



Is Britain Fairer?

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The state of equality
and human rights 2018

Executive summary

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Advance pre-publication draft. This document will be finalised and published when it is laid before Parliament in accordance with section 12 of the Equality Act 2006.

Executive summary

Our report 'Is Britain Fairer? 2018' is the most comprehensive review of how we, as a nation, are performing on equality and human rights. Looking across all areas of life, including education, work, living standards, health, justice and security, and participation in society, it provides a complete picture of people's life chances in Britain today.



And while there has been some progress – such as improvements in educational attainment, involvement in politics and equality in the workplace – there are still serious challenges that must be addressed in respect of access to justice, hate crime and sexual harassment.

Child poverty has increased and the inequalities resulting from socio-economic disadvantage are seriously affecting many people's lives. Women are still not benefitting from equality in practice and there are increasingly large gaps between the experiences and outcomes of disabled people and some ethnic minorities and the population as a whole. The persistent disadvantages faced by certain groups raise significant concerns that some people are being forgotten or left behind.

All of this is set in a context of long-term reductions to public spending, spikes in hate crime, and ongoing uncertainty about the impact of leaving the European Union.

Why have we done this, and who is it for?

We have a statutory duty under the Equality Act 2006 to report to the UK Parliament on how far everyone in Britain is able to live free from discrimination and abuses of their human rights. Here we not only answer the question 'is Britain fairer?' since our last review in 2015, but we also provide clear recommendations for change. We want this report to set the agenda for policy-makers and influencers working in a range of sectors, and anyone interested in social progress in Britain.

'Is Britain Fairer? 2018' also provides us with a robust evidence base to inform our own priorities for the next three years, to be set out in our new Strategic Plan. We will work with governments, regulators, parliamentarians, public and private sector employers and non-governmental organisations to press for concerted action to implement our recommendations, and use our own unique powers to drive change where we can. In doing so, we will have a sharp focus on the most pressing issues, bringing the full range of our powers to bear in order to drive progress towards a more equal Britain before we report again. We want everyone to play their role so that, when we next ask the question 'is Britain fairer?' in 2021, things have improved significantly.

By 2021, Britain will have left the EU. This review therefore presents a last look at equality and human rights before Brexit happens, providing us with a benchmark against which to measure the effects of this important change on people's lives.

How have we measured change?

We have used our Measurement Framework to collect and analyse the most robust and relevant evidence, and monitor progress in a consistent way, allowing us to measure change over time. The Framework is made up of a series of 'indicators' – these enable us to assess the elements of life that are important to all of us, including being healthy, getting a good education, and having an adequate standard of living. We have looked at specific topics within each indicator, such as bullying at school, domestic violence and life expectancy. For each of these, we have gathered information on law, policy and people's lived experiences, using a range of qualitative and quantitative data, and breaking down the data by the 'protected characteristics' of the Equality Act 2010. We have not included research that was published after 31 May 2018, and very little data from before 2015.

What have we found?

Steps in the right direction

Overall, we have found some improvements in education, participation and work. More children who were previously underperforming at school are now achieving the required standards, and there are fewer disparities in university attendance between groups sharing some protected characteristics. There are more women, black and Pakistani people in employment, more people – including women – in higher pay occupations, and the gender pay gap is decreasing.

People are also getting more involved in politics, with more people voting in recent elections. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds are now able to vote in Scottish elections and this is also being considered in Wales. More public and private services are being provided digitally, and these are increasingly being used by disabled and older people, helping ensure easier access.

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Socio-economic disadvantage

The picture is still bleak for the living standards of Britain's most at-risk and 'forgotten' groups of people, who are in danger of becoming stuck in their current situation for years to come.

Poverty has changed little and for children it has increased; it is particularly prevalent among disabled people and for some ethnic minorities. In line with our 2015 report, UK-wide reforms to welfare and tax since 2010 continue to have a disproportionate impact on the poorest in society. These reforms are pulling more people into poverty, particularly disabled people, people from some ethnic minorities and women, weakening the safety net provided by social security that is vital to those unable to work, or stuck in low-paid or precarious work. Despite rising employment levels, work increasingly does not guarantee an adequate standard of living. Homelessness is also on the rise, putting more people in a precarious position and particularly affecting people from ethnic minorities, disabled people and other at-risk groups.

Socio-economic disadvantage has a knock-on effect across different areas of life, such as education and health. Despite improvements in school attainment for most children over the last few years, those from lower income backgrounds and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are getting below-average school exam results. These same children are also more likely to be excluded from school, and poorer young people are less likely to go to university. Infant mortality, the risk of which increases with deprivation, rose in 2016 for the first time in decades.

The disability pay gap persists, with disabled people earning less per hour on average than non-disabled people

Some groups being left behind

Disabled people falling further behind

Disabled people are not enjoying the progress experienced by other groups. Their right to an inclusive education is not being fulfilled – in fact, the proportion of disabled children at special rather than mainstream schools has increased in England and Wales – and they are more likely to be excluded from school. This disadvantage continues in later life. The disability pay gap persists, with disabled people earning less per hour on average than non-disabled people. Disabled people are more likely to be in low-pay occupations and this likelihood has increased.

Disabled people are also more likely to be in poverty. Those who can't work rely on an increasingly restricted welfare regime that is projected to lower their living standards even further. They also face poorer health and lack of access to suitable housing. Safety is another major concern, as fewer disabled people have confidence that the criminal justice system is effective.

Without the fundamental building blocks of good education, an adequate standard of living, and being safe and healthy, disabled people are often unable to participate fully in society.

Challenges to women's safety and career progression

In some ways women's equality has progressed significantly. The employment gap and pay gap with men has narrowed, and the number of women in higher pay occupations and represented on company boards has increased. However, full gender equality has not been achieved and there are still many factors holding women back at work – some of which stem from gender stereotypes and emerge from school or earlier. For example, gender differences in career aspirations can be seen at an early age. This trickles through to higher education, where women are under-represented in most science, technology, engineering and maths courses, despite girls performing better than boys in education. Gender segregation is also prominent in apprenticeships. All of these factors contribute to women still being more likely to be in low-pay occupations.

Bullying and sexual harassment are widespread in the workplace and in education, and three-quarters of new mothers have had a negative or potentially discriminatory experience at work as a result of pregnancy or maternity. Sexual and domestic violence is a persistent and growing concern, and affects women and girls disproportionately. These negative experiences and the inequalities we continue to observe relate closely to stereotypes and perceptions of women and girls, and limit women's choices and opportunities.

Some ethnic minority groups falling behind

People from certain ethnic minorities, such as Indian and Chinese people, have continued to succeed in education and at work, and for others there have been marked improvements in these areas of life. However, Black African, Bangladeshi and Pakistani people are still the most likely to live in poverty and deprivation, and – given the damaging effects of poverty on education, work and health – families can become locked into disadvantage for generations. Ethnic minorities are more at risk of becoming homeless, have poorer access to healthcare and higher rates of infant mortality, and some groups have lower trust in the criminal justice system.

Gypsy, Roma and Travellers face multiple disadvantages across different areas of life. They achieve below-average results at school, experience difficulties accessing healthcare, worse health, and often have low standards of housing.

Moving backwards on justice and personal security

We have seen a marked backwards move in justice and personal security since the improvements we found in our 2015 review. Access to justice enables us to realise our rights to freedom and fairness, but restrictions on legal aid and the introduction of employment tribunal fees – now repealed – have severely reduced people's ability to secure redress when their rights are breached.

The conditions experienced by people held in detention have also deteriorated, with overcrowding in prisons in England and Wales risking prisoner safety and increases in incidents of self-harm and assaults in prisons. There is still a disproportionate number of ethnic minority detainees in prison and in the youth secure estate in England and Wales, despite fewer young people in custody. Levels of trust in the criminal justice system among black people are far lower than for other groups.

The level of hate crime, sexual violence and domestic abuse is concerning. While increases in reported crime may be the result of better reporting and recording, the level of identity-based violence is worrying, particularly in light of Britain's impending exit from the EU and the spikes in hate crime we saw around the time of the referendum. The higher rates of domestic abuse and sexual assault experienced by disabled people, LGBT people and women are also of concern.

Gaps in the data

We have been able to paint a comprehensive picture of equality and human rights for disabled people, people from ethnic minorities, women and men. But gaps in the data available to us mean that we do not yet know as much as we would like about the experiences of groups who share other protected characteristics. Evidence is particularly scarce for LGBT people, people with a religion or belief, and pregnant women and new mothers. We welcome the UK Government's important 2018 national LGBT survey and action plan and we will continue to work with others to close gaps in readiness for our next review in 2021.

What needs to happen next?

Although positive progress has been made in some areas of life for some people, there is still a lot more to do to ensure everyone is free from discrimination and can enjoy their basic human rights.

To stem the increase of child of poverty across Britain, governments across Britain should conduct and publish assessments of the combined impact of tax and welfare reform, and public spending decisions, on people sharing different protected characteristics and the poorest in society, to inform national Budgets and Spending Reviews. The UK Government should also reinstate the binding targets from the Child Poverty Act 2010 for England, and develop a strategy for meeting these.

There should be an acute focus on improving life in Britain for disabled people. Government should remove its reservations to Article 24, the right to inclusive education, of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The UK Government should also regularly report on progress in meeting its commitment to get one million more disabled people into work over the next 10 years, and support flexible and part-time working to help close the employment and pay gap. We want to see more disabled people participating in public and civic life, and to this end political parties should work with governments to ensure funding for disabled candidates' additional costs related to their impairment.

There is still a lot more to do to ensure everyone is free from discrimination and can enjoy their basic human rights

There is an urgent need to improve the experiences of women across Britain. Schools should record and monitor prejudice-based bullying and sexual harassment in order to tackle these effectively. To reduce the gender pay gap, employers should offer all jobs as open to flexible or part-time working from day one wherever possible. We want to see changes to legislation and a statutory code of practice to deal with all forms of harassment at work. The Government should ratify and implement the Istanbul Convention (the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence).

To improve justice and personal security, Government should assess the impact of cuts to legal aid and develop an action plan to address lack of access to advice. We need an urgent examination of the reasons for increased self-harm and assaults in prisons, and the introduction of a statutory time limit of 28 days for holding anyone in immigration detention, as we continue to be the only country in the EU without one. There should also be swift implementation of all recommendations from the Lammy Review.

This is just a snapshot of our detailed recommendations – there are many others aimed at, for example, helping people to get a better education, to be healthier and to participate in politics and the wider society – and these are underpinned by the need for a robust legal framework to protect people's rights now and after Brexit. We are committed to working with others to achieve further meaningful change to ensure that Britain is fairer for everyone.