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Professor Philip Alston
United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme
Poverty and Human Rights

By email

Our Ref: ZA37220

7 November 2018

Dear Professor Alston

I am writing regarding your inquiry into poverty in the United Kingdom and in particular the challenges facing so-called peripheral estates in large cities. This week you have been in Bristol, one of the wealthiest cities in the United Kingdom and the only one of the ten Core Cities which is a net contributor to the UK Treasury.

However, Bristol is also an unequal city and I am convinced that the actions of central government since 2010 have made this worse.

The constituency which I am proud to represent, Bristol South, has the highest number of social security claimants in the city, the poorest health outcomes and the lowest educational attainment. The southern part of my constituency also suffers from extremely poor transport links to the rest of the city and higher crime than most areas.

Thousands of people depend on national or local government for financial and other support, support which has been dramatically reduced since 2010. They have been hit disproportionately by the austerity imposed by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government 2010-15 and the Conservative government since 2015.

The electoral ward of Hartcliffe and Withywood is the most south-eastern part of the city where it meets the countryside of North Somerset. It contains five of the ten most deprived communities in Bristol as defined by the Bristol City Council Local Super Output Area (LSOAs) Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2015. Nearby Filwood ward has a further three of these ten most deprived LSOAs.

Two of the LSOAs in Hartcliffe & Withywood ward are in the most deprived 100 in all of England. More than half (50.1%) of children in the Whitchurch Lane area in Hartcliffe live in low income families compared to less than 0.5% in parts of Henleaze and Stoke Bishop. Hartcliffe & Withywood has the lowest life expectancy in Bristol for men and the third lowest for women. In other parts of Bristol both men and women can expect to live for 10 years longer than in Hartcliffe & Withywood.

Nearly six thousand working age adults in my constituency are unable to work due to ill health or disability and depend on financial support from the state through Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). Since 2010 there have been significant real terms reductions to ESA payments including the £30 a week cut to the work-related activity component and the ongoing benefit freeze announced in 2016. Many of those in the ESA Support Group will lose considerably when migrated to Universal Credit in the coming months as their entitlement to severe disability premiums is removed. In real terms they will be nearly £80 a week worse off.

Over 2,250 of the ESA claimant in my constituency live in the two wards of Hartcliffe & Withywood and Filwood, with over 1000 in the most deprived parts of Hartcliffe & Withywood. According to the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) produced by the NHS Bristol Clinical Commissioning Group these are the only two wards in Bristol identified as having a much worse proportion of the working age population experiencing limited day-to-day activities due to ill health or disability.

More than 2000 households in Hartcliffe & Withywood receive state support to help pay rent in the form of Housing Benefit which is calculated using Local Housing Allowance which was also frozen in 2016. Although there was a marginal change last year to recognise spiralling rental costs this means that many private sector tenants do not receive enough Housing Benefit to meet their rent, often falling into arrears.

The JSNA shows Hartcliffe & Withywood and Filwood wards have lower child birth weights than the rest of the city (2010-2014), which is strongly associated with special needs when a child reaches school age. Hartcliffe & Withywood has one of the highest hospital admission rates for childhood asthma and also the highest rate of excess weight in 4/5 year olds at 33% and in 10/11 year olds at 43%. Hartcliffe & Withywood ward has two of the ten most deprived food deserts in England as identified in the recently published Kellogg commissioned Social Market Foundation Report into the availability of affordable nutritious food.

Children in Hartcliffe & Withywood are the most likely to be identified as “in need” by Bristol City Council social services, a rate of 36 per 1000 population compared with zero in Clifton Down.

Over £70 million in central government grant funding will have been cut from Bristol City Council’s budget by 2020. This means that services for disabled children, public health and adult social services have all been reduced significantly. The Council has closed their Customer Service Point in Hartcliffe & Withywood and reduced levels of provision at Children’s Centres in the area. Youth services have been reduced by 30% and the Supporting People budget by 1.8 million. All of these are as a direct result of central government funding decisions.

Bristol City Council’s Education Indicators show that one in four children in Hartcliffe & Withywood have Special Educational Needs (SEN) which is the highest in Bristol, almost

40% receive free school meals and more than half are identified as deprived. Only Filwood ward has a poorer Attainment 8 average achievement score in Bristol. In 2017 only 39% of children in Hartcliffe & Withywood ward achieved the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics compared with 88% in Bishopston and Ashley Down ward.

Fewer 18 year olds from my constituency go to University than any other constituency in England. According to the Office for Students in one part of Hartcliffe & Withywood there is a higher education participation rate of 5.6% compared to a 100% rate in Clifton.

The educational challenges facing schools are therefore significant, however under the new schools funding formula introduced by central government all Primary Schools in Hartcliffe & Withywood lose out with cuts of up to 1.4% in their budgets.

The police force which serves Bristol and the wider area has also had their funding dramatically reduced by central government since 2010 resulting in 650 (19%) fewer police officers. Hartcliffe & Withywood suffers from the highest rate of domestic violence and hate crime in Bristol. Outside the city centre it is the ward with the fourth highest over crime rate. As a result more than 60% of local residents feel there is a problem with antisocial behaviour and nearly half think that crime has got worse in the past three years.

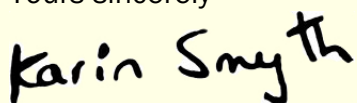
In this letter I have limited my comments to just some of the impacts of cuts to benefits, local government and schools funding on one ward of my constituency. Others I am sure will provide much more detail on the impact of austerity, in particular on women and disabled people in the United Kingdom. I could also have mentioned the impact of the bedroom tax, the benefit cap, the two child limit on tax credits and the introduction of Personal Independence Payment.

I could also have focused on the full roll out of Universal Credit which started in my constituency in June 2018. Already I am seeing genuine distress and hardship caused by delays in payment, inaccurate information to claimants or confusion over entitlement.

Despite all the challenges they face my constituents in Hartcliffe & Withywood remain incredibly resilient. The community consistently helps to support vulnerable neighbours, family and friends individually and through the outstanding local voluntary sector organisations. There is so much potential which could be realised with appropriate funding from government.

I hope that this letter is helpful

Yours sincerely



Karin Smyth
Labour MP for Bristol South

