

## Tackling Social Exclusion : the hardest to reach

“Social exclusion has complex and multi-dimensional causes and consequences, creating deep and long lasting problems for individual families, for the economy, and for society as a whole. It can pass from generation to generation: children’s life chances are strongly affected by their parents’ circumstances, such as their income and the place they live.” (*Tackling Social Exclusion: Taking Stock and looking to the future*, Social Exclusion Unit, March 2004)

### **The story so far**

The latter part of the twentieth century saw worsening trends in social exclusion and inequality. Some of the main causes of social exclusion got significantly worse, such as unemployment (particularly long-term unemployment), and the proportion of children growing up in workless and low-income households. This was reflected in growing numbers of people suffering extreme disadvantage, such as rough sleepers.

In 1997 the Government put in place a new agenda to tackle both the causes and consequences of social exclusion, aimed at improving social justice, strengthening communities and supporting long-term economic growth.

The Government put considerable investment in place across a wide range of areas targeted at the disadvantaged. It placed particular emphasis on tackling the economic causes of social exclusion (especially worklessness and low income) and addressing social exclusion from early childhood with ambitious targets for tackling child poverty alongside investment in early years development and education. It also promoted investment in educational attainment and skills, to boost the life chances of those from a wide range of backgrounds and promote equality of opportunity.

The Government coupled this extra investment with a completely new approach, emphasising prevention and joined-up working, and partnerships with a wide range of organisations, including a much stronger voice for local communities. It focussed particularly on supporting disadvantaged areas where social problems are concentrated, and it put particular effort into tackling some of the most severe and intractable causes and symptoms of social exclusion, such as teenage pregnancy and rough sleeping.

The new approach and investment are already yielding results – breaking the trend of the longer-term increase in social exclusion and its causes. For example, despite strong average income growth, the long-term increase in numbers of children in relative poverty has begun to reverse. There have been substantial drops in unemployment, including long-term unemployment especially for 18-24 year olds, and rising employment for vulnerable groups such as lone parents, the over 50s, ethnic minority groups, and disabled people. The number of workless households is falling, and the extra investment in education is yielding results. Even the intractable problems of rough sleeping and youth offending have been reduced.

However, significant problems remain, and a series of lessons can be learnt. For example, measures to tackle the economic causes of social exclusion have delivered significant results in terms of employment rates, but persistent levels of worklessness

and concentrations of high unemployment in particular areas suggest the need for greater emphasis on employment in regeneration programmes for deprived neighbourhoods.

### **The library contribution**

Library, information and advice services play a significant role in tackling social exclusion. For example, libraries provide information and advice about income and benefits, such as the National Minimum Wage, Working Tax Credits and Educational Maintenance Allowance. Libraries also work in partnership with organisations like the Connexions Service which offers a personalised advice service for 13-19 year olds. Libraries also work with the new Community Legal Service which aims to make sure that people can get information and advice about their legal rights, and help with enforcing them.

Libraries are contributing to key strategic agendas such as Inclusion, Learning and Regeneration, through their involvement in a wide range of initiatives and programmes :

**Inclusion** : National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Local Strategic Partnerships, Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, New Deal for Communities, Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders, Sustainable Communities Plan

**Learning** : Sure Start Programmes offer services to over 400,000 children under the age of four, including around a third of all children living in poverty. Evaluation of the Early Excellence Centres (now Children's Centres) pilot programme indicates that these centres can help reduce social exclusion through enhanced social, emotional and cognitive development, early remediation in rates of child protection orders and "looked after" children, and improved physical well being.

**Regeneration** : Welfare to Work, New Deal, Pathways to Work, New Deal for Disabled People, JobCentre Plus, National Skills Strategy, Regional Development Agencies

The emphasis on tackling child poverty and investing in high quality early years services, such as Sure Start and Children's Centres, was the right one and the best way to improve the life chances of the next generation. This is important not just for the most disadvantaged groups but for a wider range of families where significant inequalities in life chances remain; inequalities in employment rates, health, low income and educational attainment persist between different social classes, different ethnic groups, and different areas of the country. People's life chances are still strongly determined by their parents' background. For example:

- a baby born into the professional classes can expect to live over seven years longer than one born into the bottom social class
- the likelihood of becoming a teenage mother was almost ten times higher for a girl whose family was in the lowest social class in 1999 compared to the highest social class

- only 15 per cent of young people from unskilled social backgrounds begin higher education by the age of 21, compared with 79 per cent of young people from a professional background

Increasing numbers of children enjoyed upward social mobility and greater life chances compared to their parents throughout much of the twentieth century. However, the latest data suggests this expansion appears to have slowed or even halted in recent decades, thereby reducing mobility. There has also been a fall in intergenerational income mobility. This means poverty in childhood was more likely to lead to poverty in adulthood for those born in 1970 compared to those born in 1958.

There have been some major gains in tackling social exclusion but there is a long way to go. The scale of the problem remains large: for example, there are only 53 per cent of lone parents in work, and 17 per cent of pensioners and 16 per cent of children live in persistent low income.

### **Looking to the future**

Looking forward, policy and delivery mechanisms will need to respond to changing economic, demographic, social and technological trends in the external environment. These will include the increasing premium on skills, the ageing population with associated care needs, greater ethnic diversity, and a growing proportion of single person households.

We will also need to renew our efforts to achieve equality of opportunity, recognising that some groups are harder to reach and last to benefit from policies to tackle social exclusion. As policies help people back into work, training or other opportunities, the pool of people who remain will inevitably be those who are harder to help. Already some groups are not being reached as easily by existing programmes. Policy and delivery changes may be needed to reach all those in need.

We also need to build on current successes by making more use of delivery mechanisms which are working well for vulnerable groups, as well as considering radical new approaches:

- individually tailored approaches – the use of personal advisers appear more effective than blanket approaches. Libraries need more outreach workers who can also be advocates for the communities they work with.
- Multi-agency working – to allow multiple needs to be picked up by single agencies. Libraries need to work in partnership with all the usual – and some of the not so usual – organisations and agencies.
- Joining up and customising services – to address the needs of some of the most disadvantaged groups who are likely to live in some of the most deprived areas, for example through Neighbourhood Renewal. Libraries should focus on the “hardest to reach”, including people with personal problems such as alcohol or drug dependency, homelessness or a criminal record.
- Making services more accessible – one-stop-shops, outreach, delivery via local intermediaries such as voluntary and community groups. Libraries should also employ more staff and volunteers from excluded communities.

- Common objectives for all targets – operating across agencies which will prevent services and targets pulling in different directions. Libraries should develop integrated service planning, delivery and monitoring with a wide range of organisations and agencies.
- Providing alternative environments – to deliver services in which excluded people feel comfortable, for example alternative learning environments, home visiting. Libraries must take services to where the people with needs are – including pubs, clubs and estates.
- Flexible timescales – available for clients to receive help on programmes. Libraries must be open at times when people need to use them, including evenings and weekends.
- Stable provision - also appears important to allow providers to carry out longer-term planning for clients and continuity in personnel to allow relationships to form between clients and providers. Libraries should avoid short term externally funded projects and develop long term mainstream funded services.
- Floor targets – we should learn to build on the success of some of the floor targets where we have seen significant improvements in narrowing the gap, for example education. Libraries also need to set challenging floor targets.

Libraries can play a key role – with regard to awareness and access - in improving the take up of services and opportunities by vulnerable groups. Lack of awareness of the existence of services and knowledge of own eligibility plays a key role in take up of services amongst those who are socially excluded. In terms of access, libraries are making a significant contribution to reducing the digital divide via the People's Network. Just 12 per cent of those in the lowest income decile have home internet use, compared with 85 per cent of those in the highest income decile.

Libraries can also capture reliable information about vulnerable groups. Some highly vulnerable groups are not picked up reliably in any social surveys or by administrative systems. These include, for example, dual heritage groups, refugees / asylum seekers, homeless people, disengaged young people, mobile or transient populations such as Gypsies and Travellers, and those in the bottom 10 per cent of the income distribution. More information on these groups is required to understand their needs and the risks they face. Award winning Libraries Change Lives! services to Refugees and Asylum Seekers (Merton, 2001) and Gypsies and Travellers (Essex, 2004) are capturing reliable information about these vulnerable groups.

Sustained effort will be needed to continue to reduce the scale of the problem, rolling out approaches which have been shown to be effective, and finding ways to measure and target success to give more priority to those who need most help. If we are to break the link between children's background and their life chances, it will be particularly important to continue supporting the early years to improve the life chances of the next generation, and sustaining that progress throughout the life course.

John Pateman  
 Head of Libraries, Sport and Support Services  
 Lincolnshire County Council  
 27 April 2004  
 1,820 words