

Social Justice: Transforming lives – Briefing Note

March 2012

The purpose of this briefing, with thanks to the Voluntary Sector North West, is to:

- Introduce the Government's Social Justice Strategy
- Highlight the key principles within the strategy
- Reveal the Government's plans for delivery
- Provide initial analysis and areas of potential action and concern.

The Background

The government has published its Social Justice Strategy, which is designed to make 'society function better – providing the support and tools to help it turn lives around'. This strategy is to be welcomed and provides a coherent approach to tackle some of the injustices that exist in our society, in which 2.67 million people are unemployed, many more underemployed and within which 3.8 million children live in poverty (after housing costs). The government have a particular view of the factors behind poverty, which appear to be largely based on the Centre for Social Justice's five pathways to poverty. These are:

- Family Breakdown
- Addiction
- Economic Dependency and Worklessness
- Educational Failure
- Debt.

The strategy appears to provide a framework to 'mend broken Britain' and a means to tackle welfare dependency. This conceptualisation of social justice that guides the Strategy is not one everyone would agree with. For instance, it is claimed that the strategy sets out the 'vision for a second chance' society. Some would argue that many people do not receive a first. The strategy claims that social injustice will be achieved through 'life change' of individuals. This neglects the systemic inequalities that exist within society

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and so therefore fails to address the necessary structural change, upon which it could be argued is essential to deliver social justice in the UK.

Developing a new approach to social justice?

The Social Justice Strategy signals a new approach to addressing the issues of poverty:

- The Strategy widens the debate on poverty beyond the relative income measure alone, moving beyond the so-called 'poverty plus a pound' approach, which it could be argued did not provide substantive change. However, there will be concern about the vulnerable members of society that will experience their benefits being withdrawn in order to achieve 'fairness for the taxpayer'.
- There is some recognition of complex and interlinking disadvantages that can result in poverty. However, the Strategy does not reflect an equal understanding of the way in which these combine, nor does it pay enough attention to structural inequalities. For example, ethnicity, is only mentioned once, which is a significant omission considering figures recently which show that half of young black males are unemployed, twice the figure of their white counterparts.
- The strategy is consistent with government rhetoric on localism and the smaller state. This should not solely be seen as a result of austerity, but is central to the political philosophy of the coalition. This provides real opportunities but is not without significant challenges for many of the communities that should be the target of intervention through this strategy.

A Lifestyle Approach

The Social Justice Strategy identifies four main areas of action that will create their vision of a 'second chance society'. These are largely focused on people and families with very complex needs, which whilst welcome, does not account for the significant levels of people in the UK living in poverty. Furthermore, the Strategy does not appear to focus on the lack of jobs and the impact of austerity, which recent research undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows is impacting most severely on the most deprived communities, who are already experiencing difficulties due to the withdrawal of Area Based Grant funding.

Unsurprisingly, the Social Justice Strategy does not appear to provide an alternative view of the economy and how this could be made to work more effectively for society; the fundamental basis of the Strategy is how to best integrate people into the existing labour market. Nor does the concept of co-production get mentioned, which represents a missed opportunity to create an effective and accountable welfare state, which promotes active equality at a local level, and in which the voice of those experiencing poverty is truly valued. The main measures highlighted in the strategy are described below:

Supporting families

The Strategy declares that the family is 'the most important building block in a child's life and any government series about delivering Social Justice must seek to strengthen families.'

This includes a range of current government programmes, most notably the Universal Credit, which is claimed will reduce the 'couple penalty', meaning couples are not disadvantaged relative to working singles. Also included is an extra £10 million a year on legal aid for family mediation, reforms to adoption and plans to tackle domestic and sexual violence.

The Strategy targets the 'lives of the most troubled families in England', which is estimated to stand at 120,000. This targeted support is resourced with £448 million over the next three years and aims to provide holistic support that will focus on getting children back into school, supporting parents into work and reducing crime. Each local area has been asked to identify their most troubled families and appoint a coordinator to oversee action.

Keeping young people on track

The Strategy sets out the government's plans to support young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, by helping schools support their poorest children and keeping children engaged in mainstream education and away from gangs.

The Strategy argues that it is unacceptable that young people should have their lives chances determined by their upbringing (although does not focus on socio-economic status as a factor). The pupil premium, which provides additional support to a school budget for each 'deprived child' is heralded. However, the withdrawal of Area Based Grant funding, which targeted

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resources according to deprivation suggests this measure is limited, especially when one considers the cuts to schools budgets that the pupil premium does not cover, for example, the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant, which supported pupils newly arrived.

The Strategy also provides programme to tackle the causes and impact of exclusion, providing mental health services for young people and a number of measures that are designed to reduce the effect that youth custody has on young people. A focus on young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) is also introduced and tackled more substantively in the section on work.

The importance of work

The Strategy recognises that work has 'the potential to transform lives not just of individuals, but of whole communities'. Also the government highlight the issue of intergenerational unemployment. The Strategy sets out a 'carrot and stick' approach through a 'combination of incentives and consequences' to support people into work.

This is consistent with the aims of the UK social policy under Thatcher (and continued by New Labour), which has sought to align the welfare system with the dominant model of economic growth and efficiency, providing a flexible labour force, a general education system and low levels of social protection, with a large role for the private sector in the delivery of welfare.

The Work Programme, which brings together 'support for claimants on a range of benefits and is delivered by providers offering tailored, locally appropriate employment support' is promoted as the vehicle through which this will be achieved. Evidence suggests a gap between policy and implementation, suggesting this will not achieve the government's stated aims. The Youth Contract is also introduced, which aims to get all young people 'earning or learning again'.

The Universal Credit is designed to make the benefit system help people into work not act as a barrier to it. It is intended that this simplifies the process of applying for different benefits as people move in and out of work, or between jobs and will 'eliminate the insecurity caused by gaps in income'. This is part of the strategy to 'make work pay' but the issue is not enough alone to eradicate poverty and this is not dealt with in enough detail in the Strategy.

Skills for work are seen as important and the government states that it 'continues to support a further education and skills system which gives adults of all ages a second chance at education. This includes announcement of a £210 million annual Community Learning provision, which includes the piloting of new Community Learning Trusts in 2012/13.

Supporting the most disadvantaged adults

This element of the Strategy focuses on supporting adults with multiple disadvantages to rebuild their lives, aiming for a 'preventative approach to social policy'. The extent to which the Strategy sets out such an approach is debatable.

The strategy includes policies to improve outcomes for repeat offenders tackling drug and alcohol dependency as well as overcoming health inequalities. This includes a focus on a 'group of 60,000 adults experiencing multiple needs and exclusions...who have effective contact with services and who are living chaotic lives'. A range of measures are announced as well as a more joined-up approach to service delivery.

A further element is overcoming financial exclusion and problem debt. This highlights a role for credit unions, which are seen as a means to provide cheap credit at affordable interest for people with low credit levels. Additional to this, is a promise to crack down on irresponsible lenders.

Delivering Social Justice

The Social Justice Strategy sets out the means through which policy will be delivered. This includes:

- **Opening up public services and incentivising providers through payment by results:** This strategy sits within the open public services agenda, which aims to increase the diversity of providers of public services, increase choice and accountability for service-users and is guided by decentralisation and a particular sense of fairness. The Work Programme is held up as the innovative approach that should be replicated across the welfare state.
- **Encouraging local choice and solutions:** This includes services that are designed and delivered with local priorities in partnership with local agencies, services and service users. This will build upon the lessons of

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Community Budgets and the Whole Place pilots.

- **Developing the social economic and understanding social investment:** This elaborates a particular view of the social economy that prioritises private sector investment. The Strategy sets out plans to support the social investment market and increase the role of philanthropy. Furthermore, and building upon the Social Value Act, the government aims to embed a deeper understanding of social value into policy making. This also seeks to explore a better understanding of Social Return on Investment.
- **Building the evidence base:** The role of evidence-based policy making is touched upon. This identified the need for commissioners and investors to be clear about the potential effectiveness and returns that different interventions can deliver.
- **The Social Justice Cabinet Committee:** Government will bring together Ministers to drive forward the aims of the Strategy to provide political leadership and oversee spending priorities.

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