Britain works?

In this issue we focus on the world of work. Unemployment is low in the UK, but in-work poverty is at record levels. Debates about the nature and future of work are increasing. What can be done to tackle in-work poverty and the growth in temporary, low-hours and insecure forms of work? What is the relationship between action on pay and security, and increasing productivity? How will the labour market respond to new forms of automation? How can decent jobs be provided in industries where customers increasingly expect low costs and service on demand? How can we make further progress on family-friendly working and balancing work and family life? And how should the social security system encourage people to work and progress, or should it keep its nose out?

It is clear that work is not necessarily a way out of poverty, particularly for families with children, as two-thirds of poor children have a working parent. Against this backdrop, CPAG and Working Families are collaborating on a new project, ‘Britain works’, which will draw together evidence on the experience of low-income working families and involve employers and policymakers in developing solutions. In our first feature, Jane Mansour gives highlights from the initial research, looking at the changing nature of low-paid jobs and the support systems for work, alongside employer attitudes towards low-paid staff. The second and third features take on different aspects of the work question. Donald Hirsch explores how better pay and better state support need to be combined to tackle child poverty, and Chris Warhurst asks what constitutes a good job, drawing on international examples to consider how we might measure – and most importantly, improve – job quality in the UK.

The voluntary living wage campaign is one of the most high-profile efforts in this area. We report on analysis of its adoption by three large employers in York, noting positive impacts but also finding that hours may be as important as hourly pay in reducing poverty. We also review new research on the retail sector, with its 1.5 million low-paid employees, which makes helpful recommendations around meeting employees’ varying needs and enabling progression. It also calls into question the logic for in-work conditionality within universal credit, echoing other research showing that barriers to progression are more often structural than motivational. The second research review picks up this theme to discuss the recent National Audit Office report on benefit sanctions, which concluded that there is little evidence for their effectiveness in boosting employment.

As usual, we give voice to practitioners and people affected by the issues explored in the articles. Alan Tucker describes the impact of severe cuts in funding for English language training, which hinder refugees and migrants from progressing in work and increase the risk of poverty and isolation. And Jessica Taylor (not her real name) shows just what can be achieved when high-quality employment support is available for those facing mental health difficulties.