

Written evidence submitted by Just Fair (MRS0369)

1. Just Fair works to realise a fairer and more just society by monitoring and advocating for the protection of economic and social rights. Just Fair is committed to increasing public awareness of international human rights law and the capability to use it, and is devoted to the advancement of high-quality thinking, training and practice to ensure that economic and social rights are respected, protected and fulfilled
2. This submission was written by Just Fair and is supported by Difference North East, ATD 4th World UK, and Women's Health in South Tyneside.

Executive Summary

- The Response to the COVID-19 pandemic needs to have Human Rights at its core in order to adequately respond to the needs of the population and to ensure that all people including those with protected characteristics are not discriminated against.
- Those who are most affected by COVID-19 related drops in incomes and unemployment are some of those who are the least able to cope with any financial shocks including those on low incomes, black and minority ethnic communities, disabled people, and women.
- A number of measures including the benefit cap, the two-child limit, and the No Recourse to Public Funds immigration condition are impacting upon people's ability to achieve their basic socio-economic rights including their rights to food, housing, and health. The Government should take action on these barriers in the next three weeks.
- So far, the Government's response has not taken into account the needs of all of the population, including those who are the most vulnerable, disadvantaged, and/or marginalised.
- In 6 months' time, the UK Government needs to develop a process to incorporate socio-economic rights into domestic legislation so as to continue to improve protections for all people but in particular those with protected characteristics. In England and Northern Ireland, this should include enacting Section One of the Equality Act 2010 that would make Local Authorities have due regard to the impact of their decision making on socio-economic inequalities. The same duty was introduced in Scotland in 2018 under the name 'Fairer Scotland Duty' and is scheduled to be introduced in Wales in September 2020.

How have people been affected by the illness or the response to it?

3. Whilst COVID-19 itself does not discriminate, discrimination based on gender, race, disability, age (and other protected characteristics) and/or socio-economic status is leading to people being disproportionately impacted by the virus.

4. Existing social inequalities are being exacerbated by COVID-19. People across the UK were already experiencing a number of violations of their socio-economic rights including their rights to food, housing, education, work, and social security before the pandemic started.¹ As we shall explain in our submission, many of these groups are now being disproportionately impacted by the economic, social, and health consequences of COVID-19 .
5. Socio-economic rights are afforded to all without discrimination and are included in a number of international human rights standards notably in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.
6. Human Rights need to form an essential part of the response to COVID-19. For the World Health Organization “Human rights frameworks provide a crucial structure that can strengthen the effectiveness of global efforts to address the pandemic.”² Incorporating human rights principles of universality and non-discrimination into the response to the pandemic will help bring the success of the public health response.
7. The measures used to protect people and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic must however not be used to undermine anyone’s dignity, autonomy, or human rights.
8. Unfortunately, from what we have seen so far, the UK’s response has not fully taken into account the human rights of all of the population, and particularly the rights of those who are the most vulnerable. They have also so far not enabled disadvantaged and marginalised populations to participate in decision making processes, and support mechanisms are leaving too many people excluded from them especially those who are the most impacted by the crisis.³

Poverty and socio-economic impacts of COVID-19

9. To fully understand the context of the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 it is crucial to understand the changes made to the tax and welfare system over the past decade. The most significant changes to the UK’s social security system were introduced through the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, and include a benefit cap, the introduction of Universal Credit, replacing the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) with Personal Independence Payments (PIP), tougher sanctions in case of breach of requirements, a freeze on benefits, and the limitation of the child tax credit and Universal Credit awards to two children. ⁴
10. Our research has found that the tax and welfare reforms undertaken over the past decade have had a regressive effect on social protection especially for those who are the most vulnerable.⁵ A cumulative impact assessment by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) shows that key human rights requirements have not been met: namely, the principle of proportionality, non-discrimination, protection of most disadvantaged groups and independent review. Women, disabled people, people from Black and Ethnic Minority communities, as well as those who are on the lowest incomes have lost out the most due to these reforms. ⁶
11. Socio-economic inequality is a clear concern during the current period as there is a correlation between lower socio-economic status and lower health outcomes. The

report by the Institute of Health Equity, commissioned by the Health Foundation in 2020 to mark 10 years since the Marmot Review linked austerity measures to decreases and stagnation in health and life outcomes that have disproportionately impacted certain groups, including women, disabled people, and minority ethnic populations.⁷ The mortality rate of deaths involving COVID-19 in the most deprived areas of England was more than double that in the least deprived areas.⁸

12. At all times poverty is a particular concern for many groups with protected characteristics. Nearly half of all individuals who are in poverty live in a household with at least one person who is disabled⁹ and high levels of poverty amongst disabled people means that they will find it harder to support themselves through a financial emergency.¹⁰ The high levels of disabled people living in poverty are due to a combination of factors including the extra cost of having a disability¹¹, as well as unequal access to work¹², and inadequate welfare support. Disabled people are also, at every level of qualification, more likely than non-disabled people to receive lower pay.¹³ Bangladeshi and Pakistani households experience a 50% poverty rate compared to a 19% poverty rate in white British households. Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups have an average poverty rate twice as high as white households.¹⁴ The ONS found that women were more likely to struggle financially as well as to earn less,¹⁵ and women are the majority of those living in poverty.¹⁶
13. In the first three weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown three million people reported having gone hungry with half of this group not having eaten for a whole day.¹⁷ Disabled adults, black and minority ethnic individuals, and families with children are some of those particularly vulnerable to experiencing household food insecurity due to COVID-19.¹⁸ The Glasgow Disability Alliance found that 40% of their members so far are worried about food, medication or money.¹⁹
14. Many of those who were vulnerable to experiencing household food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic hit appear to be even more vulnerable now. There is also a new group of people who have recently become vulnerable to household food insecurity due to a recent drop in income due to COVID-19.²⁰
15. Those most affected by a drop in income linked to COVID-19 are young adults, people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, women, and those on the lowest incomes.²¹ These are also the groups who will be significantly less financially able to manage with a drop in incomes due to lower savings as well as having less flexibility in their budget as most of their outgoings are on fixed items such as bills and rent.²²
16. We believe that in order to respond to socio-economic inequalities that are prevalent in society Section on of the Equality Act 2010 should be implemented in England and Northern Ireland. Wales is scheduled to implement the duty on the 29th September 2020.²³ The same duty was introduced in Scotland in 2018 under the name 'Fairer Scotland Duty'. The Socio-economic Duty would make Local Authorities have due regard to the impact of their decision making on socio-economic inequalities.²⁴

No Recourse to Public Funds

17. No recourse to public funds' (NRPF) is an immigration condition imposed on undocumented migrants and people who have leave to remain subject to a NRPF restriction. A person with NRPF cannot access most welfare benefits or social

housing but they can access publicly funded services that are not listed as ‘public funds’ for immigration purposes.²⁵ Without the safety net of social security, many families with NRPF end up living in destitution and are at high risk of homelessness, exploitation and abuse.²⁶

18. Research has found that women, disabled people, pregnant women, and black and minority ethnic children are disproportionately impacted by the NRPF condition.²⁷ Our own research has found that not only is this policy disproportionately impacting certain groups with protected characteristics, but it is also contrary to the UK’s international human rights obligations.²⁸
19. There have been some extensions of support in response to the pandemic, notably housing support to those who are rough sleeping²⁹ as well as extensions of free school meal entitlement to some children who have NRPF.³⁰ We welcome these but are concerned that there are still people falling through the gaps in support and this will only be remedied by completely removing the No Recourse to Public Funds condition.
20. Regarding the free school meal support, the entitlement has not been extended to all children with NRPF only to those with four specific immigration conditions this means that many children are still missing out.³¹ The maximum income threshold for receiving support is much lower than it is for families who don’t have NRPF. For families or carers with NRPF, the income threshold is £7,400 net per annum per household. This equates to a household earning just over £600 per month with no access to any other form of welfare support. For other families the income threshold is also £7,400 net per annum per household however this amount is then topped up by Universal Credit to bring the households income to around £18,000 depending on the family unit. Finally, we are extremely concerned that the Government is planning to remove this much needed extension of support as soon as schools are reopened for all students despite the need still being there.³²
21. We are also concerned that people with NRPF are facing barriers in accessing the support that has been promised. Just Fair’s Social Rights Alliance in the North East of England has been contacted by a number of organisations who work with people who have NRPF and who have had emergency housing requests turned down by local authorities due to their immigration status. This is corroborated by reports from other civil society advocacy groups including NACCOM, Project 17, Migrants Rights Net, Asylum Matters, and the Public Interest Law Centre.³³

Healthcare

22. Any restriction in access to healthcare will undermine efforts to control the COVID-19 pandemic. Civil society groups including Just Fair have written to the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care asking them to suspend the National Health Service (Charges to Overseas Visitors) Regulations 2015 and 2017 and all associated immigration checks and data sharing.³⁴
23. The UK has set an example by subscribing to a number of human rights treaties that protect the right to health. In particular, Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), ratified by the UK in 1976. The rights contained in the ICESCR “apply to everyone including non-nationals, such as

refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, migrant workers and victims of international trafficking, regardless of legal status and documentation.”³⁵

24. Whilst we welcome that treatment and testing for COVID-19 is on the list of conditions exempt from charge meaning that no one will have to pay for this regardless of their immigration status, we are concerned that there are still patients who are avoiding care³⁶ because they are worried they will be charged.³⁷ As it stands if a patient is liable then they will have to pay for any care that is unrelated to the treatment for COVID-19 and is not exempt from charge. If a person tests negative for COVID-19 but still require treatment, they will be charged for any care provided after the negative test result.

Access to education

25. Treated as international students, asylum seekers are usually unable to study at university in the UK due to the high tuition fees that accompany learning and transport costs. A number of universities across the UK have begun to offer Sanctuary Scholarships, where tuition fees are waived for successful asylum seeker applicants. In some cases, a grant towards learning and/or housing costs is also provided. These scholarships make it possible for more adults to have their right to education realised in the UK.
26. During the Coronavirus lock-down, all university learning has moved online, with students needing to access courses using their own laptops and home internet. For many vulnerable students this has been difficult, and it has been a particular challenge for Sanctuary Scholars. Given only £5.39 per day (£37.75 per week) to live on by the Government, home broadband packages and substantial phone data are a luxury that most asylum seekers cannot afford. Without access to internet or their own laptops, these students are unable to continue their studies, putting themselves at risk of missing exams or failing assignments.
27. One Sanctuary Scholar in the North East told us that “*Being a Sanctuary Scholar and an asylum seeker I have got many restrictions. I live on £37 a week, which restricts me to obtain my basic daily needs every day during the pandemic. All the study materials are online and to access online I need data. As I didn’t have the right to apply for the [university’s] hardship fund for the students it was quite hard for me to continue with my studies during COVID19 without the support from the university.*”
28. On 25th March 2020 our Just Fair North East manager, along with colleagues from Asylum Matters and City of Sanctuary, wrote to universities in the region offering Sanctuary Scholarships to asylum seekers about what support these students need during the Coronavirus pandemic.³⁸ As a result, Northumbria University has contacted all of their Sanctuary Scholars, and have provided financial support for students to buy internet dongles and increase their phone data. Teesside University has said they will contact all Sanctuary Scholars to provide support according to their individual needs. But there is no guarantee that this is happening elsewhere in the country.

If there have been specific impacts on people due to them having a protected characteristic

29. We have seen from our research that there have been specific impacts of COVID-19 on people due to them having a protected characteristic. As we have listed above, people with protected characteristics are often at an increased risk of experiencing poverty, health inequalities, and may even have limited access to support.
30. We have also noticed a compounding impacts of having multiple protected characteristics that can lead to an individual experiencing increased discrimination.

Disability

31. In paragraphs 10,11, 12, and 13 we have touched upon how disabled people are at an increased risk of living in poverty and therefore may face increased difficulties in financially coping. There are additional issues that disabled people face due to COVID-19 that are of concern to us and are having an implication on people's human rights. Just Fair is a supporter of the statement on the rights of disabled people and COVID-19 and the asks included within it.³⁹
32. In International Human Rights Law it is clear that disabled people have the right to the 'highest attainable standard of health without discrimination on the basis of disability'.⁴⁰ The rights of disabled people are additionally set out in a number of treaties including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Human Rights Act (1998), the Mental Capacity Act (2005), United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), and the Equality Act (2010).
33. Colleagues from across the sector have been reporting that disabled people and their family carers are feeling pressured into agreeing to Do Not Resuscitate notices, or to not access healthcare support if they fall ill without the expressed wishes of the disabled person and their family being listened to.⁴¹
34. Changes to the Care Act 2014 that are introduced by the Coronavirus Bill 2020 must not have an impact upon disabled people's access to the adult social care they need. Organisations such as the Glasgow Disability Alliance are already reporting that services are being removed from disabled adults, in Glasgow alone adult social care was removed with no notice from 1,600 people in mid-March.⁴²
35. People providing adult social care also need to have access to sufficient Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in order to keep themselves and the disabled people they support safe.⁴³ PPE should also be available for those who are providing unpaid care work to family members, friends, or community members.⁴⁴
36. All Government and NHS guidance about COVID-19 needs to be made available in formats that are accessible to disabled people, including for those who have visual and hearing impairments as well as formats such as Easy Read. All information provided should follow the Accessible Information Standard and online information should be made compatible with software such as magnifying software and screen readers.⁴⁵
37. The digital divide is a key concern for disabled adults and other groups including older adults and those on low incomes. Disabled people make up a large proportion of adult non internet users meaning they will be disproportionately face difficulties in accessing information, following online schooling, working from home, and

purchasing groceries online.⁴⁶ According to a recent survey by the Glasgow Disability Alliance, only 37% of their members have home broadband, and for those who do have it they may lack the skills or confidence to use the internet. There needs to be support from Government to get those who want to access services digitally online, as well as information provided in alternative non-digital formats, in particular information on how to access support such as repeat prescriptions.

Race

38. As we have shown in paragraphs 10, 11, 12, 13, and 15 people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (BME) are disproportionately impacted by poverty both before the pandemic as well as job and income loss occurring due to the pandemic. We have also shown in paragraph 18 how the immigration condition NRPF, that disproportionately impacts those who from BME communities is having an impact on people's ability to cope with the economic and social changes brought about by COVID-19. We have also shown in paragraphs 22 to 24 the consequences on the right to health of migrants, including BME migrants of NHS charging regulations and data sharing.
39. The Runnymede Trust has found that "the multidimensional social and economic inequalities experienced by ethnic minority people, including racism, make a substantial contribution to ethnic inequalities in health."⁴⁷ From preliminary data, it would appear that in the UK 35% of patients in intensive care in the study sample were BME, this is nearly triple the 13% proportion that BME groups represent in the UK as a whole.⁴⁸ A disproportionate number of BME healthcare workers have died from COVID-19. On the 20th April 75% of healthcare workers that had passed away due to COVID-19 were BME despite them representing only 40% of the workforce.⁴⁹
40. Leilani Farha, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, has stated that "housing is the frontline defence against COVID-19".⁵⁰ Overcrowded housing is a particular concern for BME communities. For example, 30% of Bangladeshi households live in overcrowded households compared to 2% of the white British population.⁵¹ Research has found that overcrowded households leads people to having a heightened risk of catching COVID-19 as self-isolation is much more difficult, this is of particular concern for multigenerational households.⁵²

Age

41. Studies suggest that older people are at a particular risk of the disease and therefore need to follow a number of precautions in order to keep safe. They may also need additional support in getting food, medications and other essentials during this period.⁵³
42. The Government should be developing solutions to enable this population to stay in touch with family members and friends to combat loneliness and isolation especially as this age group is particularly impacted by the digital divide.⁵⁴
43. Age should not be a barrier in accessing appropriate treatment either for COVID-19 or for other conditions. The IFS suggest that those who will be most impacted by disruptions to non-COVID-19 related care will be those who are older or who are less affluent as they are the population groups that are most likely to have elective care.⁵⁵

44. The suspension of most of the duties contained in the Care Act 2014 (CA 2014) during the crisis are of concern due to the impact this may have on the quality of life of an individual as well as their health. Many adults with care needs will now find themselves without the support that they need.⁵⁶ A study undertaken before COVID-19 found that reductions in the level of adult social care provided to a person in their own home led to an increase of older people needing to use A&E to receive treatment.⁵⁷
45. Pensioners are normally at a lower risk of economic household food insecurity than other groups, however at the moment those who are within this age group and are isolating are reporting higher levels of household food insecurity than was present before COVID-19 due to them facing difficulty in accessing food.⁵⁸

Women

46. We have touched in paragraphs 10, 11, 12, and 13 on how women are disproportionately impacted by poverty, in paragraph 15 on how women have been impacted by job loss due to COVID-19.
47. There is growing evidence from a number of countries including the UK that the lockdown that is in place to slow the spread of COVID-19 is increasing instances of Violence Against Women and Girls.⁵⁹ Of course, COVID-19 is not causing the abuse but it is causing women to be confined with their abusers and blocking some routes to safety. Migrant women are particularly vulnerable to domestic abuse and sexual violence, and due to their lack of access to the welfare support system they are often forced to make the choice between staying with their perpetrator and destitution.⁶⁰ A persons immigration status should never be a barrier in them accessing help.
48. Women represent the majority of health and care workers. Of the 3,200,000 workers in all 'high risk' roles, 77% are women and over a million of these workers are paid below 60% median wages.⁶¹
49. Black and Minority Ethnic , disabled, low-income women and single mothers will be particularly affected by a gender-insensitive response to this crisis as their economic position is more disadvantaged and in some cases exposure to contagion is likely to be greater.⁶²

What needs to change or improve, which could be acted on in three weeks' time

50. Remove the No Recourse to Public Funds condition.
51. Suspend the National Health Service (Charges to Overseas Visitors) Regulations 2015 and 2017 and all associated immigration checks and data sharing.
52. Uplift child benefit and remove the two-child limit so that this benefit covers the actual cost of raising a child.
53. Make an immediate £20 a week increase to disability benefits (ESA, PIP) in line with the emergency increases to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits.
54. Initiate an immediate increase of £20 per week to section 98, section 95 and section 4 asylum support for the next 12 months in the first instance, in line with the increase in

Universal Credit. Section 4 support be accessible in cash in order to allow for greater flexibility during this period.

55. Make Universal Credit advance payments non-repayable grants.
56. Make information on COVID 19 accessible to all people, including but not limited to through Easy Read formats, braille, British Sign Language and in hard copy – to address digital exclusion.
57. Develop a framework to allow people with lived experience of issues as well as their advocates to feed into policy development in response to COVID-19.
58. Make available sufficient funding for Local Authorities to provide for social care.

What needs to change or improve, which could be acted on in 6 months' time.

59. Develop a process to incorporate socio-economic rights into UK domestic legislation so as to continue to improve protections for all people but in particular those with protected characteristics.
60. In England and Northern Ireland enact Section One of the Equality Act 2010 that would make Local Authorities have due regard to the impact of their decision making on socio-economic inequalities. The same duty was introduced in Scotland in 2018 under the name 'Fairer Scotland Duty' and is scheduled to be introduced in Wales in September 2020.

May 2020

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