



Centre for Local
Economic Strategies

briefing

Latest thoughts from Government on tackling inequality: The New Opportunities White Paper

January 2009

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Introduction

Published on January 13th, *'New Opportunities – Fair Chances for the Future'*, is the first White Paper to emerge in 2009. The paper, which is a cross-departmental publication, sets out the Government's agenda for investing in families, communities and citizens throughout their lives to help them get on and get ahead, making for "an upwardly mobile society" (p.4). Whilst acknowledging the current economic crisis, the White Paper is forward-looking, and argues that "a downturn is no time to slow down investment" and that instead we need to "prepare ourselves fully for the upturn". With echoes of the Leitch Review, *'New Opportunities'* makes the case for seizing the opportunities of the global economy, which is expected to double in size within the next twenty years. In order to remain competitive, the White Paper argues, Britain must invest in people's knowledge and skills.

What sets *'New Opportunities'* apart from the Leitch Review, which was primarily focused on skills, is the White Paper's greater emphasis on social justice, with the government emphasising that increasing knowledge and skills is not only important for maintaining economic advantage, but is also crucial for ensuring fairer chances for all. As such, the concept of social justice can be seen as the underpinning theme of the White Paper, which the government describes as:

"real opportunity for everyone to make the most of their potential in Britain where what counts is not where you come from but what you aspire to become" (p.1)

The principle of equality of opportunity underpins *'New Opportunities'* and consequently this briefing begins by exploring how this White Paper complements current equalities legislation before examining the key themes set out by government in the White Paper, at each turn highlighting the key duties and measures that have emerged.

The content of the White Paper

Perhaps one of the most significant themes to emerge from the White Paper is the emphasis on public bodies, including local government, to help people "fulfil their potential" (p.10) and remove "the barriers that hold people back" (ibid). Through the Equality Bill, announced in the Queen's

Speech in December 2008, public authorities are required to tackle inequality that arises from race, age, gender, or disability. For example:

- ❑ banning age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities or services;
- ❑ increasing transparency, for example, by banning secrecy clauses which prevent people discussing their own pay;
- ❑ ensuring public bodies report on equality issues such as gender pay and ethnic minority and disability employment;
- ❑ extending the scope for positive action;
- ❑ the government's creation a single new Equality Duty on public bodies to tackle discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and encourage good community relations;
- ❑ ensuring the public sector has due regard to equality when buying goods and services;
- ❑ helping to increase the number of ethnic minority women councillors.

However, *'New Opportunities'* suggests that public bodies must go further to alleviate the persistent inequality of social class. Whilst inequality can arise from age, gender, disability and ethnicity, the White Paper suggests that social class underlies many of these persistent inequalities, which may indeed be aggravated by the current economic crisis. In light of this, the government has announced in the White Paper that they will consider legislating to make clear that tackling socio-economic disadvantage and narrowing gaps in outcomes for people from different backgrounds is a core function of key public services. Whilst the government has not yet consulted on this, if legislation comes into force, it will have significant implications for local authorities and their duty to promote equality. The White Paper is built around a number of core themes, which this briefing will now go on to explore.

Theme 1: Seizing the opportunities of the new global economy

Whilst acknowledging the current economic crisis, the government also explores the potential of the UK to benefit from the global economy. In order to achieve this, the government advocates a joining up of policy and support on skills, transport, planning, public procurement and intellectual property. Ensuring a climate of innovation and a culture of entrepreneurialism will also be crucial. Investing in the workforce emerges as a key theme as does identifying and raising demand for skills.

Key actions include:

- ❑ to reduce the stifling impact of regulation on enterprise, the government will build on its targeted net reduction in the administrative burden of regulation of 25% by 2010;
- ❑ encouraging entrepreneurial skills for all by working with organisations such as the Prince's Trust to actively encourage under-represented groups to consider self-employment, and also to continue to make enterprise education available in schools;
- ❑ from April 2009 employers will be able to access Train to Gain through the integrated skills brokerage service from Business Link;
- ❑ working with employers to ensure there are relevant, high-quality training opportunities for UK workers to access available jobs, and that "only those migrants with the skills and talents to be of benefit to Britain to be admitted" (p.34).

Theme 2: Supporting child development in the early years

Research has shown that experiences during a child's formative years have a profound impact on their subsequent lives. For example, the language skills children have acquired by the age of five are a critical predictor of later life chances. However, gaps in development between children from different backgrounds open up early, with the White Paper noting that children in the 30% most disadvantaged local authorities remain far less likely to be developing well than children in other areas at five (39% compared with 55%). In light of this, one of the government's key priorities is to ensure a better start in life for all children.

Key actions include:

- ❑ the introduction of the Child Health Promotion Programme (CHPP) which aims to reduce health risks during pregnancy and then throughout a child's early years;
- ❑ the introduction of a new Healthy Child Programme for school-aged children and piloting the introduction of free school meals for primary school pupils;
- ❑ continued investment in Sure Start and building on the government's 'Children's Plan', the investment of an extra £79 million a year to 2011 to provide two outreach workers for centres in the most disadvantaged areas;
- ❑ extending the opportunity to access free early learning and childcare places, with the investment of £57 million to extend a pilot scheme to 15% of the most disadvantaged two-year-olds nationally;
- ❑ a new pilot scheme for Child Development Grants. Under this scheme parents who take up childcare places and work with Sure Start staff to take agreed action to support their child's development and improve their family's wellbeing, could be paid grants up to £200;
- ❑ improving the skills of the early learning and childcare workforce by considering making it a requirement that all practitioners have a full and relevant qualification of at least Level 3 (equivalent to A-levels) by 2015.

Theme 3: World class schools

Young people's experience of school plays a crucial role in shaping their futures. As the White Paper notes, school attainment at 16 "is a key indicator of future success" (p.45). The government has, in recent years, introduced a number of schemes to improve the quality of schools; both physically, through the Building Schools for the Future programme for example, and in terms of quality of teaching. Perhaps one of the more controversial measures the government has introduced, the academies programme, is defended in the White Paper, with the government stating that academies "are delivering better results than their predecessors, and yet serve a substantially more disadvantaged intake than the average" (p.47). However, the extent to which the government will invest in academies in the future remains vague.

Key actions include:

- ❑ 2009 will see a new project backed by £31 million, to demonstrate best practice in improving outcomes for pupils with special needs and disabilities, and to help schools rethink their approach towards and expectations of them;
- ❑ increasing funding so that more schools can provide extended services to disadvantaged families. Funding will expand next year to £40 million and £217 million in the final year;
- ❑ in order to promote personalised learning, from 2010 each child in secondary school will have a personal tutor, someone who knows them well, checks progress and responds quickly if any problems emerge;
- ❑ from 2010, 30,000 six and seven year olds will benefit annually from intensive one-to-one tuition half an hour a day. From 2010/11, one-to-one tuition will be an entitlement for every child in Key Stage 2;
- ❑ young people will now have a coherent set of choices from 14 years onwards including GCSEs, Diplomas, A-Levels and Apprenticeships;
- ❑ to pair the most effective teachers with the most challenging schools, from September 2009 all eligible schools will have access to a package of support for new appointments including a 'golden handcuff' of £10,000 payable in return for three years' service in a single participating school;
- ❑ raising visibility and accountability. Local authorities will set statutory targets for improving performance of pupils eligible for free school meals. The government will also consult on a new school report card to set out clear and simple information on how schools are raising standards, improving, and playing their role in supporting the wider development and wellbeing of children.

Theme 4: Pathways for all

Tackling the problem of NEETs (people aged 16-19 that are not in education, employment, or training) is one of the government's key priorities. Participating in education or training post-16 has clear economic benefits, as well as societal and individual benefits. For example, young people that participate in education post-16 are less likely to experience teenage pregnancy, be involved in crime, or behave anti-socially. It is hoped that improving the educational offer for this age group is a significant way of preventing young people becoming NEETs, and furthermore, tackle current trends in which young people from lower-income backgrounds are less likely to go on to university than those from wealthier backgrounds.

Key actions include:

- ❑ from 2013 all young people under the age of 17 will be required to participate in education and training, and this will be extended to 18 from 2015;
- ❑ developing new qualifications while retaining and simplifying current ones. The result will be that young people can choose between four different qualification routes:
 - General Qualifications, e.g. GCSEs and A-Levels;
 - Apprenticeships – have been improved and expanded (increasing the number of apprenticeships on offer in the public sector) and the government hopes to incorporate them into the UCAS points system by 2010;
 - Diplomas – based on a mixture of theoretical and applied learning focused on a broad industrial sector;
 - Foundation Learning Tier progression pathways – designed to provide clear routes and progression pathways at Entry Level and Level 1.
- ❑ better support for students with learning disabilities by encouraging supported employment and work experience within the new Foundation Learning Tier;
- ❑ early identification of young people from low-income families who have the potential to achieve at university, and providing a package of structured assistance during their time at school. For example, regular mentoring and high-quality information;
- ❑ from this year, all higher education institutions will be asked to produce widening participation strategic assessments.

Theme 5: Progression at work

Following the publication of the Leitch Review, upskilling the UK's population has been one of the government's top priorities. In order to remain economically competitive and reduce levels of long term unemployment, the UK needs to raise the skills of those who are out of work, but also promote progression at work. In other words, the integration of employment and skills support in order to help individuals "realise their potential" (p.67).

Key actions include:

- ❑ working closely with the professions to identify barriers to access and propose concrete actions to address them;
- ❑ plans to launch a new adult advancement and careers service and clarifying guidance to local authorities to ensure support for disabled people who seek education and employment opportunities;
- ❑ trials of a back-to-work entitlement of up to £500 for those have been carers for at least five years, including parents;
- ❑ trebling the number of Professional and Career Development Loans from 15,000 to 45,000, as well as offering more generous terms;
- ❑ encouraging companies to use Train to Gain funding to invest in training agency workers they hire, even though they are not the permanent employer;
- ❑ improve employment support for those with severe mental health conditions, as well as encouraging the use of personal budgets to fund employment support.

- ❑ increasing support for individuals wishing to move into self-employment, for example offering financial support during the first few months while their businesses are established;
- ❑ helping offenders secure employment, for example by improving direction to training opportunities.

Theme 6: Strengthening family life

The importance of family life emerges as an important theme in the *'New Opportunities'* White Paper, with the government describing families as "the bedrock of our society" (p.79). However, families face an increasing range of pressures including a lack of time to dedicate to parenting and financial worries. Strengthening family life will be crucial for meeting the government's target to halve child poverty by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020.

Key actions include:

- ❑ empowering parents to engage, setting clear expectations of what they can expect from schools, nurseries and other settings;
- ❑ giving parents regular, high-quality information on how their child is progressing;
- ❑ supporting them to develop the skills they need to help their child learn;
- ❑ ensuring that professionals are trained in how to work with parents and that schools and other institutions are accountable for how well they work with parents;
- ❑ expanding the Family Nurse Programme to more young, first-time mothers;
- ❑ investing £60 million in piloting targeted mental health support for children and young people;
- ❑ tackling child poverty should be seen as "core business" by all local authorities and their delivery partners. The government will consult on how legislation could incentivise local government to do more to tackle child poverty;
- ❑ piloting £200 Child Development Grants to help families that are failing to take up services offered by Sure Start Children's Centres;
- ❑ increasing families access to assets through schemes such as Saving Gateway accounts (available from 2010), in which government contribute an extra fifty pence to every pound saved;
- ❑ expanding Family Intervention Projects to more at-risk families;
- ❑ developing a national employment support programme for care leavers, as part of a wider drive to improve the quality of transition from care to adulthood;
- ❑ improving partnership working between employers and children's services through the creation of a national network of employers from the private, public and third sectors who will sign up to a commitment to develop employment support initiatives in their organisations for young people leaving care.

Theme 7: Supporting communities to support individuals

The final theme outlined in the White Paper explores how communities can be supported to encourage individuals to 'set their sights high' and "develop the resilience to overcome adversity" (p.91). The government argues for a "holistic view of communities" (ibid) in order to tackle the underlying economic causes of deprivation, including through greater job opportunities and higher aspirations. Continuing on from 2008's Empowerment White Paper, the government emphasises the importance of empowering communities to respond locally to the problems they face.

Key actions include:

- ❑ placing Sure Start Children's Centres on a statutory basis, including a new duty on local authorities to consult with families and communities before opening or closing a centre, or making significant changes to the services available;

- ❑ local authorities will be given grants to develop new and innovative approaches to tackle child poverty in their areas, working with local partners to test ways of addressing the needs of families in their areas;
- ❑ extending the Young Advisers initiative which enables young people to engage with civic society and decision makers;
- ❑ introducing the Inspiring Communities programme that will invite neighbourhoods to design and deliver a package of interventions for young people, their families and communities;
- ❑ investing £117 million between 2008 and 2011 to support the charity 'v' in its work enabling 16-25 years olds to volunteer;
- ❑ a new £15 million New Communities Fund (NCF) to support the regeneration work of the Homes and Communities Agency. The NCF will initially support around 10 local authority pilot programmes.

CLES reflections on the content of the White Paper

The most striking feature of the *'New Opportunities'* White Paper is that it brings together a broad range of interrelated agendas, including family, childhood, skills, progression and education; reflecting that the document is a joint publication from a multitude of government departments. This perhaps signals a shift towards a more holistic approach to tackling inequality. Furthermore, whilst both central and local government are already undertaking a number of the activities set out in *'New Opportunities'*, the White Paper emphasises the way in which activity around themes such as family life, education, and employment ought to interconnect and be joined up.

The White Paper also indicates an important shift in the way that inequality is conceptualised at the local level. In recent years promoting equality has tended to been dealt with thematically, dealing with age, gender, ethnicity and so on. However, *'New Opportunities'* suggests that to tackle these inequalities, local authorities need to get to the root of the problem: economic disadvantage. Further reflections on the White Paper are as follows:

1. The White Paper marks a cross-departmental approach to tackling inequality – not seen since the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. Whilst Local Area Agreements and Local Strategic Partnerships have encouraged a holistic approach to economic development at local government level, the White Paper puts this rhetoric into reality at central government and departmental level.
2. The White Paper also illustrates the importance of local economic development as a key driver of regeneration in government thinking, which follows on from the Sub-National Review, the Empowerment White Paper and the Regeneration Framework.
3. Welfare reform emerges as another key theme of the White Paper, with particular emphasis on retention and progression within employment, which reflects the government's drive to raise skills levels in the UK and not just to get people into jobs, but jobs that pay well and that offer opportunities to progress. However, with unemployment rising and statistics showing a reduction in job vacancies as a result of the current economic crises, perhaps the most pressing issue local authorities need to address is the lack of employment opportunities available 'full stop'.
4. The White Paper reiterates the government's aim to halve child poverty by 2010 and eradicate it by 2020. This is an ambitious strategy; however it is encouraging to see that the government recognises that tackling child poverty will demand a holistic approach that takes into account family, education, employment and community. The White Paper also serves to formalise the child poverty strategy by emphasising the role of local authorities in reducing levels of child poverty and introducing practical measures that local authorities can implement. For example, the introduction of grants to develop new ways to tackle child poverty at the local level.

5. Since the publication of the White Paper and its emphasis on the role of central and local government in encouraging social mobility, the introduction of a duty to promote equality has been mooted. Although this is not made explicit in the White Paper, the government outlines that it will consider implementing legislation to make clear that reducing socio-economic disadvantage is a core function of key public services. This resonates with the government's place shaping agenda which emphasises local government's role to create communities that are attractive, prosperous, vibrant, safe, strong and ultimately equal.

Briefing is one of a series of regular policy reports produced by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES). CLES is a not-for-profit think-doing organisation, consultancy and network of subscribing organisations specialising in regeneration, economic development and local governance. CLES also publishes Local Work, Bulletin and Rapid Research on a range of issues. All publications are available as part of CLES membership services. To find out more about membership visit the CLES website or contact CLES to request a membership leaflet.

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