# Submission from Dr Ruth Patrick, University of York to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and extreme poverty

## Background to my research

Over the past ten years, I have been researching the lived experiences of poverty and welfare reform in the UK[[1]](#footnote-1). Specifically, I have followed a small group of individuals as they live with and experience repeat changes to their benefits. This research produces rich, detailed evidence of the consequences of ‘welfare reform’ and the hardship, stigma and difficulties faced by people living in poverty in the UK today.

At the same time, my research activities have focused around effort to ensure that those with the expertise that comes with experience on poverty (‘experts by experience’) is better incorporated into policy making and policy debates. This has included joint work with groups of experts by experience, such as the Dole Animators, Thrive Teesside and ATD Fourth World, and the creation of participatory outputs which detail the viewpoints and experiences of people living in poverty.

These outputs include the Dole Animators [film](http://www.doleanimators.org/) and work developed by the [Poverty 2 Security group](http://www.poverty2security.org/), who are seeking to develop solutions to poverty grounded in their own expertise. This group have produced visual blueprints of what would make a real difference to solving poverty in the UK, and are continuing their work this year to try and ensure that the voices of people in poverty are better heard, represented and acted upon. Here, the Poverty 2 Security group are particularly interested in calling on the government to introduce a legal socio-economic duty, such that in passing a new law there is a duty to consider how it impacts upon different socio-economic groups (mirroring legislation that exists for equality groups).

Key areas of reflection of relevance to the UN rapporteur’s visit to the UK are included below.

## A. General:

### 6. Which areas of the UK should the rapporteur visit?

It is vitally important that the rapporteur visits all four countries of the UK in order to see how poverty is being experienced across different places, and in different administrations. Here, it will be particularly valuable to visit Scotland, and to learn from and hear about the distinctive approach to social security (which is embedded in a human’s right approach) being taken by the Scottish Government.[[2]](#footnote-2)

### 7. Which individuals and organisations should the rapporteur meet with?

During the visit, it will be vital for the rapporteur to take time to meet with, and hear from individuals with the expertise that comes with experience on poverty. Here, there are a number of groups that he might want to engage with but these include: The Poverty 2 Security group (which consists of ATD Fourth World, Dole Animators, and Thrive Teesside); local, grassroots organisations such as the Hope Rising Action Group (a group of women based in Bradford who have come together to challenge what they see as the social injustices caused by welfare reform and its impact; and larger, national charities, which are working in close collaboration with people with direct experiences of poverty (such as Child Poverty Action Group, and Poverty Alliance in Scotland). There is also a new network being established of groups with direct experience of poverty who have come together to lobby for change (working title the LEAP (lived experiences of poverty) Collective), and this would be a great network to try and link up with during the visit.[[3]](#footnote-3)

## B. Austerity

### 9. Have austerity measures implemented by the government taken adequate account of the impact on vulnerable groups and reflected efforts to minimize negative effects for those groups and individuals?

Austerity has been implemented with little regard to its disproportionate, negative impact on particular groups, and its uneven implementation (groups such as the Women’s Budget Group have documented its disproportionate impact on women). There should be particular concern about the ways in which austerity and recent welfare reforms (most notably the Household Benefits Cap, and the two-child limit) sever the link between needs and entitlement, and will see the higher risk of poverty for larger families rise further still (an area, where there is a pressing need for further research).

### 10. What have the effects of austerity been on poverty (and inequality) levels in the United Kingdom in the last decade?

In tracking the impact of austerity on poverty ‘levels’, it is important to also seek to track and engage with how it has affected individuals’ ‘experiences’, and their relationships with social security officials. In my own research, individuals report how they have experienced growing shame and stigma due to the negative rhetoric associated with ‘welfare dependency’, and the extent to which they experience de-humanising and dis-respectful treatment in their encounters at the Job Centre Plus or on welfare-to-work programmes.

My own research – by following individuals over time – was able to explore and track the cumulative impact of poverty and benefit changes on people’s lives. This showed how individuals often found it harder to cope with each successive round of welfare reform, and how an initially resilient response so often became difficult to sustain. It also illustrated how increased conditionality and sanctions could push people further and deeper into poverty. Single parent Chloe reflected on how hard her life had become:

*We’re paupers, we’re so poor. It’s like we’re living in – you know when you see all those adverts – please feed our children – feed my bloody children.[[4]](#footnote-4)*

## C Universal Credit

In examining the impact of Universal Credit on poverty levels, it is vital also to explore the impact of decisions to pay the benefit monthly, and to pay it to one person in the household. There are real concerns about the impact of these decisions, decisions which seem to be made with little regard for the realities of people’s lives, and the increased hardship that these decisions may cause.

Further points

Not included among the questions asked, but I think important to consider, is the broader climate and context in which poverty is experienced in the UK and – in particular – the often very punitive and demeaning rhetoric which is employed by politicians to discuss (and most often critique) the lives of people living in poverty. This has been evident in statements by politicians, and in justifications for each round of welfare reform.

What is also important to note (and to perhaps consider in visiting the UK) is the impact of the spread of what some term ‘Poverty Porn’, television programmes that purport to show the reality of life on benefits[[5]](#footnote-5). These television shows (which are incidentally very popular) undermine popular support for social security provision, and continue to create an environment where people in receipt of out-of-work benefits are subject to stigma, shame and hostility. It is important – then – to attend to the relational as well as the material – consequences and experiences of poverty in the UK today.

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1. The findings of my research can be found in the following: Patrick, R. (2017), *For whose benefit? The Everyday Realities of welfare reform*. Bristol: Policy Press; Patrick, R. (2014), *Working on Welfare: Findings from a Qualitative Longitudinal Study Into the Lived Experiences of Welfare Reform in the UK*, Journal of Social Policy, 43(4): 705-725; Patrick, R. (2016) *Living with and responding to the 'scrounger' narrative in the UK: exploring everyday strategies of acceptance, resistance and deflection*, Journal of Poverty & Social Justice, 24(3): 245-259. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/may/07/treat-people-benefits-respect-scotland-social-security-law> for a background to the Scottish approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I am working with the network, and with ATD Fourth World, Dole Animators, Hope Rising Action Group and Thrive Teesside so could help with contact as needed. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/britains-social-insecurity-system-welfare-conditionality-and-its-impact-on-social-citizenship/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/for-whose-benefit/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)