

Tackling Poverty, Inequality and Deprivation in Scotland

A summary of the Scottish Government Discussion Paper

In January 2008 the Scottish Government launched a discussion paper on tackling poverty in Scotland. This provides an opportunity for individuals and organisations to talk to the Government about poverty, inequality and deprivation in modern day Scotland. The intention is to create a discussion that will inform the Scottish Government's development of a 'framework' to tackle poverty. This will provide guidance for government, local authorities, the voluntary sector and private sector about what is happening, and what should be happening, to tackle poverty in Scotland. This short paper provides a short summary of some of the key points in the paper. It is intended to encourage groups and organisations across Scotland to take advantage of this opportunity and feed into this important discussion on how best to tackle poverty.

The Context

The Scottish Government is already committed to tackling "...the significant inequalities in Scottish society" (National Performance Framework) which will be measured by a "decrease [in] the proportion of individuals living in poverty"; the Scottish Government also remain committed to the UK goal of halving child poverty by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020.

The central question of the discussion paper is: *How best can we achieve economic growth and reduce poverty and income inequality in Scotland?* The Scottish Government Economic Strategy (GES) sets out an overarching objective: *"To create a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth."*

The approach being suggested in the discussion paper seeks to build on two GES 'golden rules'. The **Solidarity Rule** seeks social equity by increasing the proportion of income earned by the poorest groups by 2017. The **Cohesion Rule** seeks equity of prosperity between all regions; the objective is to narrow the gap in economic participation between the best and worst performing regions by 2017.

Why tackle poverty?

Scotland has “a proud history and ethos of being a compassionate nation with a strong sense of social justice and addressing the needs of the vulnerable...it is simply morally unacceptable that over 20% of our children still live in poverty.”

The paper is clear that low income is at the heart of the problem of poverty in Scotland. However it is also acknowledged that tackling poverty is about more than just income, it also means ensuring access to key resources such as education, housing and healthcare. There is a need to tackle the structural barriers preventing individuals and communities from accessing these services but there is also a need to improve “the internal capacity of disadvantaged individuals to lift themselves out of poverty”.

The evidence is clear that the continued existence of poverty acts as a drag on economic growth and both contributes to, and derives from, a range of other social problems. A lack of skilled labour not only has a negative impact on Scotland’s international competitiveness but low-skilled work is also low-paid work and often will not bring in enough money to lift a household above the poverty line.

The long-term impact of poverty on individuals and families is well evidenced in terms of health, educational attainment, employment opportunities, crime, substance abuse, and homelessness. But many communities in Scotland are blighted by deprivation that impacts all aspects of life from education and healthcare to increased incidence of crime & bad housing. It is argued that these conditions can lead to intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Principles for tackling Poverty

In developing the framework, there are some key principles that the government will seek to ensure are at the heart of their plans for the future:

- A focus on tackling the causes as well as the symptoms of poverty
- An approach that improves the internal capacity of disadvantaged individual to lift themselves and their families out of poverty by developing their resilience, while also seeking to tackle the structural barriers (such as market failures, unresponsive public services or prejudice and discrimination) that prevent some people from accessing the opportunities available to others
- A focus on early intervention and prevention wherever possible – to break the cycle of disadvantage

- A focus on providing work for those who can work, alongside support for those who can't – this should of course be sustainable work that lifts households out of poverty and provides real personal development opportunities
- A conviction that everyone – regardless of their circumstances – should be supported to achieve their potential
- The need for gendered analyses - and, where necessary, gendered approaches
- Targeted support for the most disadvantaged – but within a framework of universal service provision and a minimum 'offer' that the government expects everyone to be able to access
- The promotion and adoption of partnership working and seamless service provision which effectively connects with individuals and successfully moves them through the system (with service providers focusing on what they do best and then passing people on) in order that, as far as is feasible, they make progress at every stage and do not become stuck in the 'revolving door' of support services, circulating in and out of poverty or work
- Delivery of sustained, holistic, personalised support which is client rather than provider-focused and equips individuals to sustain themselves into the future
- The adoption of policies and services that are founded upon user involvement, consultation with people experiencing poverty, and community engagement and empowerment, so that policies and practice are informed by the real experience of those the service is trying to help
- Achievement of the right balance between closing the gap/tackling inequality and helping the very poorest in society
- The development of more active public engagement around poverty in Scotland as an issue which should concern us all and which requires action from the private as well as the public and third sectors

Key Questions:

- Are these the right principles?
- Are there other principles that should be adopted?
- Is there potential for some to compete, and therefore be in conflict, with others?
- How can the government ensure that they are in turn adopted by key delivery bodies and agencies?
- Given that there is a finite resource available to deliver on these laudable aims, what is it feasible to expect and should some principles be prioritised over others?

Tackling the Causes and Working Together

Currently, the bulk of public spending is focused on the consequences of poverty: providing benefits, social services, school meals, healthcare and housing. The discussion paper argues that it is time to shift the focus of public spending from managing the effects of poverty to tackling the root causes of poverty.

Tackling poverty in the devolved context requires Scottish and UK governments to work together. The paper contends that Scotland should primarily focus on the **prevention of poverty and tackling root causes**. Some suggested key actions include:

- Addressing educational disadvantage and underachievement
- Tackling poor health
- Providing more choices and more chances for disengaged young people
- Tackling worklessness – particularly inter-generational
- Providing the best start in the early years
- Regenerating disadvantaged communities
- Addressing attitudes, perceptions and values

UK wide policies on tax and benefits (e.g tax credits) and the minimum wage have had the greatest impact on poverty to date; but much of the impact has already been felt. UK policies will continue to be important for **lifting people out of poverty** but devolved policies have a supporting role. Suggested actions include:

- Improve employability (childcare, skills, economic development)
- Increase sustained employment and workplace progression
- Joined-up, client centred services
- Support better mental wellbeing and resilience
- Promote benefit take up and support for those who cannot work
- Tackle substance misuse
- Address homelessness
- Reduce offending and re-offending

To **alleviate the impact of poverty** the following actions are suggested:

- Increase entitlement and encourage the take-up of free school meals
- Abolition of prescription charges
- Funding free personal care for older people

- Free bus travel for older people and discounted travel for younger people
- Tackling fuel poverty among the poor
- Developing the concept of a “living wage”

Across these broad areas of anti-poverty activity, some of which are currently being implemented, some of which are being developed, the Scottish Government asks two key questions:

- Are these the right areas for action?
- Where should they concentrate our efforts?

Poverty will not be tackled with a ‘one size fits all’ approach. It may be necessary to take a differentiated approach in order to secure real improvements. The paper also asks: *Are there groups within society that require a different approach and what should that involve?*

The eradication of poverty will only happen with the support of all sections of society. It is important to understand how poverty is perceived by the public:

- How does the government go about engaging the wider public in efforts to tackle poverty in Scotland?
- What kind of language should be use in order to communicate effectively on these issues?

A vital question for the consultation is: **to what extent are current policies and programmes fit for purpose?** The Scottish Government is also seeking views on:

- Where the Scottish Government can contribute most to tackling poverty;
- How can the impact of these policies and programmes be maximised;
- Are there gaps in these policies and programmes that need filling. How should they be filled;
- The balance of activity between the three key areas outlined above;
- How well reserved and devolved programmes currently complement each other and any areas where co-operation can be improved;
- The key barriers to greater partnership working and examples of how these can effectively be overcome;
- Any areas where it is believed enlargement of the devolution settlement could improve the seamless provision of support and achieve a greater impact on poverty and income inequality;

- Should the Scottish Government do more to influence thinking and action on poverty within any particular constituencies (i.e. employers)?

The Government cannot eradicate poverty by itself. It must work together with people who understand the exact nature of poverty and disadvantage in each part of Scotland. The work must be taken forward together with local government, community planning partners, the public and third sectors, and through effective engagement with the private sector as well as the public.

Next Steps

The formal consultation process will run until 3 May 2008. The Scottish Government intends that the framework will provide a comprehensive approach to tackling poverty in Scotland. The Framework will be produced later this year after further discussion with key stakeholders.

Written responses to the consultation can be submitted to the Social Inclusion Division of the Scottish Government. The document and a standard questionnaire are available for download from:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/02/01150409/0>.

If you would like to run an event associated with the consultation please contact Alan Nicholson at the Scottish Government: alan.nicholson@scotland.gsi.gov.uk, Tel: 0131 244 7369. Alternatively, The Poverty Alliance is running a number of events related to the consultation. We are also holding events in partnership with other organizations. To find out more about these events please contact Peter Kelly peter.kelly@povertyalliance.org. In addition we are running a series of workshops with people experiencing poverty, the results of which will be feed into the formal consultation. If you would like to be involved in this aspect of the consultation please contact Sally Mackenzie on 0141 353 0440 or at sally.mackenzie@povertyalliance.org