

Open letter on the launch of the Poverty Strategy Commission

Together, we can tackle poverty. That is the message from the Poverty Strategy Commission, which we publicly launch today. But doing so will require a different approach. While concerted political and policy effort have meant that some groups, including pensioners, have benefited from lower poverty rates, the last 20 years have seen the overall poverty rate in the UK remain stubbornly above 20% and the number of people in deep and persistent poverty increase. That has been the symptom of an approach that has used poverty as a political football and a result of the fact that, collectively, we have failed to appreciate that poverty affects us all, and we are all responsible for tackling it.

The last three years have shown us why we can be ambitious about tackling poverty. Before the pandemic, we saw poverty fall because of increasing employment, rising wages and real-terms falls in housing costs for those on the lowest incomes. During the pandemic, Government action on Universal Credit directly protected 800,000 individuals – children, parents, pensioners, disabled people - from poverty.

But now, with families across the UK facing a cost-of-living crisis, poverty is again on the rise. This means that, while we all hoped that the recovery from the pandemic could lead to a reduction in poverty, the cost-of-living crisis is highlighting the precarity of many household budgets. Looking to the future, decarbonisation and changing working practices are going to fundamentally impact on future costs and incomes and there is a risk that it is those least able to shoulder these burdens that are likely to be hit hardest. More positively, businesses are increasingly starting to think about how to maximise their contribution to society and, with central Government committed to levelling up and making Brexit work for families across the country, there has seldom been a time when as much focus has rested on living standards and prosperity.

That is why it is our belief that, by working together, we can turn this around. Purpose-led businesses can drive the growth and create the quality jobs that people need to provide for themselves. As families and individuals, we can get the right skills, invest in our children and grasp the future opportunities that are available. Charities, community groups and local businesses can work together to support our families and communities to be more resilient. As a society, we must protect those who cannot work and help more and more people take steps towards employment and increased earnings where they have previously been left behind.

Of course, we recognise the vital role of governments (central and local) across the country. Individual, collective and business action needs the State to set the right framework and provide the right support. Local government provides frontline services to families right across the UK. And without a Social Security system that provides both a strong safety net and an effective springboard, any attempts at tackling poverty will be undermined.

What this shows is that we all have a role to play. That's why the Commission has been drawn together from across the political spectrum and includes leading figures from UK businesses and civic society, people with direct experience of tackling poverty on the frontline and experts in data, policy and implementation. The Commission will be supported by an extensive Advisory Group, with members representing people from right across society and right across the UK and will be undertaking work directly with people with experience of poverty. Together, our goal is to create a clear set of proposals through which government, business, civic society and communities can work together to tackle poverty.

To inform that work, we want to work with political leaders from all parties and all nations and regions of the UK, with businesses, charities and individuals, to understand what would make the difference and what needs to happen to drive change. To support this, the Commission is today launching a call for evidence, asking for your views, experience and suggestions for how we should tackle poverty and examples of what has previously worked and what is already working.

We know that this is a significant challenge – but one that must be faced together. What is already clear is that our success will rest on being able to break down the historic political divides that have limited effective action and build consensus around the fact that we will all need to act. That is our call to action. Get in touch, respond to our call for evidence, work with us, support us to make change happen. Because, together, we can tackle poverty.

Signed

Baroness Philippa Stroud

The Rt Hon. Sir Stephen Timms MP

The Rt Hon. Stephen Crabb MP

Baroness Grey-Thompson DBE

David Laws (Former Minister in Coalition Government)

Helen Barnard (Joseph Rowntree Foundation/Pro Bono Economics)

Andrew Barnett

Matthew Bolton (Citizens UK)

Ed Boyd (Regenerate)

Graeme Cooke (Joseph Rowntree Foundation)

Gavin Rice (Centre for Social Justice)

Manny Hothi (Trust for London)

David Hutchison (Social Finance)

Andrew Laird (Mutual Ventures)

Julian McCrae (Engage Britain)

Carey Oppenheim (Nuffield Foundation)

Charlotte Pickles (Reform)

Emma Revie (Trussell Trust)

James Timpson (Timpson)

Miatta Fahnbulleh (New Economics Foundation)