

## Last year the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights heard evidence from delegates at UoB Law School. His final report is now published.

On 6th November 2018, the University of Bristol Law School hosted a meeting with Professor Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, and eight organisations. This was his only meeting focussing specifically on extreme poverty in rural areas in the UK. A short (21 pages) final report on his mission to the UK has now been published.

**Here is a summary of the report:**

*"The Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, undertook a mission to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from 5 to 16 November 2018.*

*Although the United Kingdom is the world's fifth largest economy, one fifth of its population (14 million people) live in poverty, and 1.5 million of them experienced destitution in 2017. Policies of austerity introduced in 2010 continue largely unabated, despite the tragic social consequences. Close to 40 per cent of children are predicted to be living in poverty by 2021. Food banks have proliferated; homelessness and rough sleeping have increased greatly; tens of thousands of poor families must live in accommodation far from their schools, jobs and community networks; life expectancy is falling for certain groups; and the legal aid system has been decimated.*

*The social safety net has been badly damaged by drastic cuts to local authorities' budgets, which have eliminated many social services, reduced policing services, closed libraries in record numbers, shrunk community and youth centres and sold off public spaces and buildings. The bottom line is that much of the glue that has held British society together since the Second World War has been deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos. A booming economy, high employment and a budget surplus have not reversed austerity, a policy pursued more as an ideological than an economic agenda."*



3. The United Kingdom, the world's fifth largest economy, is a leading centre of global finance, boasts a "fundamentally strong" economy and currently enjoys record low levels of unemployment. But despite such prosperity, one fifth of its population (14 million people) live in poverty. Four million of those are more than 50 per cent below the poverty line<sup>3</sup> and 1.5 million experienced destitution in 2017, unable to afford basic essentials. Following drastic changes in government economic policy beginning in 2010, the two preceding decades of progress in tackling child and pensioner poverty have begun to unravel and poverty is again on the rise. Relative child poverty rates are expected to increase by 7 per cent between 2015 and 2021 and overall child poverty rates to reach close to 40 per cent. For almost one in every two children to be poor in twenty-first century Britain would not just be a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster rolled into one.

In the face of these problems, the Government has remained determinedly in a state of denial. While local authorities throughout England and Wales are outsourcing or abandoning services, and devolved authorities in Scotland and Northern Ireland are frantically trying to "mitigate" or counteract the worst features of the Government's policies, ministers insist that all is well and running according to plan.

Despite some reluctant policy tweaks, there has been a deeply ingrained resistance to change. The good news is that many of the problems could readily be solved if the Government were to listen to people experiencing poverty, the voluntary sector and local authorities, acknowledge their grievances and implement the recommendations below.

- (a) Introduce a single, multidimensional measure of poverty;
- (b) Systematically measure food security;
- (c) Reverse particularly regressive measures such as the benefit freeze, the two-child limit, the benefit cap and the reduction of the Housing Benefit, including for under-occupied social rented housing;
- (d) Restore local government funding needed to provide critical social protection and tackle poverty at the community level, and take varying needs of communities and differing tax bases into account in the ongoing Fair Funding Review;
- (e) Train Department staff to use more constructive and less punitive approaches to encouraging compliance;
- (f) Review and remedy the systematic disadvantage inflicted by current policies on women, as well as on children, persons with disabilities, older persons and ethnic minorities;