

Work, Pensions and Equality | Annual Report

Membership 2016/17

Shadow Cabinet

Debbie Abrahams MP*

Dawn Butler MP

Sarah Champion MP

Alex Cunningham MP

NEC

Diana Holland*

Ann Black

Shabana Mahmood MP

Rhea Wolfson

CLPs and Regions

Chris Bloore

Martyn Cook

Gerard Coyne

Dawn Elliott

Jack Falkingham

Mary Foy

George Norman

Jen Smith

Anne Snelgrove

Agnes Tolmie

Carl Webb

Affiliates

David Allan

Tom Burke

Ruth George MP†¹

Susan Matthews

Liz Snape

Steve Turner

Elected Reps

Steve Bullock

Clare Moody MEP

Jess Phillips MP

Glenys Thornton

* Co-convenor

†¹ Replaced

Policy Development

The Work, Pensions and Equality Policy Commission was constituted following Annual Conference 2016. A newly-convened Commission, it covers the Department for Work and Pensions and the Government Equalities Office, areas that were previously under the remit of the Economy Policy Commission and the Home Affairs Policy Commission respectively.

At Annual Conference 2016, an Equalities, Civil Society and Political Reform seminar was held covering equalities issues and an Economy policy seminar was held covering issues relating to social security and pensions. Both policy seminars were very well attended and a large number of delegates contributed to wide-ranging discussions on how Labour can alleviate poverty and inequality for all people and communities while creating a fair and dignified system of social security.

In November 2016, the National Policy Forum met at Loughborough University to discuss the priorities for each Policy Commission. Representatives identified tackling poverty and inequality, social security and pensions for all and creating a more equal society as the three priority areas for the Work, Pensions and Equality Policy Commission. The Commission then met for the first time in January 2017.

At the first meeting in January, Labour's Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary Debbie Abrahams MP led a discussion on Labour's social security, including pension, pledges. On pensions, the Commission discussed policies to protect pensioner incomes that later featured heavily during the General Election campaign. The Commission also discussed Labour's plans to address the plight of "WASPI (Women against State Pension Inequality) women" and other important pensions issues.

Debbie Abrahams also gave an update on Labour's Disability Equality Roadshow. Since launching in November 2016, the Roadshow has helped to develop policies to fight discrimination and promote disability equality through engagement with deaf and disabled people and their carers. A number of meetings had already taken place since its launch and the Commission was updated on the issues that were raised during those meetings, particularly those around the Conservative

Government's Work Capability Assessments and sanctions regime.

Debbie Abrahams referred to the Self-employment Commission also launched in November which was examining the issues facing the growing self-employment workforce, including lack of sickness protection, maternity support and workplace pensions, and was a joint initiative with the Shadow BEIS and Treasury teams.

Commission members raised a number of issues, including the importance of developing policies that will improve the lives of young people across the country. Members also discussed submissions that had been received, including on the idea of a universal basic income and on Universal Credit. It was noted that Universal Credit in its current form has many practical design flaws that are impacting negatively on low-paid workers, for example cuts to work allowances and the problems posed by the six-week waiting period. The Commission also discussed relevant motions from Annual Conference 2016 and the Leader's statement on "What Labour Stands For".

Labour's Shadow Minister for Diverse Communities, Dawn Butler MP, reported on equalities issues, including representation in parliament and public life and the Government's failure to properly assess the impact its policies are having on women and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. She highlighted the fact that Asian and African women are being hit hard by the Government's cuts to social security and that, since employment tribunal fees were introduced, the number of anti-discrimination cases for all forms for discrimination had fallen dramatically.

Between the Policy Commission's first and second meetings, a Version One consultation document was drafted based on the three priority areas agreed at the 2016 National Policy Forum meeting. The draft consultation document was circulated to all members by email and members contributed their thoughts and suggested changes in advance of the second meeting in February.

At the Commission's second meeting, the Version One consultation document was discussed alongside submissions that had been received since



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the previous meeting. Labour's Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities, Sarah Champion MP, updated the Commission on Labour's commitment to gender-proof all policies and legislation to ensure that women are not unfairly affected by policy changes. She also raised issues around maternity discrimination and LGBT rights.

Debbie Abrahams MP gave an update on the Government's plans to overturn a court decision that would have extended Personal Independence Payments (PIP) to 160,000 disabled people. The Government's changes to PIP have been an issue of vital importance to members across the country. The Commission discussed these changes in light of other cuts to support for disabled people that the Government has already brought in since 2010, including most recently cuts to the Work-Related Activity Component of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).

Changes to the consultation document were made to reflect the submissions that had been received and the discussions that Commission members had held. Subsequently, in March, the consultation was launched and members, experts, organisations and other stakeholders were invited to submit evidence to the consultation either in writing, via the Labour Party Policy Forum website or through attending a future Policy Commission meeting.

In March, six experts joined a well-attended meeting of the Policy Commission to give detailed evidence in their respective fields and to answer questions from Commission members. Representatives from the Child Poverty Action Group, the Disability Benefits Consortium, the Women's Budget Group, the Runnymede Trust and the Fawcett Society all contributed and gave evidence to the Commission during this session.

In the March meeting, the Commission discussed a wide range of issues relating to social security and equalities. The Child Poverty Action Group emphasised that child poverty is "policy responsive", stressing that it had risen under the Conservative Government having previously fallen under the last Labour Government. The Commission heard evidence that Universal Credit in its current form risks exacerbating already high levels of child poverty.

Members also heard evidence from the Disability Benefits Consortium around the damaging impact that cuts to social security are having on disabled people, as well as warnings of cuts already legislated for but which have not yet taken effect. Those included reductions in support for sick and disabled people in the Work-Related Activity Group of Employment and Support Allowance and changes to Personal Independence Payments. A member of the Commission also raised the importance of Access to Work in supporting disabled people.

Representatives from the Fawcett Society, the Runnymede Trust and the Women's Budget Group gave evidence on gender and racial inequalities in society including in terms of pay, occupation as well as in education, health and housing. The Commission discussed Labour's proud record of championing equality and of bringing about cultural change to tackle inequality and discrimination in all its forms. A member of the Commission raised the important role of workplace union equality representatives and the need for them to have the same rights as other union representatives as part of the Equality Act.

A future evidence session was intended to be held outside of London in April 2017. However, the calling of an early General Election meant the session was postponed and that policy development was accelerated in order to feed the views of members and stakeholders into Labour's manifesto process. Commission members remain keen to hold meetings across the country.

Labour's manifesto

Issues discussed during meetings of the Work, Pensions and Equality Policy Commission and on a conference call held during the expedited manifesto process were integral to the General Election campaign and to Labour's transformative manifesto, 'For the Many, Not the Few'.

Two distinct mini-manifestos published during the General Election campaign – one on disabilities and one on race and faith – as well as a comprehensive twenty-point plan on workers' rights reflected many of the priority areas that had been discussed during meetings of the Policy

Commission, as well as echoing many of the submissions and evidence the Commission had received.

Strengthening workers' rights

The announcement of a twenty-point plan to strengthen rights at work made during the General Election campaign reflected many of the discussions, submissions and evidence that the Policy Commission has focussed on. In particular, policies around low pay, rights for union equality representatives, gender pay auditing, increased paternity leave and pay, protection from third party harassment and maternity discrimination, banning zero-hours contracts and abolishing employment tribunal fees had been widely prioritised by the Commission and members across the country.

Improving social security

Labour's manifesto made firm commitments on improving social security in priority areas that had been discussed during meetings of the Policy Commission. Among others, the manifesto committed two billion pounds a year towards fixing Universal Credit to ensure that work always pays and other elements of social security policy. It also committed to scrapping the Bedroom Tax, ESA WRAG cuts and repealing the new PIP regulations, to doubling maternity pay, to reinstating housing support for 18-21 year olds, to raising Carer's Allowance, to reversing cuts to bereavement benefits and to scrapping the work capability and PIP assessments as well as the sanctions regime.

Dignity for pensioners

In stark contrast to the Conservative manifesto, Labour pledged to fully support older people to ensure security and dignity for everyone in retirement. Pledges made in the manifesto included a commitment to keep the Triple Lock on state pensions for the lifetime of the parliament, and to protect pensioner incomes by keeping free bus passes and universal Winter Fuel Payments.

The manifesto made a commitment to reject further increases to the State Pension age. In contrast, the Government has announced it will raise the State Pension age to 68 for people born between 1970 and 1978. Labour also committed to extending transitional protections to women affected by the Government's speeding up of

increases to the State Pension age. This is an issue of vital importance to members across the country, many of whom have supported the "Women against State Pension Inequality (WASPI)" campaign to bring justice to women born in the 1950s.

Tackling child poverty

The Policy Commission has received many submissions from members concerned about growing levels of child poverty under the Conservative Government. Those concerns were reiterated by the Child Poverty Action Group who gave evidence to the Commission in the March meeting. Labour's manifesto addressed those concerns by committing to a comprehensive Child Poverty Strategy in order to address the fact that, under the Conservative Government, there are now four million children growing up in poverty and the Institute for Fiscal Studies has forecast child poverty rising above five million.

Progressing women's rights

The manifesto committed Labour to gender-audit all policy and legislation for its impact on women. That has become especially important because, as the Policy Commission heard from both the Fawcett Society and the Women's Budget Group, cuts introduced by the Conservative and Coalition Governments since 2010 continue to land most heavily on women.

The manifesto also committed Labour to ensuring a woman's right to choose a safe, legal abortion by pledging to work with the Northern Ireland Assembly to extend the right to women in Northern Ireland. Labour's manifesto also committed to tackling domestic and sexual violence, addressing the gender pay gap and extending the time period for applying for maternity discrimination to an employment tribunal from three to six months.

LGBT equality

Labour's manifesto sought to build on Labour's proud record of championing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) equality. It committed to reforming the Gender Recognition Act and the Equality Act to ensure the law protects Transgender people and it committed to bringing the law on LGBT hate crimes into line with hate crimes based on race and faith.

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Reflecting a number of submissions received by the Commission, it also pledged to tackle the bullying of LGBT young people and to ensure NHS England completes the trial programme to provide PrEP as quickly as possible, and fully roll out the treatment to high-risk groups to help reduce HIV infection.

Race and Faith manifesto

During the General Election campaign, Labour launched its Race and Faith manifesto, which outlined Labour's commitment to racial equality. It set out wide-ranging policies to unlock the potential of BAME communities across the country, including the introduction of equal pay audits, a policy that the Runnymede Trust discussed in detail when giving evidence to the Policy Commission in March.

The distinct manifesto also committed to abolishing employment tribunal fees, which are disproportionately affecting BAME workers, to enhancing the powers and functions of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, to boosting the incomes of BAME communities by introducing a Real Living Wage of £10 an hour by 2020 and to improving BAME representation across public life.

A manifesto with and for disabled people

In the run-up to the General Election, Labour launched "Nothing about You, Without You", Labour's manifesto with and for disabled people, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD). Fundamentally it was underpinned by Labour's commitment to a social model of disability and agreed to enshrine the UN CRPD into UK law. It outlined policies to improve the lives of disabled people and reflected many of the issues discussed by, and the submissions received by, the Work, Pensions and Equality Policy Commission.

The manifesto included commitments to reverse the Conservatives' cuts to Employment and Support Allowance and to Personal Independence Payments as well as pledging to scrap Work Capability Assessments and replace them with personalised, holistic assessments. This is an issue of particular importance to members, reflected by the many submissions the Policy Commission has received on this matter over the course of the last year.

Current issues

Tackling poverty and inequality

Throughout the year, the Commission has received a large number of submissions expressing great concern at the growing levels of poverty and inequality under the Conservative Government. Many have noted that child poverty has now reached four million under the Conservatives and the number of people living below a minimum income standard has grown to 19 million. Meanwhile, more people are relying on foodbanks because of low pay and inadequate support.

Labour's manifesto included policies to set those trends in reverse including the introduction of a Real Living Wage of £10 an hour by 2020 and a comprehensive Child Poverty Strategy. With the cost of living now rising faster than wages, the Commission will continue to focus attention on living standards, scrutinising the impact that the Government's policies are having on low- and middle-income families. Chief among those concerns are job security, in-work support and wages. The Commission will continue to seek evidence on the Government's rowing back on its commitments regarding the levels of the National Living Wage as well as the impact its exclusion on under-25s is having on young people.

The Commission will also continue to pay close attention to the roll out and provision of Universal Credit, including elements of its design, for example the six week waiting period, reduced work allowances and the level of the second earner disregard, which all risk damaging the living standards of working families. The Commission believes that strengthening workers' rights is essential to tackling poverty and inequality and members will continue to prioritise policies that improve employment rights, for example banning zero-hours contracts, an issue on which the Commission has received many submissions.

Social security and pensions for all

The Commission has received a large number of submissions regarding social security and pensions. During the election, the Conservatives came forward with a manifesto which included plans to end the Triple Lock on state pensions and to means-test Winter Fuel Payments. Labour opposed these unfair plans, and pledged to

maintain both the Triple Lock and universal Winter Fuel Payments in our manifesto. The Commission welcomes this, and notes that, in the face of Labour pressure, the Tories have, to date, been forced to backtrack on their plans.

However, the Conservative manifesto also included plans to raise the State Pension age. Since the General Election, the Government has announced that it plans to raise the State Pension age to 68 for people born between 1970 and 1978, meaning millions of people will work longer before retirement. Labour's manifesto rejected any increases to the State Pension age and committed to a review of a flexible retirement policy.

Similarly, Labour is committed to exploring options for further transitional protections for women affected by the speeding up of the State Pension age over and above plans announced to extend Pension Credit. The Commission will work to assist policy development in these areas, which are of crucial importance to members all across the country.

While the Government's cuts to social security have already been legislated for, the effect of many are only just beginning to be felt. The impact of the Government's cuts to Employment and Support Allowance, to Personal Independence Payments, to the two child limit on tax credits, to bereavement benefits and to housing support for 18-21 year olds will only start to be felt over the coming months and years.

The Commission is concerned about the impact these cuts will have on sick and disabled people, on working families, on bereaved families and on young people. Members of the Commission will continue to closely scrutinise the effect of these cuts, seeking evidence from those affected and from organisations with expertise in these areas while developing alternative policies.

Members of the Commission will also pay close attention to the Conservatives' household benefit cap, which, having been lowered in the 2016 Welfare Reform and Work Act, is beginning to impact on a greater number of families all across the country. The Commission also notes the recent High Court judgment, which found that the household benefit cap unlawfully discriminates

against single parents with children aged two or under, and members will carefully scrutinise the Government's response to the High Court ruling. Labour has pledged to uphold the High Court judgment.

The Commission has received evidence showing that, as inflation rises, the Government's restrictions on public sector pay and on the uprating of social security payments are beginning to unfairly penalise families across the country. The Commission notes evidence on the four year freeze on working-age benefits from the Resolution Foundation and the Institute for Fiscal Studies and Commission members will continue to address the impact the four-year freeze is having on families.

Creating a more equal society

Throughout the year, the Commission has received many submissions from members expressing concern that the Conservatives are making society less equal through their cuts in public spending and failure to act on key issues relating to equalities.

The Commission will continue to focus on the equalities impact of all of the Government's policies, which has become even more important given the disproportionate impact cuts are having on women and BAME communities and also because the Government continually fails to publish comprehensive equality impact assessments.

Evidence received by the Commission shows that 86 per cent of the money being raised from the Government's changes to tax and social security is coming from women's pockets. Women are bearing the brunt of the Conservatives' policy to limit tax credits to two children as well as the Government's so-called "Rape Clause", which requires rape victims to justify themselves in order to keep their eligibility for tax credits. At the same time the Government is failing to address the gender pay gap, which still stands at over 18 per cent and it is failing to tackle high levels of maternity discrimination.

Similarly, BAME communities are being disproportionately affected by the Government's cuts to social security as well as by the Conservatives' failure to improve living standards

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and the introduction of employment tribunal fees. The Commission recognises the extent to which BAME communities are being unfairly affected and will continue to scrutinise the impact Government policy is having as well as building evidence to develop alternative policies that will improve the lives of BAME people.

The Commission notes recent evidence from the Office for National Statistics that Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people say they experience a lower quality of life together with GI/Goldsmiths' evidence relating to quality of life for trans and gender non-conforming adults. The Commission will continue to seek evidence and develop policies that strengthen LGBT rights, champion LGBT equality and improve LGBT people's quality of life. This includes continuing to build on policies outlined in Labour's manifesto in order to address the current issues facing LGBT people.

The Commission also notes that the Government has been forced into guaranteeing funding to ensure that women from Northern Ireland will no longer have to pay for abortions when using the NHS. This funding will be made available through the Government Equalities Office and the Commission will closely scrutinise the progress that is made in respect of this crucial support.

Submissions

Over the past year, the Work, Pensions and Equality Policy Commission has received submissions on the following subjects:

- Access to Work
- Anti-discrimination legislation
- Auto-enrolment
- Automation & job security
- Bedroom tax
- Benefit cap
- Bereavement support
- Carer's Allowance
- Changing legal gender
- Child tax allowance
- Collective bargaining rights
- Disability allowance
- Disability assessments
- Disability employment gap
- Disability in-work and in-to-work support
- Equality and Human Rights Commission
- Employment and Support Allowance
- Employment protection for terminally-ill patients
- Free bus passes
- Funeral poverty
- Gender neutral bathrooms
- Gender pay gap
- Health and safety executive
- Housing benefit
- In-work conditionality
- Job & pay security
- LGBT education in schools
- LGBT youth wellbeing
- Living standards
- Maternity discrimination
- Maternity leave rights
- Medical assessments by GPs for EDA, PIP and Universal Credit
- Minimum wage for under 25s
- National Living Wage
- Negative income tax
- New skilled work
- Overseas pensions
- Paternity pay
- Pension equality
- Pensioner poverty
- Pensions Act
- Personal Independence Payments
- Postcode-based discrimination
- Race inequality
- Reducing working hours
- Reforming tax credit system
- Retirement age
- Sanctions
- Social & employment rights at the heart of Brexit negotiations
- State Pension age
- Strengthening employees representation at work
- Triple Lock on state pensions
- Two child limit on tax credits
- Universal basic income
- Universal Credit
- "Women against State Pension Inequality" campaign
- Winter Fuel Payments
- Work Capability Assessments
- Workers' rights
- Zero-hours contracts