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Note Verbale No. 056

The Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland presents its compliments to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and has the honour to submit the response to communication AL GBR 8/2020, further to the letter dated 5 August 2020 from the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights and the Special Rapporteur on the right to food.

The Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland avails itself of this opportunity to renew to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights the assurances of its highest consideration.



Geneva, 9 March 2021

Special Procedures Branch
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Annex

Response of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to Communication AL GBR 8/2020 received on 5 August 2020, from the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights and the Special Rapporteur on the right to food.

In 1998, the Scotland Act, the Northern Ireland Act and the Government of Wales Act established the three devolved legislatures and transferred to them certain powers that were previously held at Westminster. Further powers have since been devolved, most recently through the Scotland Act 2016 and Wales Act 2017. The UK's devolution settlement means that the Devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are responsible for observing and implementing international obligations relating to devolved matters, which they do in consultation and agreement with the relevant UK Government Department, to ensure consistency. More generally, international relations, which would include the negotiation of new international rights, are reserved to the UK.

1. Please provide any additional information and any comment that you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.

The UK Government rejects the allegation that its response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been inadequate. We have taken unprecedented action backed by £280 billion to support and protect jobs and provided over £7 billion of additional support to strengthen the welfare system. Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT)¹ published distributional analysis² of COVID-19's impact on working households in July, which showed that the actions this Government has taken to date have supported poorest working households the most, with those in the bottom 10% of the income distribution seeing no income reduction.

This is alongside the Government's commitment to tackling poverty through a long-term, sustainable approach that focuses on employment while continuing to provide a comprehensive safety net for those that need it. Total welfare spending in 2019/20 was £225 billion, including over £98 billion on benefits for people of working age.

In the first months of the pandemic, the UK Government established a £500m local authority hardship fund, followed by a further announcement in June of

¹ Her Majesty's Treasury is the department of the Government of the United Kingdom responsible for developing and executing the government's public finance policy and economic policy.

²<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/impact-of-covid-19-on-working-household-incomes-distributional-analysis-as-of-may-2020>

an additional £63m for local welfare assistance schemes operated in England by local authorities, to help people struggling to afford food and other essentials. The £170m Covid Winter Grant Scheme, announced on 8 November, extended the support already in place, and has enabled local authorities in England to support families with children and other vulnerable households with food, key utilities and other related essentials this winter. In the COVID-19 Spring 2021 Response, published 22nd February 2021, we announced the extension of this Scheme until 16th April 2021, with councils being awarded an additional £59.1 million of funding to ensure vulnerable households do not go hungry or without essential items.

At the same time, we also announced that we are increasing the weekly value of Healthy Start vouchers this April, from £3.10 to £4.25, to support pregnant women or households with children under four, who are on a low income, with the cost of milk, fruit and vegetables helping to boost children's long-term health. In addition, we are investing an additional £220 million in the national rollout of the Holiday Activities and Food programme across England to cover the Easter, Summer and Christmas holidays in 2021. We have made £16m available for food distribution charities, to provide meals through charities over a 12-week period from December 2020; this is in addition to the £16 million made available for the same purpose in May last year.

Since March 2020, and in addition to UK-wide measures to protect jobs and strengthen the welfare system, the UK Government has given the devolved administrations an upfront funding guarantee of up to £16 billion of additional funding to support their Covid-19 response.

The Northern Ireland Executive has allocated an £5 million in 2020/21 to provide a range of support including a payment for short-term living expenses for people affected by COVID-19 and the food box scheme for vulnerable people, with 178,599 food boxes being delivered to councils between 6 April and 26 June. The Northern Ireland Department of Education³ has put in place a number of schemes such as the Free School Meals Direct Payment Scheme⁴ and The Education Authority's Eat Well Live Well programme,⁵ to help alleviate food insecurity and hardship for some of the most vulnerable children in Northern Ireland. Additional funding of £5m has also been allocated to support local Councils and Voluntary and Community organisations assist those facing food insecurity.

³ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/>

⁴ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/free-school-meals-payment-scheme>

⁵ The Education Authority launched this programme, which targets young people aged 4-25 years who are in need of a 5-day food box, providing lunch and breakfast during COVID-19.

The Welsh Government has invested an extra £13.9m in the Discretionary Assistance Fund to cover increasing demand for emergency financial support. Almost £7.9 million has been awarded to people facing hardship as a result of the pandemic and £24 million has been allocated to the Third Sector Resilience Fund,⁶ to provide cash flow support to voluntary organisations. The Welsh Government has also allocated £12 million to ensure that those who were shielding received a free food box if they had no other means of accessing food, and has committed £50.7 million to ensure that children eligible for free school meals do not go hungry, up to and including the Easter 2021 holiday.

The Scottish Government has now committed over £130 million to tackling food insecurity caused by the pandemic, promoting a cash-first approach. Since March, £57.6 million has been allocated to Scottish local authorities to support households at risk, and over £15 million has been awarded to national and local third sector and community food organisations to help provide support including: shopping services; food and activity packs; meal delivery; and wider social, emotional, and practical support. A further £30 million has been committed to tackle financial insecurity over the winter months, including A further £10 million to extend free school meal support during the school holidays up to and including Easter 2021. This is in addition to the £57.5 million made available for the Scottish Welfare Fund and Self-Isolation Support Grant.

2. Please provide information on whether the United Kingdom Government would consider providing families eligible for the food voucher system with alternative support, such as cash payments, in view of the difficulties they reportedly experience in using the vouchers.

In England, direct payments were not a viable option because the Department for Education does not hold bank details of parents and carers. Schools have a choice of providing lunch parcels, making local voucher arrangements, or using our national voucher scheme. Thousands of schools and families benefited from the national voucher scheme, and over £380 million worth of voucher codes redeemed into supermarket eGift cards by schools and families by August 2020. The national voucher scheme was re-opened from 18 January 2021 to offer support through the latest period of national lockdown. Guidance is in place for schools on how they can support children eligible for free school meals who are learning at home because of Covid-19. Schools are able to choose what support they offer to pupils depending on local circumstances, and financial support is available to cover the additional

⁶ <https://gov.wales/welsh-government-boosts-support-valued-charities-and-third-sector-organisations-wales>

costs incurred by schools where providing lunch parcels or local vouchers. This is complemented by advice from LACA (the representative body for school caterers) and Public Health England on what a good food parcel should comprise.

The Scottish Government provided £15 million to enable local authority partners to continue provision of free school meals, or alternatives such as vouchers, cash payments, and the use of catering facilities while schools were closed. An additional £12.6 million was provided to councils to support continued free school meal provision for eligible children during the summer.

3. Please provide information on whether the United Kingdom Government plans to extend the Free School Meals (FSM) system to broader categories of children whose parents fall belong to the “No Recourse to Public Funds” (NRPF) category and whether the extension would continue when the schools reopen.

The UK Government has temporarily extended free school meal eligibility to include children from some groups who have no recourse to public funds in light of the current unique circumstances that many families face at this time. The temporary extension of eligibility will continue until a decision on long-term eligibility is made.

Scottish local authorities can also provide free school meals for children in families with no recourse to public funds, using powers in the Education (Scotland) Act 1980.

4. Please provide information on how the United Kingdom Government regularly monitors and assesses the effectiveness of policies and programmes on child food security, in the implementation of the recommendation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child? We would appreciate being provided with a copy of such an assessment, if available.

The UK Government is committed to producing robust, proportionate assessments of all its policies, including changes to the benefits system, with a full distributional analysis where possible. These are published alongside our legislation allowing effective Parliamentary scrutiny of our proposals. HMT Distributional Analysis, published in July in the Summer Economic Update,⁷ showed that, as a result of the decisions taken at Budget 2020 and Spending Review 2019, the poorest households gained the most as a

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/impact-of-covid-19-on-working-household-incomes-distributional-analysis-as-of-may-2020>

percentage of net income. Through the Households Below Average Income⁸ (HBAI) survey published in March each year, DWP provides estimates and assessments of the change in the number and percentages of people living in households with low income.

Through the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017,⁹ the Scottish Government has established statutory income-based targets with the aim of eradicating child poverty in Scotland. 'Every Child, Every Chance', is the Scottish Government's first Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan¹⁰. It covers the period 2018-22, and outlines the specific actions being taken in Scotland to tackle and reduce child poverty. Reports are published annually covering progress in delivering the actions committed and achieving the targets set. In August 2020, the Scottish Government published its second annual progress report,¹¹ highlighting the range of action being taken across government.

5. Please provide information on how £63 million allocated to local authorities in England would be used to assist those struggling to afford food and other essentials due to the impacts of the COVID-19-related economic downturn.

The £63 million was distributed by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to all local authorities in England by the end of July 2020. Funding was issued with a grant letter and published guidance, setting out what the grant should be used for.¹² The scheme has now ended and DEFRA have commissioned a final survey to establish how the grant was distributed. A final evaluation on the grant will be completed once survey results have been received. The £170 million Covid Winter Grant Scheme, alongside its over £59.1 million extension until April 2021, builds on this support.

6. Please provide information as to whether the Government is considering amending the regulations on Universal Credit, so that the benefit amount responds to the number of children in beneficiary households and provides for an adequate level of support to satisfy their needs, particularly children's.

Universal Credit is a modern, flexible benefit that incentivises employment while providing support in times of need, including additional financial help with childcare costs compared to the benefits it is replacing. Child Benefit continues to be paid for all children, and there is an additional element in

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/households-below-average-income-hbai--2>

⁹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2017/6/contents/enacted>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/child-chance-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2018-22/>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-second-year-progress-report-2019-20/>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-local-authority-emergency-assistance-grant-for-food-and-essential-supplies>

Universal Credit and Tax Credit for disabled children. Support with childcare costs is also available, regardless of the total number of children in the household (subject to an overall cap).

The UK Government therefore considers it is proportionate to provide support through Child Tax Credit and Universal Credit for a maximum of two children (unless the third or subsequent children were born before April 2017, or one of a number of other exceptions apply).¹³

7. How does the Government plan to address the deepening level of food insecurity, taking into account recommendations contained in the first part of the National Food Strategy?

As part of the sustainable approach it is taking to tackling poverty, the UK Government is working to tackle a range of cost of living issues that affect not only the poorest in society, but also other households who are struggling financially due to the pandemic.

The most recent statistics published by the Food and Agriculture Organisation¹⁴ (FAO) show that the percentage and number of people in moderate or severe food insecurity declined between 2014-2016 and 2016-2018¹⁵. We are committed to developing a better understanding of the underlying drivers that affect household food security. Since April 2019, DWP has included a set of food insecurity questions in the Family Resources Survey¹⁶ which will enable us to monitor the level and depth of household food security at a national level and for specific groups and identify which groups are most at risk. The first results will be available in March 2021.

The document referred to as the first part of the National Food Strategy is written by an independent party and is not Government policy. Since these interim findings were published last July, the Government has taken action on several of the recommendations including the expansion of the Holiday Activities and Food programme and increasing the value of the Healthy Start vouchers as set out above. The Government will also carefully consider the recommendations set out in the forthcoming final National Food Strategy report in due course.

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claiming-benefits-for-2-or-more-children>

¹⁴ <http://www.fao.org/home/en/>

¹⁵ 2016-2018 is the last period for which data is available).

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/family-resources-survey--2>