned with human rights obligations and unable to address the persistent financial distress faced by many households.³⁶

31 Amnesty International, Technical Note to Guarantee our Essentials – Social Security as a Human Right, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/essentials-guarantee-campaign-technical-note>

32 Government, Pathways to Work: Green Paper FAQs, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pathways-to-work-green-paper-faq>

33 Work and Pensions Committee, Benefit levels in the UK, 2024, p17, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/cmworpen/142/report.html>

34 Lucy Bannister, Peter Matejic, Iain Porter, Daisy Sands, Katie Schmuecker, Andrew Wenham, Rachel Bull, Leuan Ferrer, Anna Hughes, An Essentials Guarantee report, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/guarantee-our-essentials-reforming-universal-credit-to-ensure-we-can-all-afford-the>

35 Lalitha Try, 'Catastrophic caps: An analysis of the impact of the two-child limit and the benefit cap', Resolution Foundation, 2024, 1, <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/catastrophic-caps/>

36 Work and Pensions Committee, Benefit levels in the UK, 2024, p17, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/cmworpen/142/report.html>

The UK **does not comply** with ICESCR obligations on the adequacy of social security due to:

- The lack of a legally defined social protection floor, which means that social security payments may fall below the necessary threshold to meet basic needs;
- Discretionary methodology of uprating and lack of transparency in decision making result in unpredictable social security levels that fail to meet the evolving needs of claimants and are subject to fluctuating political decisions;
- Lack of a transparent and consistent monitoring framework, which has resulted in the government being unable to assess the effectiveness of social security schemes in ensuring their adequacy;
- The real-life impacts of insufficient social security schemes, such as reliance on food banks and financial instability, highlight the inadequacy of social security support;
- The failure through the process of parliamentary scrutiny to identify and mitigate against the disproportionate impact of social security policy measures on groups at risk of discrimination and marginalisation.

Conclusions on the accessibility of the UK's social security system

The international human rights frameworks set out that the accessibility of social security schemes should be fulfilled by states in the coverage of the schemes, through clear, reasonable and transparent eligibility and assessment processes and through the participation of claimants in the decision making about the administration of schemes.³⁷

Amnesty International's findings demonstrate that the UK's social security system presents significant challenges in accessibility, fairness and inclusivity. The digital-by-default application process is a significant barrier, especially for marginalised groups, with limited and inefficient alternative support options.³⁸

Health assessments required for claiming certain social security schemes are plagued by the ineffective assessments of eligibility, which leaves the claimants reliant on lengthy appeals, inconsistent criteria, and unclear explanations for denied claims, causing delays and distress for claimants.^{39, 40}

The UK's sanctions regime exacerbates financial hardship and is harmful to physical and mental health, particularly for groups facing discrimination and marginalisation, with minor infractions resulting in severe financial penalties that fail to achieve meaningful employment outcomes. Marginalised communities, including racialised communities, women and people with a disability, are disproportionately impacted by sanctions, further deepening inequalities.⁴¹

37 CESCR, General Comment No. 19: The Right to Social Security (Article 9), UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/19 (2008) p8, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/618890>

38 Rosie Mears and Sophie Howes, 'You reap what you code: Universal credit, digitalisation and the rule of law', Child Poverty Action Group, 2023, 5, <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/You%20reap%20what%20you%20code-%20executive%20summary.pdf>

39 JUSTICE, *Reforming Benefits Decision-Making*, 2021, pp.6, <https://justice.org.uk/our-work/civil-justice-system/current-work-civil-justice-system/reforming-benefits-decision-making/>

40 Ministry of Justice, Tribunal Statistics Quarterly: July to September 2024, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tribunals-statistics-quarterly-july-to-september-2024/tribunal-statistics-quarterly-july-to-september-2024#social-security-and-child-support>

41 Andrew Williams, Brian Webb and Richard Gale, 'Racism and the uneven geography of welfare sanctioning in England', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 49(4), e12677, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378342873_Racism_and_the_uneven_geography_of_welfare_sanctioning_in_England

If implemented, the proposed changes contained in the government's Pathways to Work Green Paper would be a departure from the international standards for an accessible social security system, as they would reduce coverage from social risk for a marginalised group in a targeted and discriminatory manner. Furthermore, the suspension of eligibility for the scheme for people with clearly assessed needs for support and assistance for basic daily living cannot be deemed to be reasonable.

Consultation processes on policy reform often lacks meaningful engagement and transparency, undermining efforts to incorporate lived experiences into policymaking. However, some devolved governments, such as Social Security Scotland, have demonstrated improved inclusivity by involving individuals with direct experience.⁴²

Meaningful participation, as outlined in international human rights standards, is not consistently realised, and significant reforms are necessary to ensure compliance. Some positive steps are being taken in devolved governments, but broader systemic changes are essential for improving consultation and policy outcomes across the UK.

It is the view of Amnesty International that the UK social security system **fails to fully comply with CESCR General Comment No.19 on accessibility of social security, particularly in terms of reasonable, proportionate, transparent, and equitable processes due to:**⁴³

- Discriminatory conditions which limit access to social security for marginalised groups, including caps and conditionality regimes;
- Maladministration of and lack of transparency and reasonable application of eligibility criteria for social security schemes and failures to ensure due process where social security eligibility outcomes are challenged and sanctions are applied;
- Lack of meaningful participation of claimants in the design and evaluation of implementation of schemes and lack access to clear information about entitlements;
- Failures to make reasonable adjustments in the processes and methods through which people access social security schemes, such as digital applications and physical buildings.

Conclusion on dignity and respect with the UK's social security system

Dignity is a central concept within the ICESCR as it is within all human rights instruments. The concept that human rights are inherent to human dignity is well established.

According to article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, social security is 'indispensable' to the dignity of the individual.⁴⁴

The UK government does not appear to apply the same approach to defining and measuring standards within the social security systems, lacking the rigor of formal regulations and dedicated oversight bodies found in other areas. Although the DWP

42 Disability Rights UK, 'DWP ordered to disclose key documents about "dehumanising" plans to reform Work Capability Assessment', November 2024, <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/news/dwp-ordered-disclose-key-documents-about-%E2%80%9Cdehumanising%E2%80%9D-plans-reform-work-capability-assessment>

43 CESCR, General Comment No. 19: The Right to Social Security (Article 9), UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/19 (2008), paras 23-27, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/618890>

44 UN, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

does have a light touch ‘customer charter’, which states that staff will ‘be helpful, polite, and treat you fairly and with respect’.⁴⁵

Amnesty International findings demonstrate that these same principles are intended to be central to Scotland’s approach to delivering devolved social security.⁴⁶ The evidence suggests there is a fundamental gap in the way dignity and respect are integrated into the UK’s social security system, particularly in contrast to other government-regulated sectors like health and social care.⁴⁷

From the lack of a clear framework for regulating dignity to reports of hostility and judgment, it is Amnesty International’s view that the social security system falls short of its obligation to treat claimants with humanity and compassion. This imbalance of power not only retraumatises vulnerable individuals but fosters distrust and fear, perpetuating harm. Reform is urgently needed to establish robust independent accountability mechanisms, deliver adequate staff training, and shift the system’s culture toward one that truly upholds the dignity and respect of all individuals. Without such changes, the rights and wellbeing of claimants and DWP staff alike will remain compromised.

It is Amnesty International’s view that the social security system falls short of its obligation to treat claimants with humanity and compassion, and therefore to maintain dignity.

Conclusions on compliance with the duty for non-discrimination

The report sets out, within the context of collation of illustrative data, that there is already compelling evidence that the duty to ensure non-discrimination in the availability, adequacy, and accessibility of social security. The domino effect triggered by the failures in the social security system is disproportionately impacting groups with protected characteristics.

It is the view of Amnesty International that the UK government is failing in its duty to ensure non-discrimination in the right to social security, is directly excluding some groups and has failed to take targeted action to address the indirect discrimination within the system. This disproportionate impact affects these groups’ enjoyment of related rights such as the rights to food and housing.

How violations of the right to social security triggers a domino effect of human rights

The Joint Committee on Human Rights (2003) recommended incorporating ICESCR rights into UK law, emphasising the indivisibility of human rights.⁴⁸ However, debates persist about whether these rights should be made justiciable, with concerns that this

45 Department for Work and Pensions, Guidance, Our customer charter, accessed 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/our-customer-charter/our-customer-charter>

46 Equality and Human Rights Commission, Social security systems based on dignity and respect, August 2017, <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/our-work/our-work-scotland/social-security-systems-based-dignity-and-respect>

47 Jagna Olejniczak and Kate Harrison, ‘Found anything yet? Exploring the relationship between universal credit claimants and their work coaches’, Citizens Advice, January 2025, https://assets.ctfassets.net/mfz4nbgura3g/5BsJ7M44r5Hpr0ek9VL8Jm/2dcc99f09dd00ff4300ce43b47da0d9f/Found_anything_yet_Exploring_the_relationship_between_Universal_Credit_claimants_and_their_work_coaches.pdf

48 Joint Committee On Human Rights, Twenty-First Report, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt200304/jtselect/jtrights/183/18305.htm>

could overload the courts. The UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR) urged the UK to incorporate ICESCR into domestic law in 2016, but the government has yet to do so.⁴⁹ Amnesty International argues that the UK's reliance on fragmented policies and limited human rights impact assessments fails to uphold these rights, particularly for vulnerable communities.

The Human Rights Impact Assessment (HRIA) process in the UK is inadequate, especially in assessing the full implications of social policies like welfare reforms. The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016,⁵⁰ including measures like the two-child limit and benefit cap, demonstrates the government's failure to assess the human rights impacts of such policies. The Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) highlighted this omission, while the judicial system has been reluctant to address violations of ESCR, particularly in the context of welfare reforms.⁵¹

The lack of effective human rights monitoring and an action plan for the realisation of ICESCR rights contributes to systemic violations, such as the exacerbation of poverty and inequality through policies that impact vulnerable groups. While some devolved authorities, like Scotland, have implemented human rights action plans, the UK's overall approach remains fragmented, with insufficient safeguards to prevent the negative consequences of policy decisions.

The domino effect of poorly designed policies, such as austerity measures, violates multiple rights simultaneously, leading to increased poverty and inequality. The failure to adequately assess or address these issues highlights the need for a more comprehensive, interconnected approach to policymaking, one that fully incorporates all human rights, including ESCR, into both domestic law and policy processes. It is the view of Amnesty International that there is evidence that the UK government failure to incorporate ESCR into UK law, coupled with insufficient human rights assessments in legislative process, implementation and judicial reluctance to engage with ICESCR rights, has led to significant violations of the right to social security and connected rights, exacerbating inequalities.

Overarching conclusions

Amnesty International has demonstrated through evaluation of the evidence that the social security system in the UK has drifted far from the core principle to mitigate social risks and provide protection for an adequate standard of living. Of course, supporting people into work is vital too, but one right should never overshadow another. Furthermore, the social security system in the UK does not stand up to the international human rights frameworks. The result is a system that, by design, perpetuates the deprivation of living standards for those reliant on it, subjecting them to orchestrated stigma and a systematic erosion of their dignity.

49 UN CESCR Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (March 2025), para 6, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=E%2FC.12%2FGBR%2FCO%2F7&Lang=en

50 Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, c. 7., <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/7/contents>

51 Department for Work and Pensions, 'Memorandum to the Joint Committee on Human Rights: The Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015', 2015, p16, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a80d63fe5274a2e8ab52713/welfare-reform-and-work-bill-2015-human-rights.pdf>

What's needed is a comprehensive, all-encompassing review of the social security system, one that sets a clear, ambitious framework, establishes minimum standards for living, and places the system on a stronger foundation rooted in human rights and principles of availability, adequacy and accessibility.

At the same time, we must address the fundamental flaws in human rights and equality protections within our government systems – flaws that have allowed the erosion of our social security, health, food, and housing rights under policies that claim to be human rights compliant. This erosion is enabled by a failure to recognise and safeguard the interconnectedness and indivisibility of our human rights and the lack of cross-departmental efforts to protect against the knock-on effects of policies that continue to entrench and perpetuate poverty across the UK.

Summary list of recommendations for the UK government

Amnesty International's recommendations summary

Amnesty International UK urges the UK government to take urgent corrective measures and systemic action to reform the social security system and strengthen human rights protections. These actions are necessary to ensure the system upholds dignity and meets the right to an adequate standard of living.

Recommendations to the UK government

1. Establish a Statutory Social Security Commission

A landmark independent commission with statutory powers should be established to lead a comprehensive reform of social security:

- Deliver wide-ranging recommendations covering legislative, regulatory and structural change.
- Engage cross-government departments, civil society and people directly affected.
- Develop a national strategy with clear standards and timelines, ensuring human rights compliance.

2. Fiscal measures to support reform

- Review revenue and borrowing strategies to expand the scope for fulfilling economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR).
- Use a rights-based budgeting approach to assess the social impact of fiscal policy.

3. Human rights and legal framework reform

- Conduct an independent review to develop a roadmap for incorporating ICESCR rights into domestic law.
- Ensure enforceability of these rights through the judiciary.
- Develop indicators and standards to monitor implementation.
- Support legislative efforts in devolved nations to incorporate ICESCR rights.

Recommendations to the Department for Work and Pensions

1. Address harmful policy measures

- Remove the two-child limit and the benefit cap.
- End the five-week wait for initial universal credit payments and provide upfront support as non-repayable grants.
- Halt proposed reductions and limitations to support for disability and sickness social security schemes announced in the March 2025 Spring Statement and Pathways to Work Green Paper.

2. **Ensure meaningful reform through consultation and accountability**
 - Carry out accessible and inclusive consultations on Pathways to Work Green Paper reform plans.
 - Address the level and administration of social security levels, including harmful assessments and withdrawal processes.
 - Conduct full human rights and equality impact assessments before policy implementation.
 - Enhance oversight at all levels through statutory mechanisms.
3. **Create a UK Charter for Social Security Rights**
 - Outline the core purpose of the system to ensure an adequate standard of living, protect from harm and ensure dignity.
 - Set service standards, accountability routes and participatory design principles.
 - Regularly report performance against these standards to parliament.
4. **Embed claimant participation and oversight**
 - Establish local claimant participation groups in every Jobcentre Plus, supported by independent facilitators.
 - Create a national panel to inform strategic direction and accountability.
5. **Reform the legislation and process for setting and uprating social security levels**
 - Reform how social security payment levels are determined, ensuring alignment with real living costs and protecting in legislation a social protection floor (like that suggested as an essential guarantee).
 - Establish an independent and transparent mechanism accountable to parliament.
 - Include additional support needs, especially for disabled people.
6. **End the sanctions regime**
 - Scrap punitive sanctions that compromise people's ability to meet basic needs.
 - Guarantee a minimum level of protection to support a life of dignity.

Recommendations to the UK parliament

1. **Human rights oversight and accountability**
 - The Joint Human Rights Committee should lead an inquiry into the UK government's failure to evaluate policy impacts on economic, social and cultural rights.
 - Identify barriers to effective impact assessments and propose solutions for better integration of ICESCR rights in lawmaking and governance.
 - Clarify the role of national institutions and departments in ongoing rights monitoring and coordination.
2. **Independent inquiry into Jobcentre practices**
 - The Work and Pensions Committee, with the National Audit Office, should review:
 - Accessibility and appropriateness of sickness and disability health assessments.
 - Effectiveness of reconsideration and appeals processes for withdrawal, refusal and sanctions of benefits.
 - Reliance on tribunals and gaps in data monitoring.
 - The potential for independent regulation of sanctions and performance.

SOCIAL INSECURITY

The devastating human rights impact of social security system failures in the UK

This report exposes the UK's failure to provide human right-compliant social security to ensure no one lives in deprivation. Despite ratifying an international covenant to protect economic, social and cultural rights nearly 50 years ago, the UK government continues to make decisions that make access to rights such as food, housing, clothing and health more difficult.

Political choices have left us with a tattered and depleted social security system that deepens poverty, entrenches inequality and actively harms those who need it most. Drawing on first-hand testimony from hundreds of claimants and advisors, alongside a wealth of other evidence, this report reveals how the UK's fragmented, cruel and punitive approach creates a cascading effect of human rights violations – denying people dignity, security, food and decent housing, as well as negatively impacting their health and wellbeing.

Amnesty International calls for urgent reform: for social security to be recognised not as a political gift, but as a legal right that is essential to living with dignity.

Amnesty International United Kingdom Section
The Human Rights Action Centre
17-25 New Inn Yard
London EC2A 3EA

www.amnesty.org.uk

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