

Working together to reduce poverty and inequality:

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Introduction

The conference was hosted by the Department for Work and Pensions and run in conjunction with the Cabinet Office's Social Exclusion Task Force and the NGO led Social Policy Task Force. It brought together people who have experience of poverty and social exclusion with government ministers and policy makers to discuss how to reduce poverty and inequality in the UK. The focus of the conference was a series of discussion sessions which considered in detail some of the key topics which had emerged from the "Get Heard" project¹. The topics were discussed under two main themes: Family Poverty and Active Inclusion in the labour market. This document summarises some of the key headlines and issues emerging from those discussions.

1. Get Heard was one of the largest projects undertaken in the UK to involve people with first-hand experience of poverty to give their views on government policies designed to combat poverty. Set up by the Social Policy Task Force, with funding supplied principally by the EU and with some match funding from the Department for Work and Pensions, the project ran a total of 146 workshops around the UK between December 2004 and December 2005: 81 in England; 45 in Scotland; 14 in Northern Ireland; and 6 in Wales.

Family Poverty workshop outputs:

FAMILIES

Background from presentation:

The work of the Social Exclusion Task Force focuses on the most excluded families. There are 50 pilot projects taking place across England and Wales recognising the importance of building strong families (for example an ex-offender is 6 times less likely to re-offend if there is strong family support). Approach is multi-disciplinary, involving nursing services, education, social services and the police. Social networks are important to avoid stigmatising problem families. There are good lessons to be learned from initiatives like Surestart.

Comments made by individuals who attended the workshops:

Housing is crucial to successful family life. There needs to be more affordable social housing and where council housing stock is sold, the revenue should be ring-fenced for spending on other housing projects. Several examples of overcrowding were raised including:

- 14 families sharing 2 bathrooms in Northern Ireland
- A family living for 10 years with 3 children (one with special needs) sharing one bedroom

In some cases, delays in processing claims for housing benefit have led to evictions. It was also felt that mortgage costs should be met in full for those in receipt of benefit and housing benefit should be reduced in stages on return to work tapered according to income on return to work.

Community effort is needed to raise children - they need support, time and effort to be invested in them and there needs to be more (financial) support for older people who are looking after children. Parents need time at home with their children to help with their education. If the government wants families to be strong, they need to do more to support women who want to stay at home to look after their children. Good parenting early on is important - even for families with limited means. Children as old as 13 and 14 are vulnerable and their parents need to be there for them.

It is important to keep families together. It was felt that too many children are being taken into care and that more needs to be done to work with families to keep them together. Families need more support (financial and otherwise) to keep them together and prevent children being taken in to care. Poverty makes families feel that they cannot cope - but it is much cheaper to work with families

to help them stay together than to cope with the consequences of family breakdown. Families are not bad - just poor and in need of support. Low income is a key factor in family breakdown - benefit income never covers the real cost of living.

Social services need to be more careful in making decisions about taking children into care - especially singling out one child in a family. Many social workers are young and inexperienced and do not know the families they work with. There should be more support for mothers who suffer from post natal depression or who do not bond with their children. More health visitors are needed as they play a key role in preventing families being split up. The voluntary sector is more trusted than local government in helping in family breakdown situations.

Fathers need to be encouraged to engage more with family life and families need more shared learning and activities. There should be parenting classes, particularly for families new to the UK who want to learn more about its customs and to help them to assimilate. Families of asylum seekers should be treated like all other families. Children and parents are often separated in detention centres. Detention should be stopped because of the long term trauma it causes.

Actions suggested by those attending workshops:

A good health visitor is the key to survival for many low income families. Social services need to work on building trust and tackling the stigma associated with involvement with a social worker. Social workers are associated with loss of children into the care system. If the Task Force programme is to be a success it will need to have a different approach which addresses these issues.

All benefits should be pegged to the rate of inflation and housing costs should be included in the calculation..

Pension credit should be given to all people over pension age (like child benefit) and not means tested.

Tax credit thresholds need to be raised.

Some examples of good practice mentioned by those attending workshops:

A family mentoring group in Glasgow.

“Women together get together” is a women’s group which treats women’s need holistically. Only small amount of local funding so women have to pay 50p to attend.

COMMUNITIES

Background from presentation:

The Department for Communities and Local Government is developing a mixed communities approach to community regeneration. The essential factors in a mixed community are seen as:

- decent homes at affordable prices in an attractive local environment and public realm
- good public transport to urban centres and a range of economic opportunities tied into the wider area
- good schools and training opportunities
- good local health and social services
- low levels of crime and anti-social behaviour coupled with effective neighbourhood management

Comments made by individuals who attended the workshops:

There is a lack of “connectedness” in some communities and absence of community spirit. There needs to be a more joined up approach to community engagement and community groups need to be representative of their communities. “Fear of isolation isolates people”. People should get involved -“it is empowering and shows you are interested in making changes.” Community action needs to be informed by the people. People have to ask themselves what they want in their communities and to have the confidence to fight for it. They also need to be involved in any evaluation. But, it is important to remember that politicians and community groups have different agendas. A bad experience of involvement in a community group in Easterhouse was cited where people were thrown off a community group for “political” reasons.

For a community to work there needs to be: a good ethnic mix; people in the younger and older age groups as well families; and a range of incomes and businesses. **But** mixed communities can hide poverty and deprivation with the poor becoming invisible (particularly in rural areas). Different people have different needs within communities. There are also different needs at different times of year, for example there is a greater demand for community facilities during the school holidays either for specific activities or just a place for kids to hang out in safety. There are insufficient resources to help young people with sport. Children need open space but this is often fenced off. These areas should be maintained and people should be allowed to use them. Not all disabled people are old. There is also a need to consider the needs of younger disabled people within communities.

Good public services (including transport, police, shops and post offices) are essential to ensuring that communities work. In many older communities the shops have closed because of competition from the supermarkets and all that is left is betting shops and pubs. And more thought needs to be given to the

location of new supermarkets which often require a bus journey, where local shops were within walking distance. Many areas need more green spaces and flower beds and for derelict land to be dealt with. And there are insufficient public toilets which “stops people going out”.

There is a need for new housing stock, particularly social housing. The problem is where to build it? Some private landlords are buying up properties with the sole intention of selling them on at a profit. Properties are neglected, but rents go up. Housing associations will carry out essential repairs inside but external work is often neglected, making buildings look shabby.

Knowsley was cited as an example of useful engagement with Local Strategic Partnerships but other indicated that it is not always a success. Not always clear what happens to Neighbourhood Renewal funding which gets swallowed without a trace. The voluntary sector should be resourced for the work it does within communities.

Actions suggested by those attending workshops:

It's not rocket science. Start with practical things “you don't need an education degree to teach someone a skill”

Government should legislate to make local government consultation with communities a requirement.

An evaluation should be carried out of what is working well in the Devolved Administrations - possibly to be monitored by the UK Coalition Against Poverty? There are better levels of community engagement in Wales and the Good Practice guide which has been published there was developed by communities.

There has to be more transparency and availability of information in the community planning and development process. Development of community policies should: involve the planning authorities, tie in with other areas of local policy and ensure that community groups have long-term sustainable funding.

Unemployed young people should be used in neighbourhood clean up initiatives which would also teach them new skills.

Planners should get out from behind their desks and see what communities are really like, for example Community led “walk-about” - with council leaders being guided by members of the community. Don't use the excuse “we tried that 20 years ago and it didn't work”. Housing development needs to cater for the needs of families, single people, older people, disabled people etc. and there also be more tenant participation. In Rhyl, for example, one third of housing is holiday homes and lack of public transport is a major barrier to work.

There should be more ethnic integration to avoid “ghettos”. Mixed neighbourhood initiatives should guarantee participation and should include “invisible” groups such as travellers. More research is needed into the issue of rural poverty which is often hidden. Skills (particularly women’s) and resources are not utilised, More needs to be done to make public transport accessible to disabled people - particularly train stations

There should be a mixture of private and government investment in regeneration areas. Businesses need to put more into communities - especially when they take over what were public spaces (eg playing fields). Don’t assume that the creation of jobs will regenerate an area - community needs go much wider.

Some examples of good practice mentioned by those attending workshops:

Tower Hamlets is a good example of a mixed community which works.

Neighbourhood renewal schemes provide some positive learning experiences.

Network Groups such as CHIP - Children’s inclusion partnerships.

Good experience of working with Local Strategic Partnerships in Knowsley.

CRIME

Background from presentation:

Police numbers have risen by 25% in the last 10 years and crime is falling with an overall decrease of 35% in the same period. Yet, despite this reduction in crime, there are a record number of people in prison. There is a now more focus on the police and other services joining up and on drugs and drug related crime. Also there has been an increase in efforts to reduce re-offending and anti social behaviour.

Comments made by individuals who attended the workshops:

Crime rates have not reduced. People just don’t bother to report incidents because response times are too slow. Examples were quoted where the offender had disappeared by the time police turned up.

There is a sense of fear and concern in communities. Some communities become a “dumping ground” for problem tenants. Community police do not command respect in some areas, but there is some sense that community wardens can be effective. Communities need to work together with the police. Neighbourhood watch is a good example.

Drug and alcohol abuse, poverty and unemployment and crime are all interrelated. Drug rehabilitation centres are often present in areas where there is a response to a lack of employment opportunities.

Some bad behaviour is a natural part of growing up but has now been dubbed “anti social”. ASBOs don’t work and are seen as a “badge of honour” by young people along with being tagged. Children who are poor and well behaved get no rewards whereas those who misbehave do. There is more help available for those doing the bullying than their victims.

Prison becomes a way of life and is often viewed as being “like a holiday camp” with more money being spent on offenders than anyone else. Many get involved in drug taking for the first time in prison and younger offenders learn from older more experienced inmates. The length of sentence often does not match the seriousness of the offence. An example was quoted of a sentence of four and a half months for arson, yet many people (especially women) are in prison for trivial offences. There is also a perception that there are too many young black men in prison

The media inflates and inflames public opinion and creates many of the stereotypes – for example the concern over “hoodies”.

Passports are often required as proof of ID - even in connection with benefit claims - but the cost of passports is too high at £80. Need to be able to get alternative proof of identity that does not need money.

Actions suggested by those attending workshops:

There is a need for more visible policing in communities with real police officers and for police to be around after 5.00 pm which is when most trouble occurs. Police need more and better training in mental health issues and how to deal with them. They should work with whole communities to tackle issues and be seen as being part of the community with. Less turn-over of personnel would enable better community relationships to build up.

There should be better engagement with “problem families” to prevent situations getting out of hand. Parents need to work with the police rather than being hostile towards them. Domestic violence is a crime and should be dealt with as such. There should be more help for families in handling stress, violence and anger. And the police need to be better at dealing with “battered wives”.

Young people need more open spaces where they can hang out. There is a need to invest more in young people and the voluntary organisations who work with them. There should be more youth clubs and after school clubs with resources for activities such as music, drama, personal development, anger management etc.

There should be a warning that “Low expectations can seriously damage your health”. Young people need to have aspirations in life eg university/travel. A stronger, better funded education system will help to break inter-generational

barriers. It is important to avoid stereotyping at an early age, for example boys from ethnic minority backgrounds who do not achieve at school and who get involved in bad behaviour and crime “because they are bored”. Young people need reasonably well paid jobs to avoid cynicism about the world of work.

We need to work with young people to counter crime eg:

- People with experience of drug/alcohol abuse etc involved in the formal education process - they have credibility, shared experience and shared language (but difficulty with police checks and rules keep changing)
- Police community engagement projects such as school visits and “adopt a cop”
- Children to visit police stations to break down barriers and to visit prisons so they can see the reality of what “life inside” is like.

Children should not be treated as criminals but should be given help. Attention should be focussed on the hard core of real young offenders rather than tarring all youngsters with the same brush. There should be youth offender centres giving retraining for ex offenders and offering parenting skills to the parents of offenders. There should also be better education and skills training for people in prison - currently not available for those in for less than 2 years or for those guilty of substance abuse.

We should learn from examples of good practice which exist all over the country without constantly trying to re-invent the wheel. Also the media could play a positive role by focussing on positive behaviour and actions (local heroes). Asylum seekers should be given the right to work rather than being forced to forge papers and to work illegally.

Some examples of good practice mentioned by those attending workshops:

Outreach youth workers have had a positive impact.

A police open door surgery at a community centre in Wales

Neighbourhood Watch and the Community Safety Network in Northern Ireland.

Discussion sessions involving police, local authority and communities.

Active Inclusion workshop outputs:

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Background from presentation:

The Government's overall strategy for children "the future of our country" is outlined in the document "Every Child Matters". Key challenges are: to end child poverty; improve parenting and parental engagement in children's education; close the attainment and achievement gaps for disadvantaged children; increase social mobility; tackle childhood obesity; improve the situation of looked after children; and reduce the rate risky behaviour - e.g. of young offending and teenage pregnancy. The agenda spans a number of government departments and encompasses policies on education, benefits and work, health care, parental support and childcare.

Comments made by individuals who attended the workshops:

There is plenty of choice of nursery and primary education, but at secondary level there is not enough. Also the transition from primary to secondary education can be very difficult for some children and they need to be supported. "Ask the mum about primary education and ask the kids about secondary education". Nursery education is considered to be too free flowing and children are bored. When they get to primary school they find it hard to settle in to the more structured environment.

Increasingly younger BME women are reluctant to leave their children with older relatives to be cared for while they go to work or further education. This is because the older people often do not speak English, the language which the younger people speak at home and the kids become confused.

It is not always apparent that every child matters. An example was cited of a child who wanted to study history to a higher level, but there was not teacher available. Children who don't cause problems are ignored at school. A child was quoted as saying "Do I have to be bad to get something". More needs to be done to secure the life chances of care leavers.

There is not enough financial support or information for people going back to college. The New Deal is good for NVQ level but there is no support for HMC. There are rarely education places available which are suitable for people with children. It costs about £30 an hour to get a child with complex needs looked after (usually requiring two carers). Unlikely that such a parent could get in to education or work.

There needs to be more funding for courses to teach English as a second language.

Actions suggested by those attending workshops mentioned by those attending workshops:

Teachers need to be trained to understand the impact of poverty on families. Education **is** free - but there are many hidden costs. Children self-exclude from school because their families cannot afford for them to take part in school activities such as trips. There needs to be more help available in paying for these and more sensitivity around the way that help is given with school meals etc so that children are not identified as poor (ie dinner vouchers). School uniforms are very expensive and help, where it is offered, is very limited. Better support is needed for low income families. Children should only be excluded from school as an absolute last resort. An example was cited of a child who was excluded for wearing trainers as they did not have any other shoes.

Schools should be kept open for longer for pupils and should offer “wrap around” care for children of parents who work or are in education. The buildings should also be made available for use by the wider community. For example they could be used for adult training and education such as learning English as a foreign language. And sports facilities such as the gym should be made more widely available. And there need to be more after school clubs and provision for children to be looked after in the holidays.

The children of migrants should have the same rights to education as other children. It is too difficult for them to catch up once they are released from detention centres. Asylum seekers who are students are being deported during their final year of study - they should be given leave to stay to complete their education.

It's very hard for parents to keep children at school if they don't want to attend - there needs to be more partnership working between schools and parents. There also needs to be more discussion between parents and school about what the child's abilities are rather than focussing on what they cannot do. Where parents do not chose to engage a school-home link worker is a valuable resource.

Parents should be encouraged to become school governors to help them become involved in the education process. They should also be used more as classroom assistants, help in the playground at lunchtime etc

Parents need more clarity about what the curriculum contains and how decisions are made about what is in it. Parents of children with special needs should be offered training in how to help with their education. There need to be more positive approaches to bullying and more support for families that are affected.

The term NEET (not in education, employment or training) is stigmatising and should not be used. Connexions services should be extended to age 24, particularly for children with special needs.

There should be more help made available for women who want to train in roles that were traditionally male oriented and parents returning to full time education should be allowed to keep their benefits.

Lifelong learning should be made free for all pensioners. Older people are being prevented from having a second chance at learning.

Some examples of good practice mentioned by those attending workshops:

An example was quoted of good support for disabled people in Further Education.

Social services remaining in contact with children after age 16 where this is desirable.

BENEFITS AND WORK

Background from presentation:

The Government's message is that work is the best (but not the only) form of welfare. Work not only offers greater financial security, but also better physical and mental health. Government policies try to ensure a better fit between benefits and work, but recognise that the decision to work is not always an easy one, especially where there are family commitments or where a person has a physical or mental health problem. The Government is now focussing on improving support for more vulnerable groups in getting into work and tackling skills shortages.

Comments made by individuals who attended the workshops:

People need more help with confidence building and self esteem. Volunteering can work as a springboard in to work, boosting confidence and skills in preparation for paid work. People with dyslexia find it hard to understand government communications and sometimes end up losing benefits. Sanctions imposed for failing to attend an interview can stop immediately if an interview is arranged, but Jobcentre is not always good at providing relevant information.

Many people migrating from other parts of the world have skills and qualifications which are not recognised in the UK.

The Jobcentre's personal advisers have the potential for very positive results but they need better training and need to be more flexible in their approach. People's experience is often not good with examples cited of an aggressive "take it or leave it" attitude. "It's scary that if you don't like a job you can't go [straight] back on benefits". Seasonal working causes chaos because the tax/benefits systems are too slow and cannot keep up with changing work patterns and there are

unacceptable delays in the housing benefit regime, sometimes resulting in debt and evictions. There is a view that there is too much to lose when you start work - "you lose out on benefits the minute you start work"

Carers are very vulnerable to poverty, poor health and isolation. Carer's Allowance is not sufficient to replace income from work, so much of what carers do comes as a free good to society and has been estimated as having a value of £76 billion. The cared-for person is also a victim of the calculations for benefit when they live with a carer as their disability benefit is reduced. Grandparents often want to look after their grandchildren rather than allowing them to be cared for by others but if they are in receipt of income related benefits they cannot benefit from Carers Allowance.

Actions suggested by those attending workshops:

The childcare allowance in Tax Credits needs to be more realistic - Most lone parents starting work cannot afford 30% of the cost. Other costs such as housing and transport also need to be offset in the calculation. Tax credits also need to make allowances for larger families.

All carers allowances should be disregarded to avoid penalising the cared for as well as their carers.

Employers need to show that they understand their responsibilities towards employees, especially lone parents and people with health problems. Employers discriminate against people with disabilities and health problems. Everyone discriminates against older people and this should end. The anti discrimination laws must be enforced.

People living on benefits should not need to get in to debt to live. Benefit levels should be set at the level of average earnings. More publicity should be made available about levels of voluntary work that can be undertaken without JSA/Income Support being affected - There have been changes which few people seem to be aware of. And more publicity should be given to the fact that Child Benefit and child maintenance payments are not means tested once you begin work - a fact which needs to be more widely publicised. There also needs to be greater awareness of the availability of DLA and how it interplays with other benefits - Jobcentres seem to be giving out misleading information. Income Support, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit should all be dealt with in a single claim and eviction should never be considered where these benefits are in place. There need to be rapid reclaim arrangements in place where a job has not worked out.

Incapacity Benefit should be made non-contributory as many women are not entitled to it because they have broken records. Those with proven degenerative medical conditions should not have to submit medical evidence and attend medical examinations to continue receiving benefit as the whole process is which is stressful and makes them more ill.

Asylum seekers should be given the right to work, education, healthcare and training so that they can contribute to the formal economy.

Some examples of good practice mentioned by those attending workshops: “Reed in Partnership” was reported as providing a much better service than Jobcentre Plus in helping lone parents back in to work.

The Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) Pilots are showing very good results in getting people back in to work long term. Candidates are paid a bonus for every 13 to 17 weeks they remain in work.

SUPPORT IN WORK

Background from presentation:

The tax credit system is still not working well. There is now a system in place to deal with appeals. There are 6m people currently within the tax credits system and there is a lag of about 10 weeks between claiming and receiving payment. It is perhaps not sufficiently widely known that tax credits are based on family rather than individual income levels (means tested). It is also not well known that there is a “better off” calculator freely available on the HMRC website. HMRC are keen to know what needs to be done to improve the delivery of Tax Credits and their service to customers.

Comments made by individuals who attended the workshops:

The rich get more support than the poor, who pay tax on everything, even when they are in receipt of benefits. The strong public messages about fraud in the system put people off claiming benefits. Living costs are not seriously considered in assessing the levels of the tax credits and people are still left with very little after taking into account the basic necessities of life. Finding the 30% share of the cost of childcare is hard when the cost of childcare is rising. This is particularly a problem with larger families. Childcare is a problem when you are on low pay and that is why many people rely on informal networks. Sometimes it is difficult to work out whether you are better off on Income Support or Tax Credits and some people are not clear which they are receiving. There are communication difficulties between the various departments.

In-work poverty is a real issue. How do you climb the ladder? How does someone get support to train for a better job when they are already working? Some people cannot work, even when they want to. Examples were quoted of people who attended re-training but were still unable to manage work because of physical problems. Employers and employees need more help understanding of the complexities of dealing with people with mental health issues at work. The importance of volunteering as an alternative to training is not always recognised by staff in Jobcentre Plus. Attitude is that if someone is volunteering, they should also be actively seeking work. And the reduction in the child maintenance grant to £250 from a possible £1000 has reduced the incentive to work.

Awaiting a decision on an asylum decision creates destitution. As a result, asylum seekers often end up working illegally and are exploited by employers who pay low wages. It also means the government is missing out on tax revenue. Similarly, if people's benefit income is inadequate, they may end up working illegally.

Actions suggested by those attending workshops:

Government officials should get out more and meet people and HMRC staff need better training and should spend more time in the community.

Information about tax credits needs to be cleared and more widely available. For example, few people know about the change in arrangements with regard to increases in family income which mean that pay rises up to £25000 (from 6 April 2006) per year are ignored when calculating tax credit entitlement for the current tax year. In addition to telephone help lines, information could be made available include: post offices, libraries, nurseries, play groups, schools, community centres, shopping centres, and places of worship. Tax Credit claim forms need to be simplified with better structured information and examples that people can identify with.

Jobcentre Plus and HMRC should pool resources and run joint information/awareness campaigns. Jobcentres could do more to inform migrant workers of their rights and make information available in their languages. There needs to be better information about what is available to help you get back in to work (eg schemes, one off payments to help with clothing, transport etc). More information needs to be made available with regard to training opportunities either as a first step into work or for re-skilling. Also needs to be made available in accessible locations (eg. Further Education colleges).

The minimum wage needs to be better enforced and the level should be raised to the adult level for 16/17 year olds. People under 25 should be entitled to Tax Credits, whether or not they have children. Job opportunities for people in rural areas are very limited - particularly for disabled people. And there is a need to work with employers (particularly those in rural areas) to ensure that they pay adequate rates of pay. They need to show more responsibility by ensuring a rise from low wages for example in return for training.

Child Benefit should not be offset in the Income Support Calculation and the rate should be the same for first and subsequent children, although a differential for girls and boys is worth consideration.

Some examples of good practice mentioned by those attending workshops:

The "Want to Work" project in South Wales

Action Community employment (ACE) in Northern Ireland