

Ending Child Poverty in the UK

Notes from a meeting of the
Charities Parliament.
25th November 2009.
Oasis House, Lambeth, London.

The event aimed at exploring the role that schools, churches and voluntary organisations have in affecting the levels of poverty, especially with respect to the Child Poverty Bill currently going through Parliament.

Steve Chalke (founder of Oasis Global) outlined the statistics and main features of child poverty in Britain. A 5 minute DVD produced by the Citizens Advice Bureau highlighted basic issues of the hidden cost of education (school uniforms, trips, etc), the complexity of benefit forms for the less well educated, and the link between poor housing and poor health (physical & mental).

It was noted that in the Child Wellbeing and Child Poverty Report by Child Poverty Action Group (from research done by York University, Spring 2009) the UK came 24th out of 29 European countries in overall child wellbeing standards: Only above Romania, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania and Malta.

Members were asked to discuss, in small groups, the following questions:
What are the top 10 countries doing? What should we be doing?

My group noted that the rate of inequality (richest to poorest) in the top ten countries is far less than in the bottom ten. It was also noted that there is a greater pressure in UK society for parents to buy expensive presents at Christmas.

Helen Goodman MP – Under Secretary of State at the Dept. of Works and Pensions – outlined the progress of the Bill. It is currently coming back from its Committee stage before going to the Lord's. Once through there, final adjustments can be made before completion and Royal Assent, hopefully, around Easter 2010.

The Under Secretary noted that the role of the 'Voluntary Sector' lies in section 21c., which allows and encourages Local Authorities to go into Partnerships with Voluntary agencies to address poverty in their area. Whilst there are, within the Bill, specified 'duties' that will be laid upon Public Sector bodies, there are no such demands upon the Voluntary Sector.

It is acknowledged that the Voluntary Sector is closer than Government is to society in general "to see the whole person and the whole community", and that the Voluntary Sector is far more able to take risks and make innovations that other sectors can learn from. The Under Secretary said that Government needed the Voluntary Sector to be a 'critical friend'.

It is now 11 years since Tony Blair made the commitment to half child poverty by 2010. That has been achieved in terms of Absolute Poverty, but only ½ million children have been lifted out of Relative Poverty. Government now better understands the complexity of the task they face: Benefits, housing, jobs, health, inequality etc..

The Bill gives a 'firm commitment' for continued and sustained action.

Important aspects of the Bill.

1. Defined targets have been given in terms of Relative Poverty, Absolute Poverty, Persistent Poverty, and Material Deprivation.
2. A National Strategy is to be drawn up – updated every three years.
3. Annual Reports to Parliament.
4. Delivery at *local* level – with statutory duties – due to differences across the country.

The role for the Voluntary Sector:

1. Continue to challenge Government on their targets.
2. Consultation on national and local strategies – as defined in the statutory duties.
3. Keeping the local authorities accountable.
4. Delivery of action at local level in partnership with the authorities.

Government is interested in what works, is sustainable, and is value for money. Agencies dealing with Tax Credits, Job Centres, Sure Start and contractors need to work collaboratively with the Voluntary Sector [but no particular examples of how were given].

The Under Secretary finished her presentation by saying the Government needed the Voluntary Sector in terms of advice to Government.

Questions from the floor were answered by the Under Secretary.

Q – National and local actions and strategies are implied, but there is an international dimension to all this. Please comment.

A – A lot can be learnt from listening to the stories and experiences of other countries. For example the Child Care structures in Denmark are being studied for adaption here.

Q – Severe disability of a child is one cause of poverty. How is the Bill covering this issue?

Q – What explicit action is there for disabled people (adults or children) in the Bill given that the extra cost of living for the disabled is a key cause/indicator.

A – Poverty rates are higher when an adult is disabled due to problems accessing work. The Disability Discrimination Act will have some effect here. Quality of life now is important for children, not just for when they grow up.

Q – Section 21c of the Bill says that councils should engage with Voluntary Sector agencies ‘as they see fit: Would it not be better to list agencies that councils ought to engage with?

A – No. Lists can be difficult due to the differences between different areas of the country. Not all agencies are consistent in their activity throughout the country.

Q – Local Government often seems to draw in the voluntary sector to do work by offering money which is subsequently withdrawn after a couple of years but where the work needs to continue leaving the voluntary organisation the pain of closing the activity. Please comment.

A – There is a Compact that should be adhered to when setting up agreed partnerships between local government/authorities and partner organisations which should cover issues such as project overheads and funding details. The Voluntary Sector need to keep referring the authorities back to the Compact.

Q – Why should the Voluntary Sector hold local authorities to account rather than national Government?

A – National Government will be holding local authorities to account, but the Voluntary Sector can play a part in it.

Q – (RH) Does the Bill address the issues of inequality - a major cause of sustained poverty?

A – The measure of Relative Poverty puts pressure on the equality question.

[I was not happy with this answer and so have put in a written supplementary question – I await the reply - RH]

Q – There is much encouragement for Business to be ‘Green’. What does the Bill do to encourage Business to get involved in reducing poverty?

A – It would be a bad thing to put extra burdens on Business especially at a time of recession. However, employment practices can be a way forward. The Government has set up a Task Force to look at Part-time working as the Government wish to build up part-time employment. The introduction of the Minimum Wage has been very important. There are other initiatives such as allowing mothers who are looking for work to only search for jobs where the hours fit within school hours.

Q – A charity in Cambridge is being encouraged by one government department to expand it’s work, yet being hampered in doing so by another. If charitable trusts are to engage with the issue, where is the joined-up thinking at government level?

A – No ‘Pat’ answer would really cover the fact that the problem about getting departments to work together is well known within government.

Q – A lot of emphasis is placed on children under 11 or 12 – ie provision of Childminders for working parents etc. Are there resources for the 12 to 16, and part-time jobs for teenagers?

A – Yes, there is more put into the under 11’s. There is an agency funded by DCSF and National Lottery that is working specifically with teenagers. Extended Schools also engage with this area, but not every teenager wants to spend extra time at school after being there all day. There is also a need to explore resources for the transition period between primary and secondary education.

At the end of Question Time, the Steve Chalke replied to a comment made by the Under Secretary when she said that if government will not fully fund a project then the Voluntary agency should not get involved. He reminded her that the Voluntary Sector get involved because they want to be, not because of the money.

Thanks were expressed to the Helen Goodman MP for her time. Written questions were collected for her to reply to later.

The meeting closed.

On the Tube heading back to St. Pancras Station I saw a poster which read:
“An ounce of action is worth a ton of theory” – Fredrich Engels.

We await to see what action is generated from the Bill.

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