

Position statement on austerity

Austerity describes economic and social policies in the UK and other countries that result in reduced public and welfare spending, lower taxes, a smaller state and more unequal distribution of wealth. Austerity runs counter to the BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work. As part of an international profession, BASW supports the statement against austerity by the International Federation of Social Workers¹.

Austerity is a flawed economic theory that increases debt burden, unemployment, homelessness, inequality and causes misery upon the lives of citizens. Social workers work every day with the negative realities imposed on people by austerity. We absorb the pressure of the painful and angry reality of the people most affected.

The method of reducing public expenditure combined with tax reduction for the wealthy reduces state income and fails to achieve balanced economies. This results in the widening of the gap in inequality and increases poverty. Social workers throughout the world witness which policies support people's wellbeing and healthy economic development; they also see which policies undermine social structures and fail people economically and socially.

The banking crisis of 2008, the bank bailout and the consequent increase in the national debt and deficit, was used as the rationale for introducing austerity policies in the UK. These have persisted and deepened in their impact, although the governments of the four countries make different nation-specific choices including some choices to mitigate the impact of austerity economic measures of the Westminster parliament. Austerity is causing unnecessary harm now and storing up problems for the future of society. For example, while the number of people living longer continues to increase, funding for social care has been cut dramatically², causing untenable pressures on acute NHS care, inadequate, undignified social care options, a growing staffing crisis, and higher stress on carers and families.

Despite politicians' assurances that 'we are all in it together', the poorest and most vulnerable in society are being made to bear the main impacts of austerity. For example, people with a disability have seen significant cuts to their levels of benefit and higher thresholds to make claims³; mental health users have seen a shrinkage of both hospital and community support options⁴; and increased costs in rented housing, reductions in Housing Benefit, the introduction of the bedroom tax and an ongoing decline in the availability of social housing have seen homelessness levels greatly increase⁵. In 2015-2016 over a 1.1 million people were forced to access a food-bank⁶. The reduction in funding for smaller, grassroots and user led groups and organisations has been another silent, damaging consequence of reduced public funding which particularly impacts primary and secondary prevention support.

Under austerity, the wealthiest in the UK have become wealthier as inequality grows, tax reductions benefit the wealthiest and fiscal policy favours big business wealth for the minority. Austerity policies also enable big business to accumulate wealth by drawing public assets into profit-making private ownership. Austerity policies often depict the public sector as part of the problem not part of the solution to creating a more equal, productive and healthier society. Under-funding, rising demand and a discourse of failure is used within austerity approaches to undermine confidence in public services and to justify out-sourcing and use of for-profit providers.

Austerity functions on a myth of 'scarce resources' which deliberately understates the real wealth within our society and promotes using divisive rhetoric. For example, proponents of austerity distinguish 'strivers' from 'skivers' when the reality is that some 7.4 million people are in poverty despite being in working families⁷. Stigma and a sense of dehumanization are effects of austerity for many, perpetuated by such rhetoric. This contributes to break down in social cohesion and divides individuals and communities. It increases fear e.g. of people perceived as 'outsiders', such as refugees, and a threat e.g. to access to security, services or to jobs.

Politicians often claim austerity is inevitable. This is not the case. There are other, better ways to respond to economic challenges – for example, public investment in infrastructure, organisations and people to generate and redistribute wealth and raise productivity; a different, fairer distribution of taxes and building alternative economies.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Austerity is having a direct impact on citizens who use social work services, on the social work task and on social workers themselves. This includes:

- People with a disability experiencing reduced benefit levels, lower employment support allowance, higher thresholds of eligibility and lower personal support payments;
- Older people who have had hospital admission unable to get timely or sufficient support to re-establish independence in the community or move to other more suitable care settings;
- Mental health service users, who experience hospital and community services being withdrawn and more episodic and discontinuous support;
- Reduction in early help for families and children: For the small minority of families who face safeguarding issues, worsening income and often severe housing issues exacerbate stress and make state intervention more likely.

Austerity has a direct impact on social workers through:

- Reductions in preventative services increasing the statutory caseload and severity of citizen needs coming forward;
- Reductions in staffing relative to demand, increasing caseloads and risk;
- Increased stress and consequent ill-health;
- Increased ethical and professional dilemmas if citizen's needs cannot be met and austerity policies do not fit with best professional judgement.

An effect of austerity is often to isolate individuals – service users and staff – from their wider communities. It is hard to effect change as a social worker in isolation. Joining and being actively involved, in your professional association, trade union, community or faith group is key to challenging austerity and building alternatives.

BASW will:

- Seek to make visible the impact of austerity;
- Support service users, families and communities to have a voice on austerity;
- Work with other organisations and professional bodies to identify, oppose and reduce the specific impacts of austerity;
- Recognise and publicise the impact of austerity on social work and social workers;
- Identify and promote effective social work practice that supports and empowers citizens in current socio-economic circumstances;
- Support social workers dealing with the impact of austerity; and,
- Promote positive socio-economic and political alternatives to austerity.

¹ <http://ifsw.org/news/ifsw-statement-from-the-solidarity-symposium-on-social-work-and-austerity/>

² For example, BBC (2016) '10 Charts that show what's gone wrong with social care' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-39043387> Accessed 24 Feb, 2017.

³ For example, (2012) 'The Tipping Point'. <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/report-disability-government-cuts-benefits/benefit-cuts-'hitting-disabled-people-hardest'> Accessed 27 Feb, 2017.

⁴ For example, BBC (2016) 'Mental Health Cuts 'still being cut despite pledge''. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-39043387>. Accessed 27 Feb, 2017

⁵ Crisis (2016) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-38157410>. Accessed 27 Feb, 2017.

⁶ Trussell Trust (2016). <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/06/Foodbank-use-remains-at-record-high.pdf>. Accessed 27 Feb 2017.

⁷ For example, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2016) 'In work poverty hits record high...' <https://www.jrf.org.uk/press/work-poverty-hits-record-high-housing-crisis-fuels-insecurity> Accessed 27 Feb, 2017.