

The Right Honourable Boris Johnson, MP  
Prime Minister  
10 Downing Street  
London  
SW1A 2AA

28 October 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

**Re: Faith leaders' letter on the need to tackle child poverty**

In this second wave of the coronavirus pandemic and what will no doubt be a difficult winter for many, we are writing as faith leaders about our growing concerns about hunger and poverty, especially among children.

With the help of Marcus Rashford's inspiring campaign the pandemic has brought the issue of child hunger and poverty into the light. However, this is not a new problem. The rising use of food banks, most of them run by churches, synagogues, temples, gurdwaras and mosques, is the extreme and visible manifestation of a much broader and deep-seated problem. According to the official statistics, child poverty has been growing and deepening for years as a large and growing number of low and insecurely paid working families struggle to make ends meet, exacerbated further by the impact of Covid-19.

More than twenty years ago, the Government of the time promised to eliminate UK child poverty within a generation and yet child poverty has remained stubbornly high under the leadership of all political parties. No one can take the moral high ground, because this is endemic to our economic structure and seems to fall outside our moral imperatives. We can and must do something together to remove this injustice.

In last week's House of Commons debate about the extension of the free school meal voucher scheme, there were passionate contributions from all sides of the house. Some argued that we must do more to respond to the immediate needs of families who are suffering under the extreme economic pressures generated by the pandemic. Others argued that this was only a "sticking plaster", and that what we need is long-term solutions that address the underlying causes of child poverty. Others still pointed out that this was not solely Government's responsibility - and that parents, voluntary groups, and communities also have an important role in combatting child poverty.

We agree with all these arguments. But, instead of politicising this issue and arguing over individual policies, we urgently need to establish a cross-party commission with the mandate and resources to tackle child poverty in England, once and for all. What might this involve?

In the short-term, we believe that temporary measures are needed to ensure that children in low income families do not go hungry during the pandemic, especially over school holidays. Research by the Church of England, CPAG and others has shown how much parents needed and valued the offer of free school meal vouchers during the lockdown and this additional support will remain vital as many areas come under tighter restrictions again.

In the medium-term, we applaud the Government's efforts to sustain employment and to bolster the social security system to provide extra support for those on the lowest incomes. These have

been a lifeline for millions of families and children, who would otherwise be in a much worse financial situation. Looking ahead, the temporary increase in Universal Credit should be made permanent and extended to cover those on legacy benefits, and Governments should commit to increasing working age benefits at least in line with inflation (as is already the case for pensioners), in order to maintain an adequate safety net for those falling on hard times.

In the long-term, we need a coherent, cross-government and cross-party strategy to tackle the underlying causes of child poverty, including low pay, educational disadvantage, and the shortage of affordable housing and childcare, as well as measures to promote social mobility and racial justice. Simultaneously, we need a comprehensive social security system that protects people against the vagaries of life, alongside a dynamic voluntary sector to help those who fall through the cracks.

One of the positive outcomes of last week's debate is that everyone who took part agreed that no child should ever go to bed hungry and that something must be done to tackle child hunger and poverty. It is all our duty to come together to protect the most vulnerable in our society, especially in times of crisis. We urge you to act with decisiveness and compassion, to ensure that children are protected during this exceptionally challenging winter. But we also urge you to look beyond the current crisis and to use this as an opportunity for us to make a collective commitment to eliminate the scandal of child poverty for good.

Yours sincerely,

The Most Revd & Rt Hon Justin Welby  
Archbishop of Canterbury

The Most Revd & Rt Hon Stephen Cottrell  
Archbishop of York

The Right Reverend Paul Butler  
Bishop of Durham

His Eminence Cardinal Vincent Nichols  
Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster

His Eminence Archbishop Angaelos  
Coptic Orthodox Archbishop of London

The Reverend Dr Hugh Osgood  
Moderator of the Free Churches Group

Pastor Agu Irukwu  
Redeemed Christian Church of God

The Reverend Gavin Calver  
CEO, The Evangelical Alliance

The Reverend Richard Teal  
President of the Methodist Conference  
Methodist Church in Britain

Carolyn Lawrence  
Vice-President of the Methodist Conference  
Methodist Church in Britain

His Eminence Archbishop Nikitas of Thyateira and Great Britain  
Greek Orthodox Church

His Grace Bishop Matthew of Sourozh  
Russian Orthodox Church

The Reverend Dr John P Bradbury  
General Secretary, The United Reformed Church

The Reverend Dr Paul Goodliff  
General Secretary, Churches Together in England

Imam Qari Asim  
Chair, Mosques & Imams National Advisory Board

Rabbi Charley Baginsky  
Interim Director of Liberal Judaism

Sanjay Jagatia  
Chair, Hindu Think Tank UK (Hindus in UK)

Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner  
Former Senior Rabbi to Reform Judaism

Sayed Yousif Al-Khoei  
Director, Al-Khoei Foundation

Dr Desmond Biddulph CBE & Mrs Darcy Biddulph  
The Buddhist Society

Bhai Sahib (Dr) Mohinder Singh Ahluwalia OBE KSG  
Spiritual Leader & Chairman

Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha  
Nishkam Group of Organisations