



Centre for Local
Economic Strategies

bulletin

The government's social mobility strategy – Is fairness enough?

Number 83

Author: Clare Goff, Deputy Editor, New Start, claregoff@cles.org.uk 0161 236 7036

Introduction

The government has committed itself to social mobility as the principal goal of its social policy. Its social mobility strategy document, *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers*¹, published in April 2011, is framed around the idea of lifecycles. A life cycle framework will monitor mobility at key points in life, from early years through school years, 'transition years' from 16-19 and adulthood, with indicators for each stage. There is a strong focus on early years – which it calls 'foundation years' – a focus that is reiterated in its child poverty strategy², released in the same week.

The strategies bring together the government's social policy interventions and provide a narrative for its approach. Reforms to the welfare system, the introduction of a Pupil Premium and an end to unpaid internships are packaged up as a programme of lifelong support and action to help end Britain's damaging lack of social mobility, which it says 'leaves the country's potential unfulfilled'.

At a time when money is in short supply, a key emphasis is that poverty and mobility are about 'far more than just income'. Taking its cue from Frank Field's *Review of Poverty and Life Chances*³, which concluded that previous policy had focused too heavily on income transfers, the new approach is heavily geared towards interventions that have causal links with future success, such as extra support for families and access to inspirational speakers for schools.

Such 'soft' interventions may go some way towards leveling the playing field. They may even make life more 'fair' for some.

¹ *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers* – <http://www.dpm.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/social-mobility-strategy-launched>

² *A new approach to Child Poverty: Tackling the causes of disadvantage and transforming families' lives* <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/CM%208061>

³ Frank Field's *Review on Poverty and Life Chances* <http://www.frankfield.com/review-on-poverty-and-life-chances/>

But the most significant elements to both of these strategies is what they lack. Targets have been abandoned in favour of 'high level indicators'. No goals are set for either social mobility or child poverty. Indeed the new child poverty strategy promotes plans to review local government's duties around child poverty.

There is little attempt to link social mobility and child poverty interventions with broader economic challenges. Interventions around worklessness, around lack of opportunity and in-work poverty for example are few and far between.

So how far can a focus on fairness go in cracking social mobility and child poverty? This bulletin assesses the key elements of the social mobility and child poverty strategies and explores some of the issues behind its approach.

Fairness and the Lifecycle approach

The government's underlying principle to social mobility is fairness, which it defines as 'everyone having the chance to do well, irrespective of their beginnings'. This idea of fairness is a theme that runs through much of the current government's policy, from the Comprehensive Spending Review to its welfare reform plans.

While much of the focus of its social mobility strategy is on the early years of life, it recognises that there are clear 'opportunity gaps' at key stages of life, when social mobility can be improved. Its policies fall into four key life stages: foundation years, school years, transition years and adulthood.

Foundation years

Support for parents is a key part of government's foundation years' policy as is high quality early education and care. A new entitlement to 15 hours a week of free education and care for two year olds is introduced and it plans to reform Sure Start Children's Centres to focus more heavily on those families in greatest need and introduce a framework in which partners – be they public, private or from the social sector - will be paid in part by results. It is rolling out an Early Intervention Grant at local authority level and is considering an Early Intervention Places approach, as recommended by MP Graham Allen in his independent review of early intervention ⁴.

School Years

Its key policy is Pupil Premium which will provide funding for disadvantaged children. Its education endowment fund will be used to fund projects which genuinely raise attainment of disadvantaged pupils. Inspiring the Future programme will see 100,000 people from all sectors and professions visit schools to talk while Speakers for Schools will give state schools access to a network of high profile speakers, including all members of the Cabinet.

Transition years

The government will boost vocational skills through new University Technical Colleges (UTCs) and expand its apprenticeship programme to train over 360,000 apprentices in 2011/12. The new 16-19 Bursary Fund – which replaces the Educational Maintenance Allowance - will be primarily directed at the most disadvantaged. At university level more generous grants will be available to students of the poorest families and universities increasing their fees will need to demonstrate what they are doing to help those from poorer backgrounds.

⁴ *Early intervention: The Next Steps* by Graham Allen www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/early-intervention-next-steps.pdf

Adulthood

Government wants to open the internship system up to all and move away from career progressions that are dependent on 'who your father's friends are'. Unpaid internships at Whitehall are to be phased out. A new Enterprise Allowance will support unemployed people who wish to move into self-employment. A package of support will promote housing affordability and help first-time buyers.

CLES critique

CLES welcomes the fact that the government recognises that child poverty and social mobility are still issues in the UK today. Its holistic approach understands that people need different types of help at different times in their life and that individualized and localised support is best. Greater focus approach on the very poorest is to be congratulated, as is the key role the strategies give to education, particularly in the early years of life, the importance of which was highlighted in the Manchester Independent Economic Review ⁵.

However, there is a concern that the focus on fairness seeks to reward individuals according to merit and fails to take into account the structural reasons why people fail to succeed in society.

Measuring success

While welcoming the interventions outlined in the child poverty and social mobility strategies, CLES is concerned that without robust measurement of their success – and of the impact of public sector cuts which cancel out much of the new money – it will be difficult to assess their impact. The social mobility strategy says it has ambitious goals in place but does not outline them, while the child poverty strategy shifts the focus of poverty measurement away from income and towards a broader set of indicators, from low birth weight to teenage pregnancy. It announces plans to replace the Child Poverty Commission with a new Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission.

The Child Poverty Action Group is considering taking legal action against the government for not keeping to the requirements laid down in the Child Poverty Act, which include the setting of targets, and the setting up of a commission ahead of the publication of a strategy. CLES is also concerned by the weakening of child poverty indicators and particularly about proposals to review the child poverty duty on councils. It welcomes a broadening out of indicators to measure social mobility and child poverty but would like to see strict targets in place and more detailed information on how it plans to meet them. While the facts of mobility and poverty are important there is also learning to be taken from new measurements of well-being and happiness. CLES has been working closely with the Big Lottery ⁶ on looking at ways to measure, value, assess and understand what wellbeing gains, and the Office of National Statistics is also looking to develop new measures of national wellbeing ⁷. These can and should feed into data on child poverty and social mobility as part of a robust and rounded system of targets and assessment.

Without a clear strategy for monitoring progress on child poverty and social mobility and with the backdrop of less public spend, there is a real danger that progress will falter.

⁵ Manchester Independent Economic Review , <http://www.manchester-review.org.uk/>

⁶ Big Lottery Fund National Well Being Evaluation
<http://www.cles.org.uk/big-lottery-fund-national-well-being-evaluation/>

⁷ Office for National Statistics: Measuring National Well-being
<http://www.ons.gov.uk/about/consultations/measuring-national-well-being/index.html>

Linking social mobility strategies to growth

The child poverty strategy highlights the importance of work and the impact of parental worklessness on families. It outlines the government's broader commitment to economic growth and the ways in which it is improving the benefits system and helping remove some of the barriers to work. While welcoming reforms to the welfare system through the Work Programme and the introduction of Universal Credit, CLES is concerned that both the child poverty and social mobility strategies fail to link issues of poverty and poor mobility with the structural problems of local labour markets and opportunities. Child poverty and poor social mobility is concentrated in those areas left behind during the growth boom; only by tackling the problems of disadvantage related to place can inroads be made. The government's social mobility strategy is focused on the opening up of opportunities to people from disadvantaged backgrounds, creating greater meritocracy and tackling the differential capacity of places. But while creating a level playing field may help those individuals already on the 'ladder of life' to progress upwards, it will do little to help those areas struggling to get on the first rung. How are the structural problems of areas with entrenched worklessness, low skills and few jobs addressed in the lifecycle approach to mobility? Child poverty and poor social mobility are intricately connected to place and any attempt to tackle these issues needs to be linked to plans for local economic growth and tackling worklessness. A more rounded approach to the issues is called for, one that recognises that poverty is about more than opportunity and fairness, and that is linked into the structural challenges of many places. To what extent is poverty being addressed by the new local enterprise partnerships and local enterprise zones? Is the Regional Growth Fund prioritising those areas with the lowest levels of social mobility?

A place-based approach to social mobility

Both the social mobility and child poverty strategies highlight the role of personal responsibility – i.e. finding work rather than relying on state benefits.

They also shift the focus to local partners – be they business, public sector or voluntary sector. In line with the government's agenda around localism and big society, many social mobility and child poverty interventions have been localised. The Early Intervention Grant, for example, will support local areas to design effective early interventions, while Community Budgets are proposed as a means developing place-based approaches to poverty and a lack of mobility. CLES welcomes the recognition of the links between poverty, mobility and place but believes that a greater sense of the interconnectedness is needed. CLES's Place Resilience Framework⁸ is currently being piloted in a number of locations across England. A new strategic model for thinking about how our local economies operate, it focuses on boosting the links between the public, social and commercial economies and is helping inspire a new wave of thinking around place development. For people are not alone but exist within local networks, the strength of which defines their life chances. The Place Resilience Framework highlights ten danger signs that will help all local areas deal with the change. They include poor links between local economies and social and employment issues and a lack of 'local' interventions. We believe that a place policy approach helps build on the interconnections that support and strengthen local places, and thus help support and strengthen people. CLES has worked with local authorities to put the Place Resilience Framework into practice at a local level and is now looking at applying it at a neighbourhood level.

⁸ CLES Place Resilience Framework <http://www.cles.org.uk/research/resillience/>

Conclusion

Deprivation and poverty are caused not only by a lack of fairness or opportunity, but by deep structural issues related to place. Post-industrial areas still struggling to plug the skills and jobs gaps are the same places where high levels of child poverty and poor social mobility exist. While centralised nudges can help, the key focus for poverty reduction needs to be at the local level and needs to interconnect the various elements that go towards making a place happy, healthy and thriving. Local areas will struggle in the coming years of austerity to make a break-through on poverty and worklessness. Social mobility and child poverty targets could start to slip. Local areas need to be at the forefront of devising new interventions and of connecting up the various policy offerings to build joined -up thinking around place and poverty.

Bulletin is one of a series of regular policy reports produced by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES). CLES is the leading membership organisation in the UK dedicated to economic development, regeneration and local governance. CLES undertakes a range of activities including independent research, events and training, publications and consultancy. CLES also manages the monthly New Start digital magazine, through its new CLES online service, which provides comprehensive analysis and commentary on current policy and good practice.

Centre for Local Economic Strategies & CLES Consulting

Express Networks • 1 George Leigh Street • Manchester M4 5DL • **tel** 0161 236 7036 • **fax** 0161 236 1891 • info@cles.org.uk • www.cles.org.uk