

Quakers in Britain response to Reset call for evidence

About us

This response is submitted on behalf of Quakers in Britain. Quakers are a faith community working for equality, peace, truth, simplicity and sustainability. We try to find God in ourselves and those around us.

Quakers in Britain is a national church supporting a network of thousands of Quakers across England, Scotland and Wales. We're also a charity, working for positive change in areas such as climate justice, peace and disarmament, migrant rights, and criminal justice.

Our response

Our responses to selected questions from the call for evidence are below. We would be happy to discuss any of this further or take part in an online evidence session.

What policy measures or initiatives were introduced in response to Covid-19 that we should look to replicate for the long-term?

In April the government introduced a scheme to release people from prison if they were not a threat to the public. Particular emphasis was placed on releasing pregnant women and mothers with babies. We welcomed this, but were disappointed that in practice, the early release scheme affected less than a hundred people.¹

We believe the government should do more to prevent women, including those who are pregnant and have young children, from going to prison. In general, people who are not a threat to the public should not be in prison. The government could extend the early release scheme introduced during the pandemic. We also believe it is vital that the UK government adopt the presumption against short sentences that is working well in Scotland.²

During the pandemic we also welcomed the roll-out of video calls to people in prison, so that they can stay in touch with their families. Again, there is evidence that the implementation of this policy has been slow.³ We believe this should be prioritised, and continued after the pandemic.

What existing weaknesses in UK society and economy made the response to Covid-19 more difficult, and how might these be addressed to improve life in the UK and reduce the risk of future crises?

Criminal justice

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<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2020-06-01/52292/>

² <https://www.gov.scot/news/presumption-against-short-sentences-extended/>

³ <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/PressPolicy/News/vw/1/ItemID/889>

Our criminal justice system is in perpetual crisis. There is too much focus on punishment, including custodial sentences. Not enough is spent on prevention measures such as mental health, domestic violence, and youth services. One impact of this is overcrowded prisons. This made Covid-19 a huge risk to prison staff and people in prison, and in turn the wider population.⁴

Quakers in Britain call for a wholehearted shift from punishment to prevention and rehabilitation.⁵ Our criminal justice system should enable people to transform their lives for the better, rather than harming them further. Justice plays a crucial role in creating peaceful and inclusive communities and building a country where civil liberties and freedoms can flourish. Prison must be restricted to those who pose a major risk. Well-resourced public services are fundamental for the reduction of crime. This transformation would help improve resilience in our system, so it isn't in perpetual crisis and can withstand shocks such as pandemics in the future.

Immigration and asylum

The hostile environment is another existing weakness in UK society that made the response to Covid-19 more difficult. This includes a number of policies such as: NHS charging and data-sharing; no recourse to public funds; right to rent checks; and the ban on asylum-seekers doing paid work.

These policies force people from migrant backgrounds into poverty. They exacerbate racism by creating mistrust of people perceived as not being British, and by reinforcing the false view that migrants do not contribute to society.

The pandemic caused many people from migrant backgrounds to fall deeper into destitution. Many were unable or afraid to access benefits and safe housing. Many were unable to access healthcare because of the fear of having to pay or of being reported to the Home Office. Asylum-seekers who were healthcare professionals were unable to assist the NHS during this time of crisis.

Many children had to homeschool without access to technology, regular nutritious meals, or a safe home environment. A large number of people from migrant backgrounds lost their jobs. Others had to go to work despite the risk to their health.

Asylum-seekers relying on cash payments were unable to use public transport because they weren't allowed to have a bank card. People in Immigration Removal Centres, already at risk of abuse and poor mental and physical health, were put at risk of contagion due to the enclosed and crowded conditions.

Quakers in Britain call for the government to end the hostile environment and allow people from migrant backgrounds to access work, housing and healthcare. This would restore dignity to people from migrant backgrounds and enable them to contribute fully to our

⁴ https://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020_04_01_COKER_Report_HI_PRT.pdf

⁵ <https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-work/social-justice/crime-community-justice>

economy and society. We also believe it would increase society's resilience to future crises by decreasing the number of people who are unable to support themselves and access healthcare.

What should be the primary aims of a post-Covid economy, and how should progress against those aims be measured?

The long-term recovery package must be designed to support a just transition to a zero-carbon economy, with all decision-making guided by this goal. All major spending decisions should be assessed for their carbon impact and impact on people on low incomes. A carbon impact account should be published alongside future Budgets to show the overall carbon impact of government spending decisions.

At present, our society is increasingly dominated by rentierism, with wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, and increases in property values outstripping the average salary in some areas. This is a result of policy decisions, but it is never presented as a deliberate choice. Similarly, the prevailing narrative about the economy is that its only goal is to grow; there is still very little questioning of this or discussion of alternatives within the mainstream, despite evidence over many years that this model is failing millions of people and destroying the living world.

The economic crisis brought on by COVID-19 invites us to rethink our aims as a society, and how we can use the economy to support those aims. It is not enough to hope that overall economic growth will bring about better health and quality of life – we need to measure the outcomes we really want. As Kate Raworth writes persuasively in her book *Doughnut Economics*, “today we have economies that need to grow, whether or not they make us thrive: what we need are economies that make us thrive, whether or not they grow.”

A public conversation is needed about the purpose of the economy, so that a new framework can be built around people's priorities (which might be things like health, access to basic services, and leisure time), with economic policymaking designed to serve those aims. It should no longer be possible for politicians and those who benefit from the dominant economic system to hide behind the myth that economics can be ideology-free.

As Quakers, our vision is of a future where:

- global, national and local economies operate within ecological limits and uphold the wellbeing, dignity and equality of all
- our economic system serves diverse and peaceful communities which have harmonious relationships with our natural world and with one another
- investment in the arms trade, nuclear weapons and extractive industries is repurposed towards building peaceful communities and harnessing renewable resources to meet basic needs

- economic strategies and policies are based on equality and wellbeing, rather than growth and extraction.

As part of Rethinking Security, we call for a new approach to security based on justice, cooperation and sustainability. Spending decisions, in both domestic and foreign policy, are key to this.

What shape should government stimulus packages have if they are to deliver an economy that is greener and fairer, and what should they include? We are particularly interested in evidence that shows how any stimulus package might this contribute to: a. government commitments to 'levelling up' b. the UK's equitable contribution to the 1.5 degree temperature goal of the Paris climate agreement

Many interventions which are necessary for rapid decarbonisation – such as retrofitting homes for energy efficiency, more community control over energy, and investment in walking, cycling and public transport – will also improve the lives of people on low incomes if managed well.

The UK government has so far failed to implement policy changes which would bring the UK anywhere near 'net zero' by 2050. This target date is also much too late, and would condemn much of the world to utter catastrophe if other wealthy nations do not massively step up their ambition. A government serious about climate action would rapidly develop and implement a ten-year plan to decarbonise the UK economy, as well as committing to the following measures:

- End all fossil fuel subsidies, including tax breaks for North Sea oil and gas, and immediately ban new public investment in fossil fuel projects including through UK Export Finance
- Acknowledge and act on the need to reduce overall energy demand as well as transitioning to renewables
- Invest in the measures needed to reduce emissions, including retrofitting homes for energy efficiency, improving walking and cycling infrastructure, supporting natural flood prevention, and a funded just transition strategy to support workers and communities dependent on high-carbon industries, including the arms industry as well as aviation and oil and gas
- Provide funding and support for local authorities and communities to cut their emissions and build resilience to climate breakdown, future pandemics and other shocks
- Lead international efforts to establish new and additional public finance for global climate adaptation and loss and damage
- Ensure that the costs of inaction are factored into the proposed net-zero funding review, and into all investment appraisals
- Require the carbon impact of all spending decisions to be assessed, and publish a carbon impact account alongside future Budgets to show the overall carbon impact of government spending decisions.

The recovery should create opportunities for useful work which contributes to the zero-carbon transition, paid at or above the real living wage, for everyone who wants it. The UK is facing high levels of unemployment as businesses struggle to reopen. Meanwhile, there is no shortage of work to be done in the zero-carbon transition, from retrofitting homes to restoring natural habitats. Investment in retraining and direct job creation to accelerate the transition to zero carbon would pay for itself many times over, help the UK meet its climate targets, contribute to the government's 'levelling-up' agenda, avert an unemployment crisis and build skills that will be useful in a zero-carbon economy. As part of a publicly funded programme, steps should be taken to ensure that these jobs are paid the real living wage, and that gains are retained for public good – i.e. that public money is not subsidising private profit.

Should there be conditions (or exclusions) applied to government support for particular industries, and if so, what should they be?

Binding social responsibility requirements should be placed on large companies in receipt of public money. Polling has shown clearly that the public oppose 'no-strings' corporate bailouts.⁶ Large businesses in receipt of public money should be required to contribute to the public good, including through paying the real living wage, greater democratic control and accountability, and a requirement to make rapid progress towards Fair Tax Mark standards or equivalent. The UK should follow the example of Scotland and Wales in barring companies based in tax havens from receiving financial support.

Support for large corporations should also be compatible with the need to rapidly reduce the UK's greenhouse gas emissions to zero. While all workers must be supported, polluting industries such as oil and gas and aviation must not be bailed out without a clear and binding plan to wind down their high-carbon activities.

What mix of investment and changes to taxation would be needed to deliver a government stimulus package that resets the economy so that it is green and fair?

The pandemic has brought economic and health inequalities into sharp focus. People facing the greatest deprivation are experiencing a higher risk of exposure to COVID-19 and existing poor health puts them at risk of more severe outcomes if they contract the virus. Many people have lost work or are likely to do so as the Job Retention Scheme ends, while better-off people who are able to work from home have generally saved more money during lockdown, further widening the gap between rich and poor.

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<https://www.taxjustice.uk/blog/yougov-poll-public-want-higher-taxes-on-wealth-and-no-bailouts-for-tax-haven-companies>
https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/wafcpvwa4/WeArePossible_Airlines_200423.pdf

The debt charity StepChange has warned that 4.2 million people have borrowed to make ends meet during the lockdown, and that 4.6 million households risk accumulating dangerous levels of debt.⁷ Action is needed to address the risk of a major private debt crisis, and to ensure that social security payments are accessible, prompt and sufficient to meet basic needs, before the Job Retention Scheme comes to an end.

The inevitable recession must not be used to justify more austerity – this is economically counterproductive, would cause avoidable suffering and worsen inequality, and would further weaken society’s ability to respond to climate breakdown, pandemics and other shocks.

Research shows that wealth inequality in the UK is vast, with the richest one per cent owning as much wealth as the bottom 80 per cent of the population,⁸ while wealth is significantly under-taxed. Wealth is also closely associated with high carbon emissions: the richest 10% globally consume around 20 times more energy than the poorest 10%.⁹ The need to curb extreme wealth goes hand in hand with the need to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We see a pressing need to tax wealth more effectively – in particular wealth held in land and property, which accounts for a high proportion of wealth in the UK. As a logical first step, income from wealth (such as capital gains and dividends) should be taxed at the same rate as income from work.

What should be the key global priorities of the UK and what measures should the UK take to support a globally co-ordinated reset?

The UK has a responsibility towards poorer countries working to overcome the pandemic. We want to see the UK lead the calls for debt relief for the world’s least well-off countries, many of which are being battered by the twin impacts of COVID-19 and climate change. This would also show leadership from the UK as hosts of COP26.

The UK has signed up to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and should make much more use of these both in assessing progress in the UK and in aid and foreign policy decisions. Inequality, the climate and ecological crisis, and Covid-19 and likely future pandemics are global challenges and require effective international cooperation as well as strong UK action. Much greater strategic priority should be given to addressing these threats, in line with recommendations from Rethinking Security.

The UK must ensure that aid is directed to enabling poorer countries to address the climate crisis and fulfil the SDGs, rather than furthering UK business interests.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/money/2020/jun/09/uk-households-face-6bn-debts-because-of-covid-19-says-charity>

⁸ <https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/resource/billionaire-britain>

⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-51906530>

What opportunities are presented by the UK co-hosting COP26 in 2021 and/or the G7 presidency and how should these be used?

The UK's presidency of COP26 provides an opportunity to show leadership on climate and spur greater mitigation efforts worldwide, as well as an opportunity for civil society to build a much bigger and more effective climate movement.

The UK has a huge historical 'carbon debt' – it is responsible for more of the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere than most other countries, and its wealth has been built on fossil fuel energy. Excessive extraction of natural resources, mostly in the global south for the benefit of the global north, has caused immense damage to people and nature. The global activities of the UK and many UK-based corporations continue to contribute to the climate and environmental crisis. As a rich country, the UK also has the physical and social infrastructure to decarbonise much more quickly than many other countries.

In order to lead by example and build the conditions for a successful COP, the government must:

- set out a clear plan for reaching zero emissions, with binding sector-by-sector targets, without reliance on resource-intensive and untested technologies for carbon capture and storage
- commit at least 5% of government spending to funding a just transition to zero carbon
- acknowledge its carbon debt and contribute to a just transition in poorer countries through finance and technology transfers
- allocate new funding for adaptation to the impacts of climate change, both in the UK and overseas
- show leadership on establishing additional sources of finance for countries suffering loss and damage caused by climate-related disasters
- take greater responsibility for emissions generated by its activities overseas, including through aviation, shipping and imported consumer goods, and should factor these emissions into its carbon budget
- introduce measures to address overconsumption through education and regulation
- end all use of public money to support fossil fuel projects either in the UK or overseas. This includes tax breaks, investments and export finance
- align trade policy with the Sustainable Development Goals and environmental agreements such as the Paris Agreement. Trade deals must not be allowed to override these commitments.