British Politics and Policy at LSE: What would a post-COVID-19 social security system look like, and how might it be built? Now is the time to explore alternative ways forward

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*There is an urgent need to rethink not just the social security system but also who is involved in relevant policy discussions and decisions, argue **Jim Kaufman** and **Ruth Patrick**. They write that the temporary changes to the system introduced during the pandemic, and the debates they generated, offer an opportunity to push for this to be a more inclusive and expansive conversation.*

What would a progressive social security system look like, and how might it be built? These are neither new nor easy questions. But they are questions that have been given renewed urgency by the pandemic and its exposure of the flaws and inadequacies of the existing system. There is also the hope that the public mood on social security might have been shifted by the pandemic, with millions of new Universal Credit claimants experiencing a five-week wait for a first payment, and millions more seeing the possibility for state intervention on a massive scale through the furlough scheme. Britain has, in other words, witnessed the possibilities inherent within government intervention, when the political and public will are there.

As part of our major Covid Realities research programme, we're working directly with parents and carers on a low income to develop proposals for change. In virtual discussion groups, we explore policy changes that could make a material (and often relational) difference to experiences on the ground. This work isn't easy – participants often disagree, and it's hard weighing up aspirations against what is politically feasible – but it is essential.

Developing a vision for the future of social security in the UK is desperately needed if we are to channel talk of 'building back better' into positive change, and avoid regression to the increasingly residual and often punitive path charted by social security policy in recent decades. Yet, looking around, radical visions and proposals for a post-pandemic future on social security seem thin on the ground (with notable exceptions, like this from the Resolution Foundation and proposals from the Commission on Social Security).

Before the pandemic, it was widely understood that the social security system was no longer fit for purpose. In 2020, the reality of this situation became even more difficult to ignore. Wave after wave of 'welfare reform' and cuts to entitlement meant that the social security system entered the pandemic ill-equipped to provide effective support to families already in poverty and those pushed into it by COVID-19. The £20 uplift to Universal Credit, introduced in April 2020, and extended for a further six months in March 2021, was itself a tacit acceptance that we entered the pandemic with benefit levels inadequate to meet people's needs. As Caroline Rice, a participant in Covid Realities, put it:

> I'd like people to think about why it was necessary to introduce a £20 uplift at the start of covid. Surely this is an acknowledgement in itself that the support given to low-income households just isn't enough for them to live on.

As Caroline's comment suggests, policy developments during the pandemic itself would seem to offer some holds from which to advance a more progressive agenda for social security. If the £20 uplift represented a tacit acknowledgement that benefit levels were too low, then the furlough scheme implied that Universal Credit was not an appropriate vehicle for the delivery of actual social security, for which an entirely new system had to be invented. The temporary suspension of conditionality and work-related requirements was an unavoidable (but nonetheless ideologically exceptional) acknowledgement that unemployment is not a matter of personal preference.

Yet as it stands, none of these developments seem likely to result in enduring or systemic change. One problem of the current moment is where to begin when the existing system is patently inadequate, counterproductive to its stated aims, often brutal in delivery and harmful in its effects. In this context, an ameliorative reversal of a decade's worth of cuts is both vital and necessary yet also wholly inadequate. This is reflected in the experiences of Covid Realities participants for whom the £20 uplift has so often been incredibly welcome (for those who received it) and yet simultaneously failed to make nearly enough difference, given the extent of their poverty. This context would seem to demand something more radical.

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Recent years have witnessed a tumultuous period of reconfiguration in progressive politics, and this has pushed more radical ideas to the fore in debates about social security, notably around universal basic income (UBI) and a shorter working week. Yet, for many, and after such a long period of residualisation, such proposals can lack credibility. There is also a tendency to treat big policy ideas like UBI as magic bullets addressing all manner of needs and problems. Nonetheless, the desire for a radical departure is understandable, and the renewed ambition for change we have seen recently is very welcome. Yet between keeping the £20 uplift and something like UBI there is a wide and diverse range of possibilities.

One useful way of progressing this is to perhaps think of keeping the £20 uplift as part of a longer-term and more ambitious reconfiguration of social security. Keeping and indeed extending the £20 uplift is vital, and campaigners are right to invest energy in this call, but we need to position it as part of a broader project to make the case for effective, poverty-preventing social security as a core element of any 'good' society.

But, perhaps most fundamentally, we need to train our reforming lens on who is involved in these policy discussions, debates, and decisions. We need to push for this to be an inclusive and expansive conversation, that includes a diverse range of actors, and recognises and works with those with the expertise of experience. Here, then, calls for a new post-COVID-19 Beveridge report can feel like a step backwards, a reliance on a narrow set of elite voices, rather than the recognition that more imaginative and creative mechanisms are needed to develop a movement for social change.

We need to work with different forms of expertise in exploring post-pandemic possibilities, creating space for radical and ambitious proposals from those with direct experiences of the social security system to be explored in conversation with the often piecemeal but still potentially significant proposals of policymakers. There is especially important work to be done here in recognising and working with the diverse expertise that different actors hold, disrupting power differentials and utilising a full range of expertise to work for change. This work needs to be happening now. With the (temporary) changes to social security policy, and wider debates about the suitable role for government intervention (e.g. in providing free school meals to children), it seems like a space has opened in which alternative visions for social security might be advanced. This is a space that might rapidly close, however, and that gives urgency to efforts to explore and articulate alternative ways forward.

Through Covid Realities, we are starting to have these conversations, discussing participants' different views and priorities for the social security system after COVID-19. Some are enthusiastic about UBI. Almost everyone wants to see the £20 uplift kept and extended to legacy claimants and those subject to the Benefit Cap. But they also wish to see a broader set of changes around the way that social security is conceptualised and achieved, from childcare and school to the workplace. At the same time, they wish to be valued for their work and roles outside the paid labour market Alongside benefit increases, participants in Covid Realities also want to see changes in the way they are viewed and treated – by the benefit system, but also by wider society. They want society to recognise the worth and common humanity of those on benefits – a modest plea, but one which recent decades of policymaking have rendered depressingly ambitious. Catherine set out her hopes for the future of social security:

> We're asking for a fundamental change in the way we are seen and treated within the system. We want to be respected enough to not have to prove ourselves at every single turn…We want to be met with dignity and respect, as equals. Remove the stereotypes and talk to us as equals. Not scroungers. Not lay-abouts. Not uneducated. But as human beings, just like you, trying to do the best for our families, just like you.

It beholds us all to work together to start to make Catherine's vision a reality.

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