

# Letter from Human Rights Watch to UK Parliamentarians regarding impending cut to social security support

HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH

2 September 2021

## Cut to Universal Credit would breach UK's international human rights obligations

I am writing to urge you and your fellow Parliamentarians, on your return to the House of Commons on 6 September, to use your influence to help stop the proposed cut by the government on 6 October to social security support of £1040 per year (£20 per week) to Universal Credit (and Working Tax Credit).

If the government were to proceed with the proposed cut, it would be in violation of its international human rights obligations, in particular the binding International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, signed by the UK in 1968 and ratified in 1976, which sets out the rights to an adequate standard of living and to social security.

Cutting the basic rate of support to people living on low incomes, many of whom are already in work, by more than £1000 per year would leave many in a position where the government's social security system cannot guarantee their human right to an adequate standard of living. In July, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation [assessed](#) this to be the UK's "biggest overnight cut to the basic rate of social security since World War II." [Analysis](#) the same month by the Institute for Fiscal Studies of recent government data has shown that for the average recipient of social security, this amount would represent 12 per cent of what they are paid as "entitlements," and for about a quarter of all social security support claimants, it would be more than 20 per cent cut to entitlements.

According to [the latest official data](#), the number of people receiving Universal Credit doubled from 3 million in March 2020 to 6 million in March 2021, as the Covid-19 pandemic's economic impact made itself felt. As of 8 July 2021 there were [5.9 million people](#) (or 5 million households) receiving Universal Credit; almost half (44 per cent) are households with children. These data do not include Northern Ireland.

The [Trussell Trust](#) and [Independent Food Aid Network](#) have both warned of growing demand for food aid during the pandemic and set out concerns about the effect of the impending cut on demand for their services. Citizens Advice [estimates](#) that 75 per cent of people receiving an uplift would not have enough money to cover daily costs if the cut were to proceed, and projects an increase in the number of people on low incomes in debt.

The announcement of a £20 per week increase (to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit) as a Covid-19 pandemic related "uplift" in April 2020 was a welcome relief for those surviving on inadequate levels of social security support, which had diminished in value for a decade. Human Rights Watch [research](#) published in May 2019, alongside the work of many others, has documented

how the inadequacy of social security support, scaled back since 2009, had left increasing numbers of people in need of food banks.

For the approximately 3 million people already receiving Universal Credit prior to March 2020, the removal of the first increase in benefit levels in real terms in a decade would represent a cut to their social security support. For the approximately 3 million people receiving Universal Credit for the first time since the pandemic started, the current social security support level has been the status quo since their entry to the benefits system, and a removal of £1040 per year is a clear cut.

Recent [constituency level analysis](#) by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation projects that, in [413 parliamentary constituencies](#), at least one in three working-age families will be affected directly by the cut.

Cutting up to £1040 per year from social security support would be retrogressive. A policy debate centred on rights, fairness, and justice – whether that is about “levelling up” or “building back better” – should focus on the necessary steps to ensure a well-functioning and adequate social security support system that provides beneficiaries a level of resilience that permits them to withstand day-to-day economic pressures, as well as systemic shocks like the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The proposed cut in October 2021 would do precisely the opposite.

In fact, rather than cutting this support, greater priority should be given to ensuring the [up to 2 million people yet to enter the Universal Credit system](#) and still receiving “legacy” benefits, including people with disabilities and long-term health conditions, are guaranteed a commensurate increase to their level of social security support.

International human rights law makes clear that cuts, even where a government argues that they are unavoidable, should not proceed where they would cause violations of people’s human rights— including the rights to an adequate standard of living and social security. Any cuts must also satisfy a stringent [six-part test](#) set out by the UN’s Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In any event a government deliberately choosing to significantly retrogress its protection of basic rights including the rights to an adequate standard of living and to social security will be violating those rights.

Evidence of the harm that will be done is copious, including in research produced by [Child Poverty Action Group](#), [Citizens Advice](#), [Feeding Britain](#), [Independent Food Aid Network](#), [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#), [Policy in Practice](#), [Save the Children UK](#), [Trussell Trust](#), [Turn2Us](#), and [Zacchaeus 2000 Trust](#), among others (see appendix). Many, if not most, of these documents have been communicated directly either to the relevant government departments at the time of their publication, or are submissions to or reports produced by parliamentary inquiries.

Ignoring all this evidence and proceeding with the cut, with the justification that it is too “[difficult to isolate the specific impact of one policy](#)” on poverty is unacceptable. Reports that the government is [not disclosing its internal impact assessment](#) of the cut, in response to Freedom of Information Act requests, are equally worrying.

The [six-part test](#) requires that, when proceeding with cuts, a state: show a compelling state interest; demonstrate that it has exhausted all alternatives; ensure that the cuts are non-discriminatory; ensure the decision is temporary, necessary, reasonable and proportionate; give opportunity to

those most likely to be affected by the policy to participate genuinely in the decision-making process; and ensure a minimum social protection floor.

The decision by the government to proceed with the planned cut will cause deep harm and does not satisfy all these criteria.

We urge you to use the period immediately following the resumption of Parliament to make the government think again. There is still time to act now to prevent the increase in poverty and queues for aid at food banks that will result from this retrogressive move.

Sincerely,

Yasmine Ahmed  
UK Director  
Human Rights Watch

Enc. Appendix of relevant documents

## Appendix

The list below sets out some key recent documents setting out the case or making clear evidence-based recommendations against reducing Universal Credit to pre-pandemic levels. The documents listed underscore, from various policy perspectives, the potential harms (or failure by government to properly analyse potential harms) of the proposed cut, increasing public support for the government not to proceed as it plans. They also serve to document the many instances in which evidence about the potential impacts has been drawn to the attention of the government.

(Documents listed in date order, most recent first)

1. [Joint letter from devolved governments to Work and Pensions Secretary](#), signed by Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Scotland), Minister for Social Justice (Wales) and Minister for Communities (Northern Ireland), 30 August 2021
2. Independent Food Aid Network, [“Food poverty set to worsen as September’s Universal Credit cliff edge approaches,”](#) (Blog), *The BMJ*, 26 August 2021
3. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [“Universal Credit Cut – impact by constituency,”](#) (Briefing), 26 August 2021
4. Save the Children UK/Opinium, [“Almost Half of Universal Credit Claimants Don't Think They Can Live on £20 Less Each Week,”](#) (Survey), 17 August 2021
5. Trades Union Congress, [“Universal credit cut will hit millions of working families and key workers,”](#) (Blog), 23 July 2021
6. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [“UK heading for the biggest overnight cut to the basic rate of social security since World War II,”](#) (Press Release), 23 July 2021
7. Child Poverty Action Group, [“Universal Credit: What Needs to Change to Make it Fit for Children and Families?,”](#) (Report and Summary Briefing), 21 July 2021
8. [Joint letter from Westminster, Holyrood, Senedd and Stormont Committees](#), signed by chairs/convenors of Social Justice and Social Security Committee (Holyrood), Work and Pensions Select Committee (Westminster), Committee for Communities (Stormont), and Equality and Social Justice Committee (Senedd), 20 July 2021
9. [Letter from the Poverty Alliance to Secretary of State for Work and Pensions](#) regarding a refusal by the DWP to respond to a request made under the Freedom of Information Act about the impact of the £20 Universal Credit cut, 19 July 2021
10. Policy in Practice, [“Autumn of income shocks: the impact of removing Covid support,”](#) (Reports, see [“Report 1: Impact of Covid on caseloads and costs”](#) and [“Report 2: Impact of removal of Covid support and rising housing costs”](#)), July and August 2021
11. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [“Our social security lifeline: Is it strong enough?,”](#) (Report), 16 July 2021
12. Institute for Fiscal Studies, [“The expiry of the Universal Credit uplift: impacts and policy options,”](#) (Research Note), 15 July 2021
13. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [“A Minimum Income Standard for the United Kingdom in 2021,”](#) (Report, and related [Summary Findings](#)), 14 July 2021
14. Independent Food Aid Network, Feeding Britain, University of York and Living Wage, [“Secure work and a secure safety net – a new role for the labour market and social security in preventing the need for charitable food aid,”](#) (Briefing), 8 July 2021
15. Fabian Society, [“Going with the Grain: How to Increase Social Security with Public Support,”](#) (Report/Survey), May 2021

16. Resolution Foundation, "[In need of support?: Lessons from the Covid-19 crisis for our social security system](#)," (Report) 29 April 2021
17. Zacchaeus 2000 Trust (Z2K), "[Z2K's response to the Work and Pensions Committee's inquiry into the DWP's response to the Coronavirus outbreak](#)," (Briefing), 26 April 2021
18. Tory Reform Group & One Nation Conservatives, "[Pathway to Reform](#)," (Policy Position) April 2021
19. Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, "[RCPCH calls on Government to extend the £20 a week uplift to Universal Credit](#)," (Press Release; see also *BMJ Opinion* blogs by the [RCPCH President](#) and [RCPCH Officer for Health Improvement](#)), 18 January 2021
20. Zacchaeus 2000 Trust (Z2K), "[Z2K's response to the APPG on Poverty's call for evidence into the impact on poverty of maintaining the £20 uplift in Universal Credit](#)," (Briefing), January 2021
21. All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty, "[The impact on poverty of not maintaining the £20 uplift in universal credit and working tax credits, and of not extending the uplift to legacy and related benefits](#)," (Inquiry Report), January 2021
22. Disability Benefits Consortium, "[How the Government has continued to prop up a two-tier welfare system by ignoring 2 million people during this pandemic](#)," (Blog), 2 December 2020
23. Turn2Us, "[Weathering the Storm: How Covid-19 is eroding financial resilience](#)," (Report) November 2020
24. Citizens Advice, "[Life on Less than Zero](#)," (Report), October 2020
25. Independent Food Aid Network and Feeding Britain, "[Hunger and the need for food banks between March and September 2020](#)," (Briefing), October 2020
26. Trussell Trust, "[Long Haul Ahead: The impact of Covid-19 on food banks in the Trussell Trust network](#)," (Report; see also related [policy paper](#) by NIESR for the Trussell Trust projecting demand for food banks, and [key survey findings](#)), September 2020
27. Turn2Us, "[Submission to the Comprehensive Spending Review](#)," (Briefing), September 2020
28. House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee, "[Universal Credit isn't working: proposals for reform](#)," 2nd Report of Session 2019–21, HL Paper 105, July 2020, Conclusions and Recommendations 26-27
29. House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, "[Universal Credit: the wait for a first payment](#)," Third Report of Session 2019-21, HC 204, October 2020, Paragraph 122
30. Disability Benefits Consortium, "[DBC letter to Secretary of State on emergency Covid-19 measures](#)," (Open letter), 27 March 2020

The above is not intended as an exhaustive list. Inclusion in this appendix should not be taken to constitute endorsement by Human Rights Watch of the entirety of a document's contents or all aspects of its policy position.