

Lankelly Chase Foundation

The politics of disadvantage:
New Labour, social exclusion
and post-crash Britain

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Foreword

By now we were meant to have reached a secure settlement for people on the margins of society. The social exclusion agenda was intended to be much more than a series of initiatives. It was envisaged as a fundamental reframing of political discourse whose objective was nothing less than to 'end social exclusion' through public service reform. While many improvements followed of which we can still be proud, recent spending cuts have revealed the extent to which progress relied on the supply of new money. Fifteen years since the launch of the social exclusion agenda, our ability to support our most disadvantaged citizens remains highly contingent.

What causes politicians to risk their political capital on attempts to improve the lives of the most disadvantaged members of society? How do they square such action with their wider political philosophy or narrative? How do they sell this to an often sceptical, sometimes antagonistic public? And is the resulting action ultimately in the best interests of those it aims to support?

These questions are more sensitive and urgent than ever. The well-being of people who face severe and multiple disadvantage depends critically on support provided by publicly funded services. These services in turn are determined by the nature and tone of political discourse. As spending cuts deepen, national and local politicians are having to make decisions that may literally prove a matter of life and death for people who have little or no stake in the political process.

The economic context may be unprecedented, but many of the factors that currently shape the politics of disadvantage are familiar:

- public and media concerns about social fabric and personal responsibility
- an inevitable focus on a core electorate (the 'decent hard-working majority')
- the premium placed on an individual's economic utility in a globalised economy
- strongly divergent views on how different manifestations of disadvantage should be understood and prioritised

These and other factors helped shape, for good and ill, the social exclusion and social justice agendas of the New Labour and Coalition governments respectively. This report, written by IPPR for LankellyChase Foundation, aims to bring these factors to the surface so that we can understand better their impact on the development and delivery of policy. It also appraises what the basis for a new politics of disadvantage might be.

Given the grim reality now facing the most disadvantaged, an analysis of political discourse may seem an odd priority. What this report shows, however, is that political case for action remains complex, the terms of the debate are not wholly constructive, and the means of delivery are especially contested. The imperative to lead this agenda with clear-sighted political ideas and argument is greater than ever. The lessons of the recent past need to be learnt and new approaches developed that respond to a radically transformed environment. Otherwise, the undeniable progress made in the last 15 years on social disadvantage risks going into rapid reverse.

Julian Corner
Chief Executive, LankellyChase Foundation

Executive Summary

Introduction

Just days after the 1997 election, Tony Blair made a speech on the Aylesbury Estate in South London, promising 'there will be no forgotten people in the Britain I want to build'. The New Labour government set out an ambitious vision to end social exclusion as part of a project to re-build Britain as 'one nation', in which each citizen 'has a stake'.¹ New Labour's social exclusion agenda was a bold attempt to deal with chronic levels of social disadvantage and inequality in the UK in the mid-90s. It aimed to achieve this not simply by redistribution through the tax and benefits system, but by reforming government, improving public services and targeting support for the most disadvantaged.

Important progress was made in reducing social disadvantage, which, this report argues, should be built on. However, given the substantial resources invested and the health of the economy over the period, reform under the social exclusion agenda did not extend far enough beyond Whitehall into public services or local government and the agenda never made full use of peoples' potential.

There has been no real attempt to learn from the decade-long social exclusion agenda for politics, yet it has vital lessons to offer each of the main political parties. In this paper we review the impact of the social exclusion agenda, focusing in particular on the implications for future policy on 'multiple disadvantage'.² We set out new ways forward by examining findings according to different political perspectives which have their roots in the theory and practice of politics today.

Our findings are based on almost 30 interviews with those involved in efforts to tackle social exclusion over the past fifteen years, carried out over several months in 2012. Interviewees included service users who received support during this time, a number of former ministers and senior politicians in the New Labour government, political advisers and policymakers under Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and under the Coalition government, the former heads of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) and Social Exclusion Taskforce, academics, civil servants, local government officials and civil society representatives. We explore, in particular, how efforts at social reform are heavily shaped by the 'politics of disadvantage', a term which we use to describe the 'democratic deficit' facing the most disadvantaged in society.³

“ I think there is a lot of out-of-sight for these problems, this is a problem for all [political] sides...it's out of sight out of mind for a lot of folk. ”

¹ Prime Minister Tony Blair speech 'Bringing Britain Together', South London, 8 December 1997 (Blair 1997).

² Multiple disadvantage is defined as the experience of two or more of the following: mental illness; certain personality disorders; severe alcohol dependence; drug dependence; homelessness; learning disability; and adult neurological disorders. These problems can reinforce and compound each other (Duncan M with Corner J 2012).

³ People who experience multiple disadvantages rely heavily on publicly funded support and so their outcomes are especially susceptible to the way in which political discourse determines public policy. This politics is itself shaped by a number of relevant pressures and drivers, including: public and media concerns about social fabric and personal responsibility; the focus on a core electorate; the premium placed on an individual's economic utility and independence and the political and policymaking processes that shape the delivery of public services

Key findings

Social exclusion agenda made progress in reducing social disadvantage but was overly reliant on the levers of state.

The biggest achievements of the social exclusion agenda were those where government could use the levers of state to bring about change, for example, in redistributing wealth through the tax and benefits system to reduce the number of children living in poverty, using conditionality in the welfare system to increase numbers of people in work or concentrating resources to meet one-off targets, such as teenage pregnancies or numbers of people sleeping rough. On problems that required a more nuanced approach such as responding to complex needs that cut across a number of services, tackling ethnic inequalities and increasing the voice and power of the most disadvantaged, the agenda had less success.

The agenda relied on marginal spending, leaving mainstream public services largely unchanged.

Initiatives and reform often lacked institutional and local roots. In areas such as urban regeneration, health, social services and education, marginal spending secured by the SEU had limited influence on 'mainstream spend'. This was particularly the case in relation to area-based regeneration. A lack of lasting reform was seen in the 'limited evidence of the re-aligning and re-allocating of mainstream budgets' (York Consulting 2008) as a result of initiatives that were funded through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. A failure to successfully 'mainstream' these efforts was also attributed to the influence of New Public Management (NPM) practices that encouraged service users to become 'active consumers' of services, rather than engaged participants, often bypassing existing informal networks and inhibiting a sense of local ownership. The economic crash and resulting collapse in public finances has exposed this reliance on marginal spending as a key weakness in New Labour's approach to tackling social exclusion.

In an era of heavily reduced public spending, government will not be able to 'coax and cajole' departments into mainstreaming social exclusion objectives through one-off investments, such as the £1.71bn New Deal for Communities (NDC),⁴ cross-cutting units or large programmes to improve integration between systems, such as the Drugs Intervention Programme.

Services and systems struggled to deal with complex social problems.

Service users from disadvantaged groups continued to experience a lack of timely engagement, poor or infrequent contact with professionals and were given little information about the planning of their support. Because of the complexity of their problems and the difficulties they often face in forming trusting relationships, people with multiple disadvantages need highly relational, intensive contact. Yet the 'command and control' systems of accountability under New Labour, with centrally determined targets dictating local action, all too often restricted professional autonomy, diverted attention away from the frontline and created resentment among service users. Services all too often 'met the target but missed the point' as the complex, personal achievements of building successful relationships and a sense of purpose in life were often squeezed out by systems that favoured 'hard' outcomes. This is not straightforward, however, as these systems of accountability were also seen to have tackled poor performance and to have led to greater allocation of resources to tackle disadvantage through national indicators such as public service agreements.

The agenda did not significantly shift the experience of disempowerment among the most disadvantaged.

The sense of disempowerment that is a constant feature of life for the most disadvantaged was not sufficiently challenged under the social exclusion agenda. New Labour offered greater opportunity and improved public services in return for which individuals were asked to show greater personal and social responsibility. But this led to a politics of exclusion that was narrowly focused on obligation. A weak concept of inclusion beyond the labour market meant there was not a strong enough platform for challenging prejudice and stigma, under-representation and marginalised groups' experiences of unresponsive services

One review found that targets and requirements for greater participation in social and political activities had little impact, and many low-income families felt they had 'no influence at all' (Stewart and Hills 2005). Over time, the politics of the social exclusion agenda became more concerned with bearing down on social dysfunction in pursuing the Respect agenda to tackle anti-social behaviour, rather than action on social inclusion. Prospects for the most severely excluded, including those at the bottom of the income distribution scale,⁵ did not significantly change over the period.

⁴ Between 1999–2000 and 2007–2008, the 39 NDC partnerships spent a total of £1.71bn on some 6,900 projects or interventions <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/ndc/downloads/general/Volume%20six%20-%20Assessing%20impact%20and%20value%20for%20money%20.pdf>

⁵ The very bottom 5 per cent of incomes increased by around 1 per cent per year in real terms between 1996/97 and 2004/05, compared with annual increases of between 2 and 3 per cent for the rest of the population (SEU 2006).

	Egalitarian	Liberal	Relational
Political strategy			
Social inclusion strategy 'Opportunity for all'	New Labour right to place priority on employment and training as a means to inclusion but weak on tackling injustices of market economy	New Labour did not do enough to give voice and power to the most disadvantaged; inclusion strategy based on too narrow a view of citizenship	New Labour had a utilitarian approach to inclusion; should be valued as a good in and of itself
Securing public legitimacy ('Rights and responsibilities discourse')	Reciprocity is vital for the legitimacy of public services but the balance was lost between 'rights' and 'responsibilities'	Public services need a moral framework, but under New Labour individuals and communities were disempowered	Rights and responsibilities exacerbated the exclusion of some groups and exploited them for political gain in a way that was undemocratic
Policy			
Scope of the social exclusion agenda	The focus for tackling social exclusion should be broad, with a universal orientation and within a wider policy framework of redistribution	There should be a targeted approach to improve life chances for the most disadvantaged; the welfare state plus public services formula has failed	The state should not define groups of disadvantaged people when their individual characteristics vary and are dynamic
Evidence-based Policy	New Labour's focus on evidence-based policymaking was right, but this came at the cost of widespread reform and did not do enough to tackle entrenched inequalities	Knowing 'what works' is vital to ensure value for money, secure the effectiveness of policy and target support as well as possible	Evidence-based policymaking encourages a top-down approach, which standardises responses and conflicts with community empowerment
Statecraft			
Policy Implementation	The impact of the social exclusion agenda was limited by a focus on marginal spending on targeted programmes and didn't do enough to tackle inequality	Social exclusion policy often lacked local ownership and an enduring legacy of individual empowerment.	Individuals and communities were encouraged under the social exclusion agenda to become 'consumers' of services rather than participants
Accountability and localism	Accountability became too centralised under New Labour, but there is scepticism about how greater localism will cater for the most disadvantaged	Reform was limited because although new governance structures and organisations were set up, they were seen as agents of delivery rather than institutions in their own right	Systems of accountability standardise and remove any space for contingency and complexity; this keeps power in the hands of the state, which should be devolved to civil society and people

In order to marshal these findings and reflect on the New Labour period, we draw on three influential forms of political thought: Egalitarian thinking prioritises material and distributional concerns, long central to social democratic politics; Liberal political thought combines a commitment to individual rights with a strong tradition of civic engagement; Relational thinking advocates a politics built around everyday experience and the centrality of human relationships to the good life and was central to the collection of ideas referred to as 'Blue Labour'. The three political frameworks suggest different ways forward for various actors including political parties, policymakers and civil society, to respond.

Aspects of each of these schools of thought can help set out a way forward in tackling social disadvantage. Egalitarian principles can provide a vision for greater equality and universal support, while liberal means of individual and community empowerment can help realise this vision. Relational thinking can help confront the weaknesses of both state and market in relation to tackling disadvantage, but this will require a shift away from the New Labour traits of 'control and consensus' towards greater unpredictability and a willingness to contest concentrations of power.

Conclusions and ways forward

“The focus on the marginal pound was a mistake. It created the impression that you wouldn’t do anything about social exclusion unless you got paid for it – you can use extra spend to capitalise or incentivise but your mainstream money is always going to be larger than your marginal money.”

The story of social exclusion told under New Labour, and now of ‘social justice’ under the Coalition government, is that insecurity, isolation and a systematic lack of opportunity are the preserve of a small minority marooned from mainstream society. This story is not true of Britain after the financial crisis, if indeed it ever was. Exclusion and inequality are no longer seen as marginal issues, following the longest decline in living standards since the 1920s and with long-term unemployment back at levels not seen since the mid-90s.

Under Blair, the social exclusion agenda understood that the most excluded need different forms of support than the post-war settlement of welfare state plus universal public services could provide. But its mistake was to paint a picture of 2.5 per cent of the population as fundamentally different to the rest because of disaffection, social dysfunction or lack of opportunity. This suggests that the problems of alienation, isolation and poor life chances are confined to a tiny minority, rather than simply hitting this group harder and often in combination.

The Coalition’s ‘Social Justice’ strategy also focuses on a narrow group facing entrenched social disadvantage and poverty, the causes of which are attributed to family breakdown, substance misuse, crime, debt and welfare dependency, while neglecting wider economic inequalities such as in-work poverty and structural unemployment. The lesson of the past decade or so is that both approaches lead to a settlement for the most disadvantaged that is residualised and unstable.

In today’s Britain, a more resilient settlement for tackling social disadvantage will require finding common ground with majority concerns and creating the conditions needed for greater inclusion by going

further to restore power and voice to disadvantaged groups. It will mean providing highly relational and targeted support for those who need it most, but also pursuing long-term, institutional reforms to make mainstream services more responsive, providing the ultimate test bed for a more ‘relational state’.

For this to secure popular consent, it needs to form part of a bigger argument for social renewal, linking with common concerns like better solutions to mental health problems and social isolation, more responsive public services that listen early and often, and tackling pervasive inequalities in the employment and housing markets. This could provide the basis of a transformative agenda for tackling social disadvantage in the next decade. Some starting points for this are set out here.

Politics

Rather than a narrow, individualistic model of economic inclusion, equal value should be placed on wider aspects of citizenship, such as contribution to civic life, personal flourishing and strong social relationships. In contrast to the politics of inclusion under New Labour and the Coalition, this would be based on a conviction that empowerment is a better route to social responsibility than obligation alone. For this to succeed, however, it has to be part of a politics of the common good. While responsibility was demanded of the most excluded under New Labour, voluntary exclusion at the top of society was too often ignored. If more is to be expected of those facing disadvantage, a sense of responsibility has to stretch across the whole of society and not just the most marginalised.

“All the focus was on the drugs and coming off drugs, yet drugs were helping my mental stability. It was only later on in life that [I was] diagnosed with a mental health issue but it was actually a relief – having someone who knew what was going on in my mind and why I was acting the way I was acting.”

Priorities

An agenda for social renewal would prioritise areas in which there continues to be serious failure, such as multiple disadvantage, which remains a minority interest in any government department and where high quality frontline services are still lacking. To this end, a new agenda should seek to protect services like the homelessness sector and drug and alcohol treatment as well as intensive, one-to-one support for the most disadvantaged individuals and families. This review also concludes that public spending should be maintained and, where possible, expanded in areas such as mental health support and early intervention, particularly early years and childhood/young adulthood, which have wide reach and where changes would also improve prospects for the most disadvantaged.

Spending in these areas would be sustained by doing less on issues where policy has proven less successful, for example, in the youth justice system, where interventions have struggled to address the complex economic and social factors that are the cause of so much youth offending; or on area-based regeneration where macroeconomic policy is more likely to have a long-term impact than discretionary spending by government.

Social partners

A new agenda should be based on a different understanding of state power, one which doesn’t attempt to drive social change simply through a service delivery mechanism but also sees it as an exercise in partnership and coalition building. Civil society organisations such as charities, social enterprises and trade unions will play a vital role in challenging existing power structures and forms of prejudice to create a level playing field

for the most disadvantaged, whether in relation to challenging public opinion, local hierarchies, unresponsive public services or undemocratic forms of accountability or governance.

Building common alliances to link disadvantage with majority concerns.

Those advocating on behalf of people facing multiple disadvantage need to identify long term projects where there are grounds to build common cause with broader coalitions to link up with majority concerns. Identifying these shared concerns becomes more important as competition for scarce resources increases and public attitudes towards the least advantaged harden. A potential area for this could be a stronger settlement for the most disadvantaged on mental health (see below). A diverse coalition of political and advocacy groups and service users joining together with the growing constituency of support calling for more talking therapies will be key to establishing this as a mainstream political goal.^{6,7,8}

Stronger platform to defend the humanity and dignity of the most disadvantaged.

A stronger platform to defend the humanity and dignity of the most disadvantaged is increasingly needed to challenge the hardening of public attitudes towards the least advantaged, which is creating space for more divisive policies, for example on welfare reform.⁹ A lack of external political pressure from charities and trade unions was highlighted by some in this report as one of the reasons why less radical policy progress could be made under the social exclusion agenda. ‘Invest to save’ arguments pursued by many charities can risk falling on deaf ears in government.¹⁰ Charities working with the most disadvantaged could play a powerful role in the public debate by uniting around a campaigning

⁶ B6 See Layard (2012) How Mental Illness Loses out in the NHS where for example calls for a major expansion in psychological therapy for those who have mental illness on top of other chronic conditions beyond 2014 <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/special/cepsp26.pdf>

⁷ Other majority concerns in which the multiply disadvantaged have a stake and which could form the basis of such a coalition also include securing a job guarantee for those out of work with forms of intermediate employment for the most disadvantaged or campaigning on localism to secure a clearer national/local settlement on support for the most

⁸ A model for this comes from children’s advocacy, where groups supporting the poorest and most disadvantaged children for example have invested in achieving the long-term objective of securing universal childcare. This has become a mainstream, shared political concern which has widespread public support, potential economic benefits and, if introduced, would improve the lives of the poorest and most disadvantaged children.

⁹ See for example <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/9354163/David-Camerons-welfare-speech-in-full.html>

¹⁰ This is still a difficult argument to make to government. It is rarely the department making the up-front investment that accrues the savings, and when these do come they are not always cashable or realisable in the short term. In tough times, a value for money argument might not rest in favour of spending on the most disadvantaged.

“One of oddities of the politics of poverty is that there are so few organisations representing poor people. There’s an established charity world but that doesn’t represent, trade unions have largely given up...what is remarkable was how little external political pressure there was on any of these fronts.”

aim of improving public perception and understanding of the lives their clients lead, with the framing of their experiences led by service users themselves.

Statecraft

Rather than being centrally determined, priorities should be set according to local need, with the role of central government being to define key challenges. Instead of driving social change through target-led systems and centralised services, the goal should be to decentralise services and introduce more subjective approaches to accountability.

New approaches to accountability.

More meaningful systems of accountability should be introduced over models such as payment-by-results (PBR) or ‘black box’ commissioning for the most disadvantaged groups. PBR may have a role for some groups, such as those closest to the labour market in welfare to work, but for those with the most complex needs, PBR provides little incentive for the intensive, long-term support required. ‘Black box’ commissioning¹¹ can also lead to loss of insight and accountability in relation to the ‘hardest to help’ groups. Beyond these practical concerns, both systems set objective outcomes with little or no input from the service user. A different approach for those most in need of highly relational support would place equal value on process as on outcome, so that chasing results wouldn’t compromise the quality of the frontline relationships that are needed to achieve them. It would empower individuals or families to shape the nature of their support and the outcomes they aim to achieve as some innovative services already do¹² and base these outcomes on personal well-being and participation as well as on employment or educational goals

(see ‘Politics’). Commissioning would change too, relying more on close collaboration with local services and knowledge of local need rather than arm’s-length audits.

Reconciling localism and entitlement.

Linking community priorities more closely with social exclusion policy could create more integrated services and target resources more effectively. However, greater localism also means tough choices, such as not reversing the recent withdrawal of ring-fenced funding in a number of areas, which places some disadvantaged groups at risk of losing out on support. In the past, government has sought to promote equality of rights for the most disadvantaged through legislation or statutory requirements on local authorities, such as equality duties. In a more localist future, new ways need to be found to improve prospects for marginalised groups. Some have argued for greater public scrutiny or voluntary agreements on entitlements or service guarantees. Others suggest that greater equality is more likely to result from communities having the freedom to negotiate better solutions to local problems. Understanding what entitlement for the most disadvantaged will look like in a more localist future urgently needs to be debated.

Stronger organisation of service users to challenge institutions.

Crucial to balancing localism and entitlement will be deciding how the most disadvantaged gain power and voice alongside those around them in the community. A priority for this should be stronger organisation of service users to challenge institutions. On some issues such as mental health, service users are well represented and organised through groups holding institutions and services to account and

¹¹ ‘Black box’ commissioning gives independent providers flexibility to innovate and involves a ‘hands-off’ approach to commissioning from the state.

¹² This is best exemplified at a service level by one organisation, which provides intensive support to ‘chaotic’ families where families themselves recruit professionals, decide what problems they want to tackle and help shape outcomes. The focus on process as well as outcome creates space for professionals to prioritise building relationships with the families. Families having a say in the outcomes they aim to achieve gives a sense of ownership, boosting their capability and creating deeper and more sustainable change – see <http://www.participle.net/projects/view/3/102/>

“The focus was never at the people with the most complex needs. Anyone who might wind up being criminals people were really worried about, people like adults with learning difficulties never got a look in as they were low cost and low harm.”

linking into commissioning priorities. But for other issues such as substance misuse or long-term unemployment, service-user groups are not organised on the same scale and few groups have direct links to commissioning and formal processes of decision-making, representation and review. Changes in the way services are commissioned could help to set this as a priority for public and voluntary sector services.

For more responsive services for the most disadvantaged, institutional and systems reforms should be prioritised over small-scale initiatives, mainstream over marginal spending, and preventative reach over crisis responses. Reform should include freeing up for resources for more relational support through greater automation and/or transactional responses for those who don’t require personalised support. As a starting point, changes in the mental health system and social services/criminal justice system provide examples for this.

Stronger settlement for those socially excluded by mental health issues.

One in six of the population now experience mental health problems and a mental health condition is often a core and exacerbating factor in multiple disadvantage. There have been calls to make available psychological therapies available to more of those with depression and anxiety disorders by extending the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme at a cost of around £300m.¹³ This would be unlikely to reach the most excluded, many of whom will need highly personalised interventions to ensure that they can receive support through mainstream systems as they are currently configured.

As part of any general expansion, there should be commitments to reach more socially excluded people,

providing highly personalised interventions where necessary, while working to change organisational cultures by building professionals’ skills and knowledge in relation to multiple disadvantage. For example those in the criminal justice system (just over 70 per cent of whom have a mental disorder compared to just under 5 per cent of the general population) and in homelessness services (almost 40 per cent of London’s rough sleepers are estimated to have a mental health problem).¹⁴ Young people with mental health problems should also be a priority due to high levels of unmet need. At a time when the NHS needs to make savings of around £20bn, the associated benefits (for example mental illness is the cause of half of all incapacity benefit claims) mean mental health should be strongly considered for additional spending and at the very least its budget should not be cut.

A better balance between enforcement and prevention.

While preventative services such as social services and probation have become more narrowly focused on the management of risk and enforcement, services with an enforcement remit like the youth justice system and policing have taken on more social support functions. This reflects the enforcement-led response to tackling many social problems under New Labour, and which has not significantly altered under the Coalition. But the approach had varying levels of success. For example nearly all of the targets on education and training, mental health, substance misuse, and housing provision in the youth justice system under New Labour were missed. Challenging this balance could help determine whether the funding going into these services could have better preventative reach. In the same vein there is a strong case for a review of the core functions of social services and the extent to which it can

¹³ By extending the IAPT programme. See Layard (2012) How Mental Illness Loses out in the NHS which calls, for example, for a major expansion in psychological therapy for those who have mental illness on top of other chronic conditions beyond 2014 <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/special/cepsp26.pdf>

¹⁴ See www.revolvingdoors.org.uk

still serve its original purpose ('the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being').¹⁵

“ There is a hunger for something different. Stop telling us that everything is wrong and that we can punish people or measure people in this way... We should talk about the need for a social renaissance today – so much would change if the government of the day spoke a positive narrative not a negative one. ”

Conclusion

Our call in this paper is for a new agenda for preventing social disadvantage, which is part of a bigger argument for social renewal and which connects with majority concerns. It should be based on a different understanding of state power, one which doesn't attempt to drive social change simply through a service delivery mechanism but which also sees it as an exercise in partnership and coalition building. It should take a rigorous and creative approach to designing public services for greater productivity and preventative reach, and it should advocate localism and more meaningful systems of accountability. Most importantly, it would be based on an ethic that sees empowerment as a better route to social responsibility than obligation alone, and would demand this responsibility from all parts of society, not just the most vulnerable.

¹⁵ See <http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/>

Introduction

“ I grew up between East London with my Mum and sister, then later between there and North London. The kind of life I led was basically based around crime and violence – I was frustrated and I couldn't express myself.

I was street homeless a few times where I scored the rent money and had to leave. I did quite a lot of prison time – not serious time, a lot of six months stints – I'd say I was in eight or nine times. I always had a trade; even when I was in a chaotic lifestyle I was in and out of employment.

All the focus was on the drugs and coming off drugs, yet drugs were helping my mental stability. It was only later on in life that it was actually recognised that there might be something other than substance abuse.

I didn't expect to be diagnosed with a mental health issue but it was actually a relief – having someone who knew what was going on in my mind and why I was acting the way I was acting. I really do think if that was recognised earlier on and I was able to get that sort of help earlier on I may not have wasted thirty years of my life. ”

Tim, 44, from Hackney

Like most of us, Tim defies easy categorisation. Though he was in and out of work and his work was often seasonal, he never had difficulty in finding work. He says his life was based around 'crime and violence'. He used drugs, including crack cocaine, for over thirty years, resulting in frequent stays in prison and time in hostels and insecure accommodation.

Despite being in drug rehabilitation at least three or four times, it was after he was sectioned for his mental health problems that Tim found the strength to change his life. Since his mental health problems were diagnosed, he now feels he was using drugs to cope with depression, and his anger and violence were a result of his difficulty in understanding his own behaviour. He is volunteering at a drug treatment centre and says helping people in a similar situation has given him a purpose that helps him stay clean. His challenge now is to find a job and gain the trust of employers to hire him, even though he has an extensive criminal record.

Because of his problems and experiences, Tim needed more than the support of friends and family to understand what was contributing to his difficulties and to change his life. As a result, he and many others in similar circumstances are heavily reliant on the public and voluntary services they encounter. Their experiences of these services will largely be based on the workers and professionals they come into contact with. But this, in turn, is influenced by how services are funded and commissioned, the policy frameworks that set the

context for this, the priorities that are set at the level of local and central government and the political concerns that influence this. Ultimately, then, the lives of people like Tim are shaped – not solely, but fundamentally – by the politics governing the provision of the support they seek.

This paper is an account of the views of some of those involved in this politics over the past fifteen years, including people like Tim who received support, the politicians involved in setting the agenda for it, the policymakers involved in devising it, the academics who influenced it, and the civil servants, local government officials and civil society who delivered it. The aim is for the lessons learnt and knowledge gained to shape a better 'politics of disadvantage' for the future.

It is difficult to estimate the number of people who, like Tim, have experienced severe and multiple disadvantages like homelessness, mental health problems or substance misuse, because they are in part defined by their lack of contact with services and are often missed in official surveys. This has been estimated at around 800,000 or 1.7 per cent of the population.¹⁶ On a wider definition of multiple disadvantage, around 5.3 million people, or 11 per cent of adults in the UK, are estimated to experience, at any one time, three or more of six areas of disadvantage (in relation to education, health, employment, income, social support, housing and local environment).¹⁷ However these numbers are in constant flux as people move in and out of disadvantage for different reasons and these

official figures do not include many people who are homeless, in prison or hospital, or who are refugees – in other words, the most socially excluded.

There are signs that some aspects of multiple disadvantage are worsening as a result of the current recession and economic instability. In 2011, there was a 14 per cent increase in the number of households accepted as homeless by local authorities, the largest increase for nine years (CLG 2012). The number of rough sleepers rose in 2011, up by 23 percentage points on 2010 (ONS 2012). The number of evictions by private landlords in the past 12 months is 70 per cent higher than three years ago.¹⁸ Unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment, which is currently at its highest rate since 1996, is a risk factor for social exclusion, along with being economically inactive¹⁹ and having few or no qualifications (SETF 2009).

As the economic crisis has contributed to the problem of multiple disadvantage, it has also made public spending on the problem increasingly unsustainable. The cost to public services of a family with five or more disadvantages has been put at between £55,000 and £115,000 per year (HM Treasury 2007), the cost of an ‘average’ adult with multiple needs put at £23,000 per year, and for the most severely disadvantaged, the cost of one individual to public services can be as high as £400,000 over several years in direct costs alone (MEAM 2009). Despite these high costs, public service reform has struggled to prioritise multiple disadvantage, and even where it has, progress has been modest.

In this paper we explore to what extent this is the result of what we refer to as the ‘politics of disadvantage’.²⁰ We do so largely through examining the political discourse²¹ and policymaking of the last fifteen years, with a particular focus on the social exclusion agenda of the previous government.

This is both a case study of the politics of disadvantage and a means to of evaluating how progressive politics and policymaking need to change to allow for a more meaningful approach to tackling multiple disadvantage in the future.

We have two key objectives: to expose the role of political discourse in shaping the policymaking environment for the most disadvantaged over the past fifteen years,²² and to synthesise what we can learn from this, along with key lessons on statecraft²³ and policymaking that can help to tackle these problems in the future more effectively. We address the broad issues of social exclusion and multiple disadvantage, with a particular focus on ‘severe and multiple disadvantage’.²⁴ People experiencing severe and multiple disadvantage face a systemic difficulty in that services working in silos are often geared to address ‘depth’ but not ‘breadth’ of need. We start from the normative position that in a progressive society, it is the duty of government to help create the conditions for even its most vulnerable and marginalised citizens to prosper, and that there are clear benefits in terms of collective well-being, democratic life and economic prosperity in doing so.

Our findings are based on almost 30 semi-structured interviews, carried out over several months in 2012, with people involved in efforts to tackle social exclusion over the past fifteen years. Interviewees included people like Tim who received support during this time, a number of former ministers and senior politicians in the New Labour government, political advisers and policymakers under Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and under the Coalition government, the former heads of the SEU and Social Exclusion Taskforce, academics, civil servants, local government officials and civil society representatives. The findings are also informed by a review of key aspects of political

¹⁶ Those who are disadvantaged in three of these six areas (education, health, employment, income, social support, housing and local environment) for five or more years out of 10, according to British Household Panel Survey data for 2007 (DWP 2010).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Analysis of Ministry of Justice statistics by homelessness charity Crisis, available at: <http://www.24dash.com/news/housing/2012-08-13-Crisis-report-70-rise-in-evictions>

¹⁹ Those defined as economically inactive are neither in employment or unemployed according to the International Labour Organisation measure of unemployment. This group includes, for example, those who are looking after a home, the retired, students and long-term sick.

²⁰ Understood here as the ‘democratic deficit’ affecting the most disadvantaged in society.

²¹ Written or spoken political communication or debate.

²² Our hypothesis is that the politics governing the provision of support for these individuals needs to be better understood because of their heavy reliance on public and voluntary services and their lack of a political voice due to their relatively small size and voting record.

²³ The means by which a political party governs.

²⁴ Severe and multiple disadvantage is defined as the experience of two or more of the following: mental illness; certain personality disorders; severe alcohol dependence; drug dependence; homelessness; learning disability; and adult neurological disorders. These problems can reinforce and compound each other (Duncan with Corner 2012).

discourse, including political texts such as speeches, policy strategy documents and evaluations.

In order to critique our findings and as an organising principle for reconceptualising the agenda, we draw on three political perspectives that shape the way we think about governing and policymaking today. They provide an organising principle for the research and are drawn upon as guides rather than dogmatic positions. Egalitarian thinking prioritises material

and distributional concerns, long central to social democratic politics. Liberal political thought combines a commitment to individual rights, with a strong tradition of civic reformism. Relational thinking advocates a politics built around everyday experience and the centrality of human relationships to the good life, and was key to the collection of ideas referred to as ‘Blue Labour’. A typology of these different perspectives is set out in Figure 1 below:

	Relational	Liberal	Egalitarian
Goals	Lived experience at the heart of politics	Individual flourishing	A more equal society
Core strategy	Process, not outcome	Liberating and empowering citizens	Renewing social democracy for a new era
Statecraft	Localised; contingent	Targeted; ‘what works’	Universal; institutions
Emblematic policy	Peer-based approaches	Self-directed support	Sure Start

Figure 1: Typology of relational, liberal and egalitarian political perspectives

The mid-1990s, New Labour and social exclusion

The mid-90s was a period shaped by challenging social and economic circumstances. Poverty and inequality were at levels unprecedented in post-war history, long-term unemployment was growing and economic inactivity among men of working age was high (Commission on Social Justice 1994). A process of deinstitutionalisation²⁵ in the eighties and nineties had led to a number of highly visible social problems, including the second highest rates of homelessness in Europe (Stewart and Hills 2005). One in four children was living in poverty. Reversing this decline became one of the central challenges for the Labour party, which saw its best opportunity to win power in almost two decades.

The Labour party, in opposition in the mid-1990s, was renewing its approach to social justice, based partly on analysis that its redistributive tax-and-spend policies had sunk its electoral ambitions in the seventies and eighties. Instead, it embraced 'third way politics' which emphasised the importance of 'equality of opportunity' rather than the more controversial 'equality of outcome' (Giddens 1998). This shift also hinged on Labour's growing acceptance of the need to reconcile economic efficiency and the free market economy with social justice, rejecting nationalisation and public ownership, to support its social democratic programme of strong public services and limited redistribution. On the right, a discourse of a growing 'socially and morally inferior' underclass detached from mainstream society, as described by Charles Murray, was gaining influence, leading to a resurgence of belief in individual agency and obligation, and in attaching 'responsibilities' to rights (Murray 1984), which was also to influence New Labour's political programme.

It was against this backdrop that the concept of 'social exclusion' emerged in the UK.²⁶ It was different because it encompassed a range of factors that can shape disadvantage, rather than an exclusive focus on material poverty.²⁷ As with many influential shifts in policy, the social exclusion agenda began as the result of considerable political energy that had built up, in this case, over 18 years of Conservative government which, according to those on the left, had left a legacy of 'official silence and bias of policymaking' in relation to poverty (Oppenheim 1998). This also meant that relatively little was known about how to address poverty and social exclusion, with more attention having been given to analysing the causes and patterns of poverty and disadvantage rather than to developing a framework for possible solutions.

The shift from thinking largely about income poverty to poverty and social exclusion was partly a response to concerns about wider social decay sparked by

incidents like the Jamie Bulger murder case in 1993,²⁸ and problems like truancy and high rates of teenage pregnancy. It represented a shift in moving beyond traditional thinking on the left to embrace new thinking, such as the 'capabilities' framework proposed for considering disadvantage by Amartya Sen, and network-based and social capital theories (Christie and Perry [eds] 1997). But social exclusion was also a politically expedient concept, helping to move the Labour party's public image away from its tax-and-spend past without renouncing redistribution altogether. This was meant to appeal both to Labour's traditional political constituency and to the middle England voters New Labour was courting.

Following a landslide election victory, the Labour party came to power in 1997 on a promise to repair the social fabric and improve social cohesion. Social exclusion was a central part of this agenda. Tackling social exclusion was given a dedicated unit in the Cabinet Office and had personal support from the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, as well as other senior members of the cabinet. In a speech later that year, Minister without Portfolio in the Cabinet Office, Peter Mandelson, set out its vision and goals:

“Our vision is to end social exclusion. Our priority is to redirect and reform social programmes and the welfare state towards that goal. Our strategy is to build a broad-ranging political consensus for action.”
Mandelson 1997

With high ambition, and considerable public goodwill behind it, New Labour embarked on a first year in office in which almost every domestic department was to reframe its agenda around social exclusion through new policies on welfare to work, childcare, turning around failing schools and area-based regeneration in the most deprived areas.

²⁵ Long-stay psychiatric hospitals were replaced with less isolated community mental health services for those with a mental disorder, known as the policy of 'Care in the Community'.

²⁶ A continental term that was in use in a number of different political traditions in Europe, it was widely adopted at an EU level in response to the crisis of the welfare state in Europe which was triggered by persistently high unemployment.

²⁷ Levitas et al (2007) have defined social exclusion as: '... a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole'.

²⁸ In this case, two boys aged 11 were convicted of the murder of three-year-old James Bulger in 1993.

Analysis

There are four key periods into which the social exclusion agenda can be broadly divided: the establishment of the SEU in 1997 to 2001, when it formed part of the Cabinet Office; 2002 to 2005, when the unit moved to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM); 2006–2007, when the SEU was merged with the Prime Ministers Strategy Unit and re-named as the Social Exclusion Taskforce; and 2007–2010, with the Social Exclusion Taskforce under the Brown government. We break the social exclusion agenda down into three key areas to analyse it. In ‘political strategy’ we explore what the wider political objectives of the social exclusion agenda were and how these formed part of a governing strategy. We then ask what the scope of the social exclusion agenda was, how priorities were set and what tools were used in ‘policy’. Finally, in ‘statecraft’ we ask how the levers of state were used to implement the agenda, which institutions and agencies were involved, and how closely this matched with policy intentions.

i. Political strategy

The concepts of ‘Opportunity for all’ and ‘Rights and responsibilities’ were key elements of New Labour’s political programme and underpinned the social exclusion agenda. The goals of social inclusion policy were understood through ‘Opportunity for all’, which placed a strong emphasis on labour market participation along with education and training to improve life chances.²⁹ ‘Rights and responsibilities’ framed the social exclusion agenda in its emphasis on conditional cooperation in return for quality support from public services.³⁰ This integrated a moral element into New Labour’s programme for social inclusion.

Opportunity for all

Through ‘Opportunity for all’ New Labour strived to create ‘equality of opportunity’ and to protect citizens from the advance of globalisation, technological change and deindustrialisation by equipping them with the improved education, skills and support they needed to find work. The premise – that economic volatility could be stabilised through this strategy to create sustainable economic growth – was crucial to New Labour’s vision for social inclusion.

Being in employment or training was the main goal of ‘Opportunity for all’. This was later adopted, along with housing, as the official indicator of social inclusion – ‘a home and a job’ – in 2007.³¹ Faith was placed in the mainstream economy as the path out of exclusion for people of working age’, as Tony Blair explained:

“The best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience.”
(SEU 1997)

In interviews, the key strengths of ‘Opportunity for all’ all were cited as its refusal to accept widespread unemployment and its emphasis on education and training, which could do much to improve people’s life chances. But some interviewees intimated that the policy did not go far enough to respond to the underlying structural problems in the labour market:

“Apart from the introduction of minimum wage, it glossed over the fact you can be in work and socially excluded – it’s not a case of you’re either in or you’re out. What about those on low pay, caring for relatives or doing more than one job?”

The assumption that the mainstream economy could provide a route out of exclusion came to look increasingly doubtful over time, particularly as levels of working-age poverty rose:

“The main problem is...that the link between employment and inclusion...has proved not to be a very strong one. We have seen a remarkable increase in employment in Europe and in the UK over the past ten years... yet that hasn’t done anything to significantly reduce poverty rates or rates of multiple disadvantage.”

The ‘home and a job’ focus for policy could also distort priorities, for example leading services to ‘cream’ off those closest to the labour market to meet targets or priorities, while “parking” the most disadvantaged’ (DWP 2010). Some also argued that it didn’t sufficiently compensate for market failures in housing and employment, particularly in areas with low housing availability and tight labour markets.

At the level of the political rhetoric used to communicate the agenda, ‘Opportunity for all’ was criticised for having too narrow a focus. Though better access to work and training was vital, there was a view that it should have been complemented by other important dimensions of inclusion, such as social interaction and political participation (see Burchardt et al 2002). Instead, what it meant to be socially included appeared to be based on a more transactional approach to citizenship. One interviewee explained:

²⁹ See Department of Social Security (1999) Opportunity for All: Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion, London: The Stationery Office.

³⁰ For example see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/460009.stm

³¹ In the government-wide Public Service Agreement (PSA 16) on social exclusion.

“ [Opportunity for all] was quite ... 'I'll do this for you but only if you do that for me' ... [we need] to move away from a political narrative that just sees us as bits of the GDP and [focuses on] how we can produce more GDP – whether we get grades A–C or some kind of 'Mcjob'. In order for our nation to flourish and for people to flourish, we need a much broader understanding of what we need to provide people with. ”

Several interviewees spoke of the complex challenges that went beyond a 'home and a job', but which struggled for recognition in policy terms:

“ For someone with a 28 year alcohol habit, just having 10 cans a day, not 20, is progress; on the purpose scale, doing one day a month volunteering is a massive achievement... speaking to someone is a major achievement... but these are small things that don't sell... and they're not going to sell because politically they're not seen as important... ”

Equality of opportunity remained an elusive concept. The premise that economic volatility could be stabilised by supply-side policies like education and skills policy was exposed after the 2008 financial crash, and it became clear that policies put in place had not shifted the UK's low-wage/low-skill equilibrium, to provide greater opportunities for social inclusion.

Rights and responsibilities

The most significant aspect of New Labour's political strategy in relation to social exclusion

policy was the 'rights and responsibilities' agenda. This was a key focus of Blair's rhetoric in opposition (Blair 1995), and became part of Labour's political strategy in government, forming the basis of its social contract. It aimed to build strong communities founded on reciprocal rights and responsibilities, to cultivate civic virtues like good manners and respect for other people, their privacy and their property.

The emphasis on conditional cooperation captured by 'Rights and responsibilities' was supported by most interviewees as an important foundation – even a political necessity – for public services:

“ How do you sell poverty reduction strategies in a society where your targets are a relatively small minority of very poor and excluded people? I think it is absolutely self-evident that unless there is a moral element to the argument about what you're going to do, the opportunities you offer people and the responsibilities that come with that, you will not get buy-in from the majority of working-class, let alone middle-class voters. ”

The balance between rights and responsibilities was viewed as fairly even during the early period of the social exclusion agenda, with 'responsibility' promoted through greater conditionality in the welfare system and 'rights' through more programmes aimed at improving services and outcomes in the most disadvantaged areas, such as the NDC. But after the 2005 election, during which anti-social behaviour emerged as a key voter concern, there was a change in tone in the presentation of policy and the creation of the Respect Unit to tackle anti-social behaviour. Some interviewees saw this as an attempt to deliver on voter concerns, particularly for those living in deprived communities,

but others saw it as a slide into a more authoritarian, politics which also saw the prison population rise by almost 20,000 over the decade from 2000 (HoC Library 2012).

Decisions were made to position certain policies such as the Family Intervention Projects (FIPs), or Family Nurse Partnerships (FNPs) which emerged from the Respect Unit and SEU, as being more about responsibilities or 'control' than rights or 'care':

“ There was a big battle about how you framed it – as a tough approach to 'neighbours from hell' or a more intensive form of support that will really help. On Family Intervention Projects we did present it as a 'tough' thing and there is no evidence to suggest it damaged the results...but on Family Nurse Partnerships... arguably presenting it as tough...in my view on family nurse partnerships it was probably a mistake to frame them in that way... ”

The 'tough love' rhetoric did not always match the reality. With FIPs, for example, evaluations carried out since then suggest that more families were referred for mental health problems and 'social inadequacy', than for offending and anti-social behaviour (Gregg 2010). In the case of the New Labour's use of language, one interviewee reflected:

“ The language was never the most inclusive... I always say to people we were much better at substance than at spin...it was much more substance focused, policy focused, we didn't spend enough time on the branding and the coalition building and the public communication of it. I think there is a lot of out-of-sight for these problems, this is a problem for all

[political] sides...it's out of sight out of mind for a lot of folk. ”

As one interviewee commented, tackling social exclusion was almost always presented as a benefit to a hostile or sceptical public, rather than those it was intended to support:

“ [Social exclusion] only served to present these people as problematic and expensive, and therefore it drove a wedge further between them and 'the rest of us'. There was very little attempt to make the case for the hard lives these people had led. They were viewed in terms of cost, risk and harm reduction. ”

This was underscored by the fact that it was overwhelmingly poor or marginalised groups that were addressed by the Respect rhetoric, rather than wealthier groups or individuals that had broken the moral code.

'Tough love' politics

In the first fortnight of the Brown government, the Respect taskforce was disbanded to signal a different approach to law and order issues. That year the Conservative party and the Sun newspaper began to run the narrative of 'Broken Britain'. One interviewee explained:

“ The public's view was that they were right [about Broken Britain]. Labour tried to fight back, asserting that Britain wasn't broken, but this wasn't very successful, even though the facts didn't bear out what the alternative narrative was saying. ”

Action on anti-social behaviour was later re-integrated into the Brown political programme in the run up to the 2010 election, but despite the priority and profile given to social exclusion policy under New Labour, the Broken Britain agenda was able to win media support and influence the public.³² Despite the considerable investment and results achieved, there was not a widely shared perception of success. One adviser suggested that the ‘Rights and Responsibilities’ narrative unravelled towards the end of Labour’s time in power, which undermined public perceptions:

“If the Tories had said despite all the money you have spent there is this group of people who you have failed to help and that group of people is slightly shrinking over time but nothing like fast enough relative to state of the economy and how much money has been invested in them – if that had been the charge, it would have been hard for Labour to deny this. Instead, they were asserting that crime and teenage pregnancy were getting worse. Labour denied this but weren’t believed. In trying to explain what they were doing about it they struggled because they didn’t have a coherent narrative that included both [rights and responsibilities]... There was a perception that Blair was too tough and Brown wasn’t tough enough, rather than there being a well worked-out analysis or narrative.”

The egalitarian argument on ‘Opportunity for all’ would be that New Labour’s social inclusion strategy was right to encourage access to employment and training as vital to a secure and stable life. But it would acknowledge that New Labour was naive about what it took to overcome the injustices of a market economy and that not enough attention was given to the difficulties faced by those in, as well as out of, work. The liberal

argument would be that the agenda didn’t do enough to give voice and power to the most disenfranchised and that it had too narrow a conception of citizenship. Relational thinkers would similarly argue that a focus on employment and training encouraged a more instrumental approach to social inclusion, which should be valued as a social good in and of itself, not simply because of its associated benefits. It would contend that not enough was done to create resilient social bonds to promote inclusion, and that New Labour’s early emphasis on social solidarity and cooperation collapsed because it was thin and underdeveloped.³³

On ‘Rights and Responsibilities’, and the moral argument it introduced for support for the most disadvantaged, liberals would argue that the moral framework was correct but that relying on centralised, statist pledges was wrong, overpromising on what central government could deliver. Egalitarians would similarly argue that reciprocity is vital but that the balance between the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ aspects of rights and responsibilities meant the agenda lost its way. A relational view would agree that reciprocity is the foundation of any strong community, but would argue that rights and responsibilities could be used as a disguise for a politically expedient attack on unpopular groups, legitimising public cynicism and hostility.

Several interviewees suggested that an entirely new political narrative was needed for a more empowering approach to communicating the meaning behind rights and responsibilities:

“There is a hunger for something different. Stop telling us that everything is wrong and that we can punish people or measure people in this way... We should talk about the need for a social renaissance today – so much would change if the government of the day spoke a positive narrative not a negative one.”

³² See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1249531/We-living-broken-Britain-Most-voters-pessimistic-state-country.html>

³³ Grounds for the liberal and relational views come from analysis of international approaches to social exclusion. This suggests that in the UK, social exclusion is based on the notion of rights and obligations that has evolved out of a tradition of liberal individualism. Here, citizenship is based on the exchange of social and economic rights and obligations, such as labour market participation, rather than a broader conception of the bonds between individual and society, as is more common in continental Europe (Silver 1994). This could explain the struggle for recognition for forms of inclusion that are about social and political, as well as economic, participation.

ii. Policy

As we have seen there was a strong political rationale for the social exclusion agenda having a central place in New Labour’s early political programme. However, agreeing the problem(s) conceptualised by social exclusion and tractable causes and policy solutions would prove more challenging. But the ambiguity of the concept, which served it well in political terms,³⁴ made it more challenging when designing a policy framework from scratch.

Setting the scope of policy

‘Wide’, ‘concentrated’ and ‘deep’ exclusion

The initial remit of the SEU was to identify a set of discrete social problems and to adopt clear targets for reducing these problems. There were three goals: achieving a reduction in the scale of truancy and school exclusions; fewer people sleeping rough; and the introduction of a better model for tackling the linked problems of the most deprived neighbourhoods (DSS 1998). These priorities were set by the SEU together with Prime Minister Tony Blair and other key ministers.³⁵

The emphasis on people and place in the early years of the social exclusion agenda was later described by David Miliband as ‘wide’ and ‘concentrated’ (ODPM 2005).³⁶ It grouped together highly visible social problems like teenage pregnancy, truancy and NEETs but it also focused on the ‘area’ effects of concentrations of disadvantage. According to several interviewees, the scope reflected political priorities as well as analysis of need:

“At the outset of the Social Exclusion Unit there was an idea that you could focus in on defined “problems”. How they chose groups was also political: it was partly led by who they felt was falling through cracks between departments; however, it was also led by who had the most political purchase, who attracted the interest of politicians the at time, for example on teenage pregnancy.”

Over time, the social exclusion agenda shifted away from a focus on discrete issues and area-based concentrations of disadvantage towards individuals and families facing multiple disadvantage – in David Miliband’s second formulation: ‘deep social exclusion’. In 2006 the new Social Exclusion Taskforce adopted

as its core focus the ‘2.5 per cent of every generation caught in a lifetime of disadvantage and harm’, as set out by Tony Blair and Hilary Armstrong in Reaching Out: An Action Plan on Social Exclusion (SETF 2006).

This shift spoke to the success – as much as the failure – of policy up to that point. The assessment was that measures taken on employment, education and welfare had lifted millions out of poverty, increased employment rates and levels of educational attainment, with 95 per cent of the population seeing their incomes grow by between 2 and 3 per cent each year. However, those on the lowest incomes had seen the lowest rates of growth and were still experiencing ‘profound exclusion’. There was a realisation that methods had to change, and this led to an increased focus on the principles of early intervention, personalisation and a more systematic focus on ‘what works’ (SETF 2006).

This shift to address more acute disadvantage and move away from the early, more universalist underpinnings of the social exclusion agenda intensified the tension within government between an egalitarian focus on directing resources towards redistribution and a more liberal focus on improving life chances. Several interviewees described a tension in government between spending through the tax and benefits system and the programmes of the social exclusion agenda:

“I can remember having discussions at No. 10 Cabinet Office about... if you had an extra pound is it better if it goes... through the tax and benefits system so it goes into the pockets of disadvantaged people or is it better to improve opportunities for them, through services and the like? Essentially different parts of government had different views.”

³⁴ For example, see Levitas’s theory of the three discourses contained by social exclusion: a redistributionist discourse (RED), a moral underclass discourse (MUD) and a social integrationist discourse (SID) (Levitas 1998).

³⁵ Interviewee: ‘The prime minister was very... involved in the choice of subjects, I remember him giving advice to have a tight focus, we said we would look at three subjects in six months...’

³⁶ In a speech in 2005, David Miliband described three ideas about social exclusion as ‘wide, deep and concentrated’. Wide social exclusion addressed those deprived according to a single indicator, such as the 194,000 16 to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training homeless people, or NEET; ‘concentrated’ social exclusion described deprived areas where there is a geographic concentration of problems; and ‘deep’ social exclusion addressed those excluded on multiple accounts – otherwise known as the multiply excluded (ODPM 2005).

These different approaches to addressing disadvantage have been conceived of as either focusing on the very excluded to ‘address the tail’ of disadvantage or improving universal provision to leave the general population healthier and more economically secure, thus ‘shifting the curve’ of the income distribution scale.³⁷ The targeted approach of ‘addressing the tail’ fitted more naturally with the liberal political philosophy of the Blair government than the more social democratic persuasion of the Brown government. One interviewee explained:

“Brown had too much faith in the idea that if you invested in mainstream public services and adapted them you would solve the problems. Blair was much more likely to say ‘here’s this group and we’re failing them’, but Brown was less likely to say the approach was a failure; he would have put more faith in the idea that a combination of tax credits and better public services would help.”

Social exclusion policy therefore struggled to find a firm footing during the Brown years:

“I sat in long meetings [with minister under Brown government] where he was trying to get his head around what did he really think about social exclusion, how did he move this agenda on. The officials knew he didn’t like what he’d inherited...but he wasn’t able to make it into a bigger story...hence people didn’t feel it was going anywhere and the politics reasserted itself on Respect because there wasn’t a more secure grounding for it all.”

Interviews also revealed political concerns about the later focus of social exclusion policy on more entrenched forms of exclusion from the wider perspective of public acceptability:

“There were some supporters...people who felt it was the real core mission of the unit...but it took you off into territory where there weren’t that many votes in it. These were people who frankly tended never to vote... and some of the causes and cases we looked at were extremely unpopular with voters and with some politicians...We sometimes felt that when we got to some of the particularly unpopular groups...sometimes some ministers... didn’t really want us to be so involved there...if it didn’t...fit in with that whole narrative around rights and responsibilities.”

The social exclusion agenda, particularly its later scope, took the Labour party into less traditional territory, away from the universal origins of the post-war welfare state towards more personalised and specific forms of intervention. In some respects this reflects a tension between egalitarians and liberals.

Egalitarians, while encouraging more support for the most severely disadvantaged, can be concerned that this represents a move away from considering social exclusion within the wider context of poverty and disadvantage and gives the impression that social exclusion policy only needs to be targeted at a relatively small group. They may also be uncomfortable with its similarities to a more conservative, behavioural account of poverty and disadvantage.

Liberals would be convinced that moving to more targeted support for the most disadvantaged is a natural progression for the welfare state, as it has failed to reach the most insecure and vulnerable through more universal responses.

Relational thinking would take issue with the notion of the state defining groups of disadvantaged people at all, as their individual characteristics vary and are dynamic. However, the tension is unresolved on the left between egalitarians who support a broad focus for tackling social exclusion, with a more universal orientation and within a wider policy framework of redistribution, and Liberals who prefer a more targeted approach to improve life chances for the most disadvantaged.

³⁷ See http://www.familyandparenting.org/our_work/Parenting/Naomi+Eisenstadt

Policy design

A rigorous evidence-based approach to policymaking was a distinctive feature of the social exclusion agenda from the beginning. Geoff Mulgan, the architect of the social exclusion agenda, wrote at the time that the SEU would be serious about basing policymaking on evidence, rather than theory.³⁸ The particular challenges of the politics of disadvantage, including a weak political constituency and a reliance on public acceptance for support for often unpopular groups, were to test this commitment to evidence-based policy. One interviewee explained:

“The Social Exclusion Unit was very successful in what it set out to do and it used very good analysis. However, even though the focus of the SEU was led by evidence and analysis and the data was good, – the political response wasn’t always led by this. There was sometimes a disconnect between the analysis of the problems and what then followed.”

Views on the role of evidence-based policymaking in the agenda were polarised. There was a view that without ‘template’ programmes approved by central government, departments and local authorities struggled to know how to allocate their resources most effectively:

“If you look at mental health and drugs where there should have been the same impulse to care about these people or families...there was nowhere for that impulse to go because there was no readymade policy solution in the same way as there was with family nurse partnerships in health, for example. There was no sense of... ‘if you as a dept or at a local level are worried about not reaching your targets on mental health here’s what you ought to be investing in’.”

However, others saw evidence-based policymaking as conflicting with other valid objectives of policy, such as community empowerment and local variation:

“Sure Start was the nearest thing New Labour had to scalable intervention, but because it was designed from the top it couldn’t be re-designed at the bottom to meet bespoke needs of communities so therefore ended up with all Sure Starts as the same. If they had started differently by applying principles of co-production that met the needs of particular communities we would have had Sure Starts that were different but that met local needs.”

Political and institutional pressures on policy

Evidence-based policymaking was tested in practice by vested interests inside government and the challenge of finding politically feasible ways to resolve thorny social problems. One example relates to attempts to reduce re-offending. The SEU report *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners* was the result of a nine-month-long investigation into the criminal justice system. The report argued that prison was not merely failing to prevent re-offending but increasing the likelihood of it by exacerbating problems faced by prisoners including unemployment, debt and broken family links (SEU 2002).

In the report, the SEU came up with a series of recommendations to knit together a cross-government approach to rehabilitation and reducing re-offending. The report was published with no action plan (the first SEU report not to include one) because the relevant government departments only agreed to support the analysis if no specific policy commitments were made. The government did not respond to the report for two years because of internal wrangling over the recommendations.

Ministers eventually accepted a recommendation to close the ‘finance gap’ (the period between leaving prison and receiving the first benefit payment which could take as long as six weeks), which the evidence showed was likely to increase re-offending, but civil servants were unable to agree a solution that the departments involved found either logistically or politically acceptable. Measures like education and job advice for prisoners were accepted by the Treasury and other departments, but recommendations like securing temporary accommodation for offenders on leaving prison (shown to cut re-offending by 20 per cent) or ‘social inclusion’ measures, like extra support for the children of prisoners (shown to be three times more likely than peers to suffer mental health problems), were rejected by the departments involved, often after long and acrimonious negotiations. This was typically because departments either failed to see the issue was their responsibility or because the solution did not fit with their own political narrative.

The leaking of some of the most controversial recommendations to the media sealed the fate of the report. The high profile of the social exclusion agenda at the time (2002–2004) hindered rather than helped to implement some of the evidence-based conclusions of SEU reports according to one interviewee:

³⁸ ‘Given how much is spent on social exclusion policy, it is remarkable how little policy has been properly assessed. Instead, all too often prejudice and dogma has substituted for analysis. To improve the performance of policy, it is vital to test programmes out so that they can be improved and adapted before replicated’ (in Oppenheim (ed) 1998).

“We were doing this within the glare of lots of people’s attention, but we had courted that attention because we were the Social Exclusion Unit...The very fact of a Social Exclusion Unit report made [the recommendations] undeliverable for about three or four years afterwards...”

The key difficulties in translating the evidence-based recommendations of the SEU’s research into policy were institutional barriers within Whitehall, civil service inertia, and the difficulties of finding politically feasible solutions to problems involving groups often unpopular with the public. But added to this was a lack of political pressure from outside government which could have helped mitigate some of these challenges:

“One of oddities of the politics of poverty is that there are so few organisations representing poor people. There’s an established charity world but that doesn’t represent, trade unions have largely given up...what is remarkable was how little external political pressure there was on any of these fronts. That meant that if there was a backlash, as there was from head teachers, there wasn’t much to counter it and so a lot had to be done by stealth, working within the machinery to change things, without that much high politics assisting.”

Another example relates to political negotiations on how policy was designed. Under the Social Exclusion Taskforce in 2008, the Socially Excluded Adults Public Service Agreement (known as PSA 16) was introduced.³⁹ The PSA 16 was the first time disadvantaged groups had been the focus of a cross-cutting government target; previous targets had related only to children in care. The PSA focused on four groups: people experiencing mental health distress; care leavers; offenders; and people with learning difficulties. It aimed to shape government policy around ensuring that some of the most vulnerable groups achieved two outcomes: a sustainable home, and a sustainable and meaningful job or training.

However, this hadn’t been the agenda of choice for the PSA by the Social Exclusion Taskforce. They had intended it to be a lifecycle approach to early intervention. But this was too close to the remit of the Department of Education (known then as Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF]):

“If I had a preference I probably would have gone for the early years agenda for the PSA, but...it was too risky to go for a PSA on children because [the DCSF] did not want to let that go and... it had to be a PSA across government and health had to be centrally involved because one of the key programmes was the nurse family partnership, and education were not prepared to give up anything else in order to have a PSA they couldn’t control.”

So instead the agenda focused on work, training, housing and early intervention with adults.

There was a similarly strong political influence on which groups were chosen as the focus of policy, particularly when the scope of the agenda narrowed to focus on entrenched exclusion. One interviewee explained:

“People who were ‘high cost’ but ‘low harm’ were neglected. Of the groups from the PSA16, care leavers were the smallest group but they got the most money. This is not necessarily wrong, as the outcomes are so bad for those groups, but it was hard to get money for groups who were inexpensive and yet low threat. The focus was never at the people with the most complex needs. Anyone who might wind up being criminals people were really worried about, people like adults with learning difficulties never got a look in as they were low cost and low harm.”

Political influence was also evident in the indicators used to define social exclusion and underpin policy. Which indicators were chosen was essentially a values-based decision, dependent on views of social exclusion and its causal links to poverty. For example, should an individual who is out of work and has mental health problems be defined as socially excluded because of their personal problems or because they are on a low income and experiencing multiple deprivation? The answer may be all of these, but the relative importance attached to different indicators shifts the policy response.

Policymakers ultimately determined which indicators were added or dropped. Figure 2 shows a summary of descriptions and indicators used for social exclusion from 1997 to today. The policy focus on unemployment and economic inactivity remained over time, but there was a gradual shift from indicators of deprivation and disadvantage to include indicators of dysfunction or criminality, as well as a general move from focusing efforts on individuals

³⁹ Public Service Agreements identified national priorities that informed the Comprehensive Spending Review and therefore influenced how central government funding was allocated.

Report/Speech	Description	Individuals/groups
Tony Blair (1997)	‘The poorest people... the forgotten people’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single mothers • Five million people of working age living in homes where nobody works • People who have never worked since leaving school • 150,000 homeless • 100,000 children not attending school
Social Exclusion Unit (2004)	‘Those with multiple disadvantages’	<p><i>Five or more of the following:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being a lone parent or a single person • Having low qualifications or skills • Having a physical impairment • Being over 50 • Being from an ethnic minority group • Living in a region of high unemployment
Respect Task Force 2005/ Respect Task Force, cited in Tony Blair (2006)	‘Families with complex needs’	7,500 families with problems ranging from behavioural difficulties amongst children to problem parenting
Tony Blair (2006)	‘The “hardest to reach” families’	<p><i>Individuals including:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looked-after children • Families with complex problems • People with mental health issues • Pregnant teenagers
Social Exclusion Task-force (2007)	‘The 2–3 per cent’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those who suffer from moderate to severe mental health problems • Young problem drug users • Young offenders • 16–18 year olds who are not in employment, education or training • Children in care • People who lack functional numeracy or literacy (SEU 2007)
Social Exclusion Task-force (2007)	‘Families at risk’	2% of families – or 140,000 families – across Britain experiencing complex and multiple problems
Social Exclusion Task-force (2007)	‘Adults facing Chronic Exclusion’	<p><i>Adults experiencing some or all of:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor health prospects – mental and/or physical health issues • A history of exclusion, institutionalisation or abuse • Behaviour and control difficulties • Skills deficit – unemployment and poor educational achievement • Addictions
Gordon Brown (2009)	‘50,000 most chaotic families’	50,000 households who have complex needs and have received multi-agency intervention for a considerable period of time
David Cameron (2011)	‘Troubled families’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 120,000 families living troubled and chaotic lives • Are involved in crime and anti-social behaviour • Have children not in school • Have an adult on out-of-work benefits • Cause high costs to the public purse

Figure 2: Summary table of descriptions and indicators relating to social exclusion 1997–2012 (see Appendix for full table)

iii. Statecraft

The SEU was originally set up to act as a catalyst for wider governmental action on social exclusion and to institute a set of reforms to improve 'joined-up' working across government. This grew out of a critique that the post-war structure of government that divided functions was well suited to specific issues, but less able to tackle complex cross-cutting issues such as social exclusion (Mulgan in Oppenheim [Ed] 1998).

and areas towards families (see Appendix for complete table). Policymakers ultimately determined which indicators were added or dropped. This led some to suggest that there was a 'pick and mix' approach to indicators used under the social exclusion agenda (for example see Levitas 2008).

It is to be expected that the setting of policy priorities and the implementation of policy will be subject to political pressures and institutional barriers. But these findings highlight the degree to which political and bureaucratic imperatives played a role in shaping policy, in relation to evidence-based analysis of the scale and severity of social problems. It is also clear that the high profile of the social exclusion agenda brought with it difficulties which limited the impact it was able to have, particularly in more controversial policy areas.

The findings prompt wider questioning of the value of evidence-based policy. The relational argument would be radical in this respect. It would suggest that evidence-based policy disempowers services and service users because it assumes that government, or those in authority, can decide the

value of a particular 'outcome', rather than individuals, communities and professionals. In so doing it encourages a false notion that outcomes can be guaranteed, whereas instead, the pursuit of objective outcomes should be abandoned, with politics instead focusing on the design of processes – particularly ones that enable relationships.⁴⁰

Egalitarians would argue that an evidence-based approach to policymaking was the right one, but that this had come at the cost of more widespread reform and that, as a result, not enough had been done to tackle entrenched inequalities. From a liberal perspective however, knowing 'what works' is vital to ensure value for money, to secure the effectiveness of policy and to target support as well as possible. Evidence-based policymaking is certainly at an important crossroads: there either needs to be better use of evidence-based programmes to influence mainstream services and improve their impact, or policymakers need to acknowledge that evidence-based programmes are only ever likely to reach a small number of people.

⁴⁰ Cook and Muir (2012 forthcoming).

The influence and shape of the social exclusion agenda waxed and waned, partly in accordance with political interest and funding. In the SEU's innovative and trailblazing early period, the unit reported directly to senior ministers and had relatively little difficulty securing resources. In the middle period, the unit was able to leverage less funding from the Treasury as more conditions were placed on securing funding in spending reviews and the SEU was moved from the Cabinet Office to the ODPM with the aim of bringing the 'people' and 'place' aspects of social exclusion policy together, but also because it had begun to meet with resistance from key government departments. The move to ODPM reduced its influence with other departments as its cross-cutting role became harder to maintain. Despite having the Deputy Prime Minister as lead cabinet office member, the Unit no longer reported directly to No. 10, a link that had previously given it influence with spending departments.

In the later period of the Blair government, the social exclusion agenda regained high-level political support as Blair took up the agenda again with earnest. The Unit moved back into the Cabinet Office and had its own dedicated minister. However, it still had few executive powers and little budget, relying on its influence, as ultimate responsibility for implementation lay with government departments. The SEU frequently came up against the shorter-term orientation of government departments and their particular institutional, budgetary and political pressures.

Policy implementation

The early statecraft of the SEU was bold and experimental. It assembled a cross-cutting policy team from various government departments, with half of

its small team coming from outside government – academia, the voluntary and private sectors. It experimented with new approaches, like pooled budgets and shared targets, and had specific implementation teams, all elements that were different to a traditional civil service model. This also extended to how the SEU communicated its findings:

“We had different ways of influencing policy, having people on the frontline taking part in cabinet committees, kids from estates presenting to cabinet, all different ways of getting away from standard Whitehall procedure and to get a feel of the frontline rather than dry civil service and academic language.”

The agenda began with the insight that there were limits to what could be achieved through a top-down, centrally driven political approach to tackling deep-rooted social problems. It introduced the concept of 'open policymaking', with a large-scale consultative process informing the design and implementation of policy, and extensive outreach, which resulted in rich input from a diverse range of groups.

One of its most exciting innovations was Policy Action Teams, 18 of which were set up with clear targets and action plans to address specific aspects of social exclusion, 'like guerrilla warfare in order to speed up a culture change across Whitehall'.⁴¹ Following this, the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NSNR) was launched in 2001 with the vision that: 'within 10 to 20 years no one should be seriously disadvantaged by where they live' (CLG 2010).⁴² It aimed to tackle problems such as unemployment and crime, and to improve the quality of services to excluded communities.

⁴¹ From interview.

⁴² The goals of the NSNR were to narrow the gap in issues, including worklessness, crime and poor health, between deprived neighbourhoods and the rest of the country. The NSNR targeted funding to 88 areas through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. In addition to this, a wide range of area-based initiatives were launched, including health and education action zones and the New Deal for communities.

The NSNR was seen by many as delivering the SEU's policy vision. A key objective of the agenda was to encourage areas to harness 'mainstream' resources to tackle deprivation rather than rely on one-off regeneration spending. This required a sustainable long-term approach to achieving change. Despite this aim, improvements achieved were not always maintained. In areas targeted by NSNR programmes, for example, the gap in relation to issues around unemployment and worklessness rates began to narrow after 2001. However, between 2006 and 2007 the difference between NSNR districts and the national average began to widen again. Several interviewees argued that targeted programmes did not have enough influence on mainstream services and that, as a result, the strategy did not achieve wider or lasting reform:

“The focus on the marginal pound was a mistake. It created the impression that you wouldn't do anything about social exclusion unless you got paid for it – you can use extra spend to capitalise or incentivise but your mainstream money is always going to be larger than your marginal money.”

Evaluations of initiatives that were funded through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund found 'limited evidence of the re-aligning and re-allocating of mainstream budgets' (York Consulting 2008). An evaluation of NDC funding identified 'some doubts about the likely impact of succession strategies' (CLG 2010) following the end of targeted programmes. The geographic reach of these programmes was limited (York Consulting 2008). While the strategy paper that launched NSNR, 'Bringing Britain together', identified one thousand estates needing action, work was undertaken with only seventeen areas and then extended to eighty-eight. The large scale of funding for each scheme – the total budget for NDC £1.71bn⁴³ – meant that the programme could never be extended to all areas (York Consulting 2008). Many of the budgets for work in this area, such as the single regeneration budget and funding for health and education action zones, were limited and competitive between areas (York Consulting 2008).

There was a view that NDC and NSNR initiatives failed to achieve more sustainable change because they lacked local ownership and an enduring legacy of community empowerment. A distinction was made between 'involving' local people, as the initiatives sought to do, and having the levers at a local level to make a difference:

“One of more damning findings of the New Deal for Communities is that it didn't lock into the existing social networks, the existing change mechanisms [in those communities]... there is an evaluation which suggests that when New Deal ended, actually the underlying infrastructure of informal networks and support had been weakened by the overlay.”

In line with the NPM theory that was influential at the time, NSNR and NDC focused on encouraging people to become more active 'consumers' of services rather than being able to determine and develop the nature of local programmes. One interviewee described how this reflected how a 'delivery state' model dominated under New Labour, influenced by NPM practices:

“The attitude was very much...if you make this pronouncement this will happen. It was a 'pipeline' way of thinking about politics – we will make this political announcement rather than working in a multiple social way and appreciating how this impacts on people themselves.”

There was also a view that lack of sustainability was symptomatic of a wider problem – that the social exclusion agenda lacked a fully fledged 'theory of change'. The 'one template fits all' approach of 'best practice' and performance indicators was of limited value when it came to how policy was mediated through the civil service and local relationships:

“There was a lack of understanding of the processes of change and a theory of change. Getting change to happen is not just to do with the identification of social problems like alcohol or drug misuse, it's to do with how organisations change. There is a real need to understand the impact of Whitehall on mediating between politicians' enthusiasm and action on the ground. If don't have policies that address civil service culture as well as policies that address the social problem, you won't make any progress.”

This critique extended beyond government and the civil service into frontline services. On multiple needs, for example, there was a view that policymakers had underestimated the extent to which professionals working in mainstream services need the skills and support to engage with people facing multiple disadvantage.

⁴³ Between 1999–2000 and 2007–2008, the 39 NDC partnerships spent a total of £1.71bn on some 6,900 projects or interventions (CLG 2010).

Overall in terms of policy implementation, the reforms secured by the social exclusion agenda were often limited to central government and did not extend far enough into local government, public agencies or civil society more widely. Egalitarians would argue that the influence and reach of the agenda was limited by the minimal impact of marginal spend on mainstream programmes. On this view, mainstream spending has to be prioritised if support for the most excluded is to be more than residual. From a liberal perspective, the agenda would have had a more lasting impact on civil society and local communities if, in the case of urban regeneration, for example, it empowered people in local areas to take ownership of programmes.

The relational argument would be that a better understanding of individual behaviour and organisational culture was needed for more widespread reform. New Labour was good at setting up new governance structures and organisations, such as the cross-cutting units that multiplied during the period, but reform didn't extend further because it neglected the importance of process in favour of a focus on outcomes, overlooking, for example, the importance of nurturing existing informal networks in communities or treating organisations as agents of delivery rather than as institutions in their own right. It would argue that policy was more likely to be effective if principles were understood as part of a process of more intensive learning and change, and one which was able to work better with uncertainty and complexity.

Accountability and service-user experiences of frontline services

On coming to power New Labour inherited poor systems of accountability, which had gradually been eroded under previous governments, and it was determined to restore clear lines of responsibility. In addition, the need to retain public support for New Labour's high levels of investment in public services meant that there were considerable political pressures to demonstrate the impact of policy. To do this it introduced national standards, performance targets and success indicators – the 'command and control' systems of NPM, with centrally determined targets dictating local action.

Several interviewees suggested that though the drive for targets and standards improved performance in some areas and challenged poor delivery, it meant that the space for achieving less measurable but equally valuable outcomes was reduced:

“The way problems were conceived and addressed...meant that we lost complexity. Because it gave clear priorities, we stopped looking at interrelationship of targets and complexity of the problems. There was an idea that targets would drive some kind of change. There was also an idea that if we drilled down deep enough, if we got to know...who these families were we would somehow have the solutions. So the process itself became the answer...”

The experiences of workers and service users also reflected this. For example, interviewees told how the complex long-term achievements of building successful relationships and a sense of purpose in life, which are key predictors of how well individuals cope with and recover from complex health and social problems (Best 2010), could be sidelined. One former homeless worker told the story of 'Peter' who he had helped move off the streets and into a flat, but who became suicidal because he couldn't adapt to life away from the daily habits and friendships built up over years of life on the streets:

“We moved him on and stuck him in a flat and he was suicidal... what actually works is someone finding a purpose in life and relationships, but these are long-term goals and they're just not as easily understood in policy terms.”

A growing body of knowledge, informed by the insights of social network analysis on how individuals cope with and recover from problems such as poor mental health or substance misuse, suggests that the key predictors of change are successful relationships and a sense of purpose, followed by stable accommodation and employment or other meaningful activity. The key turning points in individuals' lives are frequently psychological and social,⁴⁴ the shorthand for this being to possess strong social or 'recovery' capital. Evidence suggests that possessing this can reduce the need for more intrusive forms of treatment (Best 2010). Building stronger social capital does not necessarily require more resources, but services often fail to prioritise these needs.

The 'audit culture' tended to focus on the most easily measureable aspects of a service, an approach that was ill suited to capturing the relational aspect of social exclusion, as one interviewee explained:

⁴⁴ For example, a Laub and Sampson (2003) follow-up study of adolescents from youth offending institutes followed subjects up to the age of 70 and found that the key predictors of change were successful relationships and stable employment (in Best and Laudet 2010).

“The problem is that when politicians move into this terrain, they want the certainty of measurement – but it’s very difficult to get at the quality of social relationships through measurement.”

Because of the complexity of their problems and the difficulties they can face in forming trusting relationships, particularly with those perceived as figures of authority, people with multiple disadvantages need highly relational, intensive contact and for a sense of ownership to be restored to compensate for the disempowerment they face as a result of their condition or circumstances (Anderson 2011). However, impressions of public services by service users fitted with the general experience of the most disadvantaged, which include a lack of timely engagement, poor or infrequent contact with professionals, and being given little information about the planning of their support (Anderson 2011).⁴⁵

For example several service users described how there was not enough balance between therapeutic and clinical support in services they had attended:

“I was offered a three month programme with contact once a week – that isn’t realistic, that’s not going to work.”

One service user told of the difficulty of not receiving timely support:

“You try and seek the help...but by the time everything gets going it’s gone down the line and I might be in a completely different mind frame, I might be working and thinking “oh, I’m all right. I don’t need 3 months or 6 months in rehab now, I’ve got a job”. That crisis has passed, your heads moved on. That kept happening. I would say “it’s too late I’m working now, things are ok”. But they’re not and six months later I’m back in the chaotic lifestyle.”

Several interviewees told how their lack of support was sometimes the result of challenging behaviour which was either not understood by services or which led to them being refused support. This is despite the recognition that the lives of people with multiple disadvantage are often scarred by neglect, abuse and other trauma, and this can have a lasting impact on inter-personal relationships, resulting in aggressive behaviour (Anderson 2011). This problematic

behaviour can lead to professionals expressing discomfort and even hostility towards working with this group (Lester & Bradley 2001).

Many interviewees expressed concern that, despite some exceptions, services continued to be designed primarily around the symptoms of disadvantage rather than preventative actions to tackle the underlying causes. This could result in high demand for services that would not otherwise have arisen – a problem known as ‘failure demand’ (Seddon 2009).

To view this problem from a wider perspective, several political theorists have suggested that ‘standardisation’ is a key characteristic of modern states. On this view, attempts to resolve complex, unpredictable problems of multiple disadvantage have not seen greater progress because of public services that are unresponsive to complex needs, and systems that struggle with problems which require ‘nuance and insight’ (Stears 2011).

Accountability is a key example of this. The relational argument would be that centralised systems of accountability standardise, removing any space for contingency and complexity and reducing the scope for professional autonomy. These systems encourage services to look up to commissioners, executive agencies and Whitehall more than to look across to local communities, service users and their families. It would also suggest that the state actively suppresses this complexity, reducing the particular to the general.⁴⁶ A radical relational perspective would abandon the state’s role in providing public services altogether and hand over responsibility to civil society. The liberal view would not go this far. It would argue that under New Labour, a ‘Command and Control’ style of accountability, with centrally determined targets, should dictate local action and restrict professional autonomy, diverting attention away from the frontline. However, it would not fundamentally reject some central oversight of public services.

Egalitarians would agree that accountability became too centralised under New Labour, but they would be concerned about devolving too much power to the local level and the implications this may have for national standards, particularly minimum standards of support for the most disadvantaged. Egalitarians would maintain the role of the state in providing universal public services. The way in which systems of accountability change to reflect the critiques above depends in large part on the future of localism.

⁴⁵ Others’ impressions included being faced with delays in receiving help, problems navigating systems, refusal or exclusion from services, poor continuity of care and a fragmented service response (Anderson 2011).

⁴⁶ In interviews this was a criticism made of systems of accountability but also of the wider process of translating political ideas into policy: ‘No matter how much you change the political narrative for good or bad, policy mutates around it...takes a new political language and wraps it around what [it] is doing[,] what it was doing before[,] and carries on.’

New localism?

Another tension identified by interviewees was how far the scope of the social exclusion agenda reflected local priorities and concerns. There was a strong critique of ‘top-down’ approaches to defining and interpreting the problem of social exclusion:

“If you could define the problem, analyse the extent to which it was a problem numerically, identify the geographical locations and then find solutions that worked... it could be done – it was a very industrial approach to public policy.”

Though this was a fairer criticism of the agenda at some points more than others, from the initial choice of issues at the outset of the agenda in 1997, to the socially excluded groups chosen as the focus of the public service agreement in 2006 (PSA 16), centrally dictated targets and defined outcomes restricted scope for local variation. There was still a view that the PSA 16 helped marshal government resources for vulnerable groups in a way that was otherwise unlikely to have happened, but there was also a recognition that this came at the cost of local autonomy:

“I can understand why top-down targetry didn’t feel that it had enough local input into it. They put a lot of emphasis on having a PSA target – in central government terms that was really important because it was having a PSA that meant you got the money, but I suspect that...people in local authorities were also pretty fed up with that approach.”

Several interviewees argued that national policy should establish clarity at a conceptual level but that this should then be interpreted according to local knowledge. In order for this to happen, local government and local civil society organisations needed to have a deep understanding of the changing nature of social problems in their areas to give a stronger lead:

“Local authority leaders pay too much attention to national policy and not enough to problems in their area...we really need to have a much better understanding of society and the globalised nature of it... We’ve got new problems and we have to keep on top of the changing nature [of them].”

There was a general view that a clear settlement has not been reached between central and local government as to how to support the most disadvantaged. There were different ideas about how this should be achieved. A liberal perspective was summed up by one interviewee who argued that it should be through local empowerment: ‘if social exclusion moves up the agenda again, I’m sure there’ll be a stronger strand which is about – you get this in ideas like connected care and local commissioning – the idea that really you have to put the power in the hands of those local communities...’

An egalitarian view was described by one interviewee who argued that this should be achieved through ring-fencing and minimum entitlements:

“I don’t assume that any local authority is directing its resource to where it is most needed and for equity reasons it is important that central government does play a role there.”

The relational argument would be that the idea that central government can guarantee equality is not borne out in practice, that in reality, greater equality is achieved through individuals and communities having the freedom to negotiate better solutions to local problems and through tackling inequalities of power.

However, from many there were simply real concerns about the prospects for disadvantaged people as ring-fenced funding is withdrawn and more decisions are reliant on strong local representation:

“The truth is that mostly the politics are that people just want them out and they are seen as outsiders, trouble makers, they don’t want to deal with them, they think they’re from somewhere else. People who stick their head over the parapet find that it is an unpopular agenda, there aren’t votes in this locally, unless people are savvy enough to tell the popular story and your average town councillor doesn’t get it enough to do this.”

There was broader agreement that an urgent debate is needed about what kind of settlement there should be between national and local government as part of a new localism and how this will enable disadvantaged people to gain greater power and voice alongside those around them in a community.

Key conclusions

New Labour's social exclusion agenda began with the insight that there were limits to what could be achieved through a top-down, centrally driven political approach to deep-rooted social problems. Its early statecraft achieved success in 'open policymaking', with a large-scale consultative process informing the design and implementation of policy, and extensive outreach involving a wide range of groups in its efforts to achieve reform. But despite early experimentation, the agenda became associated with an often top-down, centralising and technocratic approach to statecraft.

The greatest achievements of the social exclusion agenda were often those where government could rely on technocratic levers of state to standardise results, for example, falling numbers of children in poverty, numbers of lone parents in work, or to achieve more through meeting one-off targets, such as teenage pregnancies or numbers of people sleeping rough. Three key themes emerge from the findings and deserve greater consideration:

- Limited reform of mainstream services – these working in parallel or isolation from specialist, targeted services, leading to an ongoing problem of 'failure demand'.
- Systems of accountability that failed to respond adequately to social complexity – the flaws of managerial, technocratic systems of accountability are clear, but it is less clear how the aspects of these systems that need to be retained can be in a less target driven culture.
- Lack of local ownership – there was little scope for local variation as part of some of the evidence-based programmes run by the SEU and local government was not always trusted to lead programmes. With the likelihood of further removal of ring-fenced funding for certain disadvantaged groups, urgent debate is needed about what kind of settlement is needed between national and local government as part of a new localism.

The findings confirm the hypothesis for this research: that the politics of disadvantage combine to create a distinct set of circumstances where the most disadvantaged in society are highly dependent on a precarious and shifting politics. This can protect or enhance their vulnerability. Based on the interview

findings and the review above, five key lessons emerge in relation to the politics of disadvantage:

- The most disadvantaged continue to be excluded from the decision-making processes that shape their lives, including their care, how services are delivered and political forums.
- Weak external political pressure means that the impetus is primarily with politicians and policymakers to force the pace of reform, but as other priorities emerge this can be difficult to maintain.
- If a key characteristic of the modern state, according to some political theorists, is the drive to standardise, multiple disadvantage is a prime victim of a political system that fails to respond adequately to social complexity.
- A highly visible agenda for multiple disadvantage can be both a help and a hindrance. It secures attention, but a high profile can make radical reform more difficult to achieve.
- Political legitimacy for investing in support for the most disadvantaged can only be secured on a reciprocal, conditional basis, but this can lead to a polarising and stigmatising political discourse.

Figure 3 summarises analysis of the findings from the three political perspectives. Analysing the findings from these different political perspectives helps bring out the trade-offs and tensions that need to be confronted and resolved in order to consider new ways forward and to begin to reconceptualise social exclusion.

All three forms of political thought can help set out a way forward: egalitarian principles can provide a vision for greater equality and universal support, but without liberal means of individual empowerment and civic renewal this vision may not be realised. A strong relational tendency could help improve the resilience of social bonds and confront the

weaknesses of both state and market in relation to tackling disadvantage, but this will require a shift away from the New Labour traits of control and consensus towards greater contingency and contesting of power.

The mid-2010s: a transformed social and economic context

The political and economic foundations that formed the basis of the social exclusion agenda in the 90s collapsed in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. The associated social and economic change has radically transformed the context for tackling disadvantage.

	Egalitarian	Liberal	Relational
Political strategy			
Securing public legitimacy ('Rights and responsibilities discourse')	Reciprocity is vital for the legitimacy of public services, but the balance was lost between 'rights' and 'responsibilities'	Public services need a moral framework, but under New Labour individuals and communities were disempowered	Rights and responsibilities exacerbated the exclusion of some groups and exploited them for political gain in a way that was undemocratic
Policy			
Scope of the social exclusion agenda	The focus for tackling social exclusion should be broad, with a universal orientation and within a wider policy framework of redistribution	There should be a targeted approach to improve life chances for the most disadvantaged; the welfare state plus public services formula has failed	The state should not define groups of disadvantaged people when their individual characteristics vary and are dynamic
Evidence-based Policy	New Labour's focus on evidence-based policymaking was right, but this came at the cost of widespread reform and did not do enough to tackle entrenched inequalities	Knowing 'what works' is vital to ensure value for money, secure the effectiveness of policy and target support as well as possible	Evidence-based policymaking encourages a top-down approach, which standardises responses and conflicts with community empowerment
Statecraft			
Policy Implementation	The impact of the social exclusion agenda was limited by a focus on marginal spending on targeted programmes and didn't do enough to tackle inequality	Social exclusion policy often lacked local ownership and an enduring legacy of individual empowerment	Individuals and communities were encouraged, under the social exclusion agenda, to become 'consumers' of services rather than participants
Accountability and localism	Accountability became too centralised under New Labour, but there is scepticism about how greater localism will cater for the most disadvantaged	Reform was limited because, although new governance structures and organisations were set up, they were seen as agents of delivery rather than institutions in their own right	Systems of accountability standardise and remove any space for contingency and complexity; this keeps power in the hands of the state which should be devolved to civil society and people

Figure 3: Analysis of findings from three political perspectives

The story of social exclusion as told in the New Labour years has come to an end. The dominant narrative of a rising tide of general prosperity secured by year on year growth, investment in public services and limited redistributive measures, leaving a small group of excluded people caught up in chaotic situations, is no longer viable in a context of declining living standards, rising unemployment, homelessness and cuts touching a growing minority.

For progressives of all political persuasions there has to be a new account of how support for the most marginalised will form part of the vision for a more sustainable economy and more equal society. Realising this depends on learning from the recent past, and considering the new challenges posed by the social legacy of the recent economic instability.

The weaknesses of New Labour's economic model of light touch financial regulation to help deliver social justice were exposed by the financial crash.⁴⁷ The collapse resulted in a permanent loss of output for the UK and has been followed by the slowest recovery on record. Over a decade of rising living standards and unprecedented growth have given way to entrenched austerity following the crash and as the Coalition's deficit reduction agenda has taken hold. The decline in average living standards is set to increase until at least 2014, with relative low-income poverty expected to rise until 2015-16, particularly among children (IFS 2012).

In a stark contrast to New Labour's steady rise in public spending after its first term in government, the Coalition's deficit reduction agenda will see a sixteen per cent cut in Whitehall departments' budgets for public services over seven years with departmental spending as a share of the economy only returning to 1998 levels in 2016/17 (IFS 2012). Cuts in public services will disproportionately affect the most disadvantaged, with the overall impact for those in the poorest households equivalent to having more than a fifth of their income taken away (Horton and Reed 2010). To protect some departmental budgets, the Chancellor plans to cut £10bn from the welfare budget, which could dramatically reduce entitlements and have a severe impact on levels of social exclusion. However whichever party, or parties, win power in 2015 will also face tough choices.

Some comparisons can be made between now and when the social exclusion agenda was conceived in the mid-90s. Unemployment is high, back up to where it was in 1994 at 2.65 million. Long-term unemployment is rising, with women worst affected this time round as a result of heavy public sector job cuts. Homelessness is on the increase, with a 14 per cent increase in the number of households accepted as homeless by local authorities in 2011 (CLG 2012). As in the mid-1990s there is growing public recognition and anger at income inequality (Natcen 2010), and this is compounded by fury at 'irresponsibility at the top' and a mistrust of elites, whether in finance or in politics. Pre-tax inequalities in the UK are among the highest in the OECD, and wage inequality continues to grow as real median incomes stagnate.

But the wider economic and political conditions are completely transformed. In the mid-90s binding together a number of social problems for social and institutional reform was possible because there were sufficient resources and public goodwill to do so. Neither of these can be relied upon in the short to medium term. We are yet to see what impact the combination of high levels of unemployment, a chronic housing shortage, rising prices, falling living standards, soaring top pay, high levels of inequality and deep and painful cuts will have on public attitudes towards disadvantage and poverty.

This could, as in previous recessions, increase levels of empathy and understanding towards those at the margins of society, as more people experience a greater sense of vulnerability. However, a shifting sense of entitlement and individual responsibility has also come to characterise the early 2010s.

There has been a hardening of attitudes towards welfare: over half of people think benefits are too high and that they discourage people from finding work – up from just over a third in the early 80s (Natcen 2011). A recent poll has suggested that 74 per cent of the public – including 59 per cent of Labour voters and 51 per cent of those on the lowest incomes (below £10,000) – think that welfare payments should be cut, particularly for the unemployed and lone parents (YouGov 2012). Objection to a 'culture of entitlement' is now widespread and a very high premium is placed on individual responsibility.

⁴⁷ This delivered unprecedented levels of investment in public services, including programmes that formed part of the social exclusion agenda, such as spending on drug treatment, welfare to work, and skills and measures to tackle inequality through the tax and benefit system.

Opportunities and threats facing disadvantaged groups

The Coalition has set out its vision for tackling multiple disadvantage and wider poverty in *Social Justice: Transforming lives* (DWP 2012). The vision it articulates of a 'second chance society' resonates with a strong sense among the British public that people deserve to be given an opportunity no matter their circumstances (Kellner in Hampson [Ed] 2010). But this is undermined by the lack of a compelling programme for public service reform to compensate for huge amounts of funding being withdrawn from public services and welfare support (see Bubb 2011).

The strategy addresses multiple disadvantage, but policy activity following on from the agenda is narrowly focused on disadvantaged families, prompted by David Cameron's pledge that the Coalition would be the most 'family-friendly government ever' and his commitment to 'turning round the lives of 120,000 most troubled families' before the end of this parliament.⁴⁸ The agenda is being led by DWP so employment is a defining factor and seen as the key route out of poverty, despite widespread working poverty and high unemployment. The overwhelming focus of the Department for Work and Pensions is on reforming the welfare system through major initiatives such as Universal Credit and overseeing drastic cuts to the welfare bill.

Another driving force of Coalition policy is the belief that market based mechanisms can drive efficiencies and provide innovative responses to difficult social problems. Under the Coalition, private sector provision of public services has grown in probation, education, and welfare, frequently on the basis of PBR, to minimise upfront spending required by government. However, rigid interventionist approaches, such as PBR, which dictates the speed of engagement rather than responding to the individual's own pace, very often do not work for people with the most complex needs (McDonagh 2011).

At a local level the spending cuts are driving local councils to retreat into tight statutory responses, pulling back on discretionary support. But perhaps the biggest threat is the withdrawal of ring-fenced

budgets, several of which support disadvantaged groups. These include the budget for drug treatment which is currently ring-fenced but will be pooled when allocated to health and well-being boards. The ring-fence for Supporting People, which provided housing for the most vulnerable has also come off.⁴⁹ The real danger is that adults facing multiple disadvantage become even more isolated, with less support available because of cuts and higher thresholds for support, less local monitoring and analysis, and perhaps most worrying of all, a shrinking voluntary sector.

There is a danger that in responding to the broader challenges of a stagnant economy, falling living standards, rising levels of poverty and pressures on public spending in housing, health and social care, progressives will fail to engage with the specific and complex challenges facing a small minority, regardless of the potential wasted and the wider impact on society. In a programme for national renewal, marginalised groups could get left behind as a broad-based, majoritarian project seeks to appeal to wider interests and stronger political constituencies.

However, this would store up problems for the future and compound the risk of permanent damage being done to the social fabric, with all the misery this entails for families and communities. Instead, the conceptual underpinning, political strategy and policy framework of the social exclusion agenda need to be rethought and rooted in the changed circumstances of our time.

⁴⁸ See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8701820/UK-and-London-riots-David-Cameron-vows-to-turn-around-120000-troubled-families-by-2015.html>

⁴⁹ Note: this process began under the previous government.

Towards a new politics of disadvantage?

Today the language of social exclusion has been replaced by the language of 'social justice', adopted by the Coalition government to describe its strategy to tackle the 'root causes' of poverty. The Coalition government embraced tackling entrenched poverty as part of its reform agenda on coming to power in 2010, distinguishing itself from the previous government on the grounds of its aim to improve life chances and incentives to work, rather than 'increasing a reliance on the state' by compensating for levels of low pay and unemployment.

Tackling disadvantage is posed by the Coalition government as a choice between improving life chances or alleviating income poverty. Rather than reducing 'snapshot inequality' through redistributive measures, the aspiration is to help improve social mobility – narrowly focused on children and young people – through improving life chances (Clegg 2010). In his Hugo Young lecture of 2010, Nick Clegg argued: 'Poverty plus a pound does not represent fairness. It represents an approach to fairness dominated by the power of the central state to shift money around, rather than to shift life chances'.

Similarly, Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan-Smith criticises the previous government's strategy for tackling poverty and disadvantage as 'more concerned with pushing people just above the poverty line' than with changing their lives, differentiating the Coalition's approach from that of the left as being about more than the 'simplistic concept of income transfer' (DWP 2012). The Coalition articulates a strongly behavioural account of poverty and disadvantage, failing to fully acknowledge the role structural forces play in producing and worsening some aspects of multiple disadvantage. For example, he questions the value of benefits altogether because 'extra money provided to dysfunctional families may simply be spent on drugs or gambling, rather than on helping children'.⁵⁰

This political narrative also caricatures the position of the left which, as we have seen, pioneered many of the policies pursued by the Coalition to tackle disadvantage. The left, in turn, has not fully engaged in this debate, either to respond to the charges or to set out new thinking. A degree of inertia is also the result of the left rethinking its approach to social justice – specifically, how best to tackle inequality, both in its material and non-material forms, and what the new role of redistribution should be in that. There may also be a concern that in engaging too much with issues of family breakdown, addiction and other factors attributed by the Coalition to poverty and disadvantage, the left could compound stereotypes mistakenly being put forward as representative of the poor. But it is misguided to pretend these debates are not happening or that the issues are not real. This reticence leads to a political debate that lacks vigour and candour, provides weak democratic representation for the poorest and most disadvantaged and leaves civil society as the key agitator for greater inclusion. The mixed fortunes of the past fifteen years open up space for considering new and different ways forward to break through this political impasse.

⁵⁰ See <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/publicEvents/events/2011/20111201t1830vLSE.aspx>

Ways forward

The story of social exclusion told under New Labour, and now of 'social justice' under the Coalition government, is that insecurity, isolation and a systematic lack of opportunity are the preserve of a small minority marooned from mainstream society. This story is not true of Britain after the financial crisis, if indeed it ever was. Exclusion and inequality are no longer seen as marginal issues, following the longest decline in living standards since the 1920s and with long-term unemployment back at levels not seen since the mid-90s.

Under Blair, the social exclusion agenda understood that the most excluded need different forms of support than the post-war settlement of welfare state plus universal public services could provide. But its mistake was to paint a picture of 2.5 per cent of the population as fundamentally different to the rest because of disaffection, social dysfunction or lack of opportunity. This suggests that the problems of alienation, isolation and poor life chances are confined to a tiny minority, rather than simply hitting this group harder and often in combination.

The Coalition's 'Social Justice' strategy also focuses on a narrow group facing entrenched social disadvantage and poverty, the causes of which are attributed to family breakdown, substance misuse, crime, debt and welfare dependency, while neglecting wider economic inequalities such as in-work poverty and structural unemployment. The lesson of the past decade or so is that both approaches lead to a settlement for the most disadvantaged that is residualised and unstable.

In today's Britain, a more resilient settlement for tackling social disadvantage will require finding common ground with majority concerns and creating the conditions needed for greater inclusion by going further to restore power and voice to disadvantaged groups. It will mean providing highly relational and targeted support for those who need it most, but also pursuing long-term, institutional reforms to make mainstream services more responsive, providing the ultimate test bed for a more 'relational state'.

For this to secure popular consent, it needs to form part of a bigger argument for social renewal, linking with common concerns like better solutions to mental health problems and social isolation, more responsive public services that listen early and often, and tackling pervasive inequalities in the employment and housing markets. This could provide the basis of a transformative agenda for tackling social disadvantage in the next decade. Some starting points for this are set out here.

Politics

Rather than a narrow, individualistic model of economic inclusion, equal value should be placed on wider aspects of citizenship, such as contribution to civic life, personal flourishing and strong social relationships. In contrast to the politics of inclusion under New Labour and the Coalition, this would be based on a conviction that empowerment is a better route to social responsibility than obligation alone. For this to succeed, however, it has to be part of a politics of the common good. While responsibility

was demanded of the most excluded under New Labour, voluntary exclusion at the top of society was too often ignored. If more is to be expected of those facing disadvantage, a sense of responsibility has to stretch across the whole of society and not just the most marginalised.

Priorities

An agenda for social renewal would prioritise areas in which there continues to be serious failure, such as multiple disadvantage, which remains a minority interest in any government department and where high quality frontline services are still lacking. To this end, a new agenda should seek to protect services like the homelessness sector and drug and alcohol treatment as well as intensive, one-to-one support for the most disadvantaged individuals and families. This review also concludes that public spending should be maintained and, where possible, expanded in areas such as mental health support and early intervention, particularly early years and childhood/young adulthood, which have wide reach and where changes would also improve prospects for the most disadvantaged.

Spending in these areas would be sustained by doing less on issues where policy has proven less successful, for example, in the youth justice system, where interventions have struggled to address the complex economic and social factors that are the cause of so much youth offending; or on area-based regeneration where macroeconomic policy is more likely to have a long-term impact than discretionary spending by government.

Social partners

A new agenda should be based on a different understanding of state power, one which doesn't attempt to drive social change simply through a service delivery mechanism but also sees it as an exercise in partnership and coalition building. Civil society organisations such as charities, social enterprises and trade unions will play a vital role in challenging existing power structures and forms of prejudice to create a level playing field for the most disadvantaged, whether in relation to challenging public opinion, local hierarchies, unresponsive public services or undemocratic forms of accountability or governance.

Building common alliances to link disadvantage with majority concerns

Those advocating on behalf of people facing multiple disadvantage need to identify long term projects

where there are grounds to build common cause with broader coalitions to link up with majority concerns. Identifying these shared concerns becomes more important as competition for scarce resources increases and public attitudes towards the least advantaged harden. A potential area for this could be a stronger settlement for the most disadvantaged on mental health (see below). A diverse coalition of political and advocacy groups and service users joining together with the growing constituency of support calling for more talking therapies will be key to establishing this as a mainstream political goal.^{51,52,53}

Stronger platform to defend the humanity and dignity of the most disadvantaged

A stronger platform to defend the humanity and dignity of the most disadvantaged is increasingly needed to challenge the hardening of public attitudes towards the least advantaged, which is creating space for more divisive policies, for example on welfare reform.⁵⁴ A lack of external political pressure from charities and trade unions was highlighted by some in this report as one of the reasons why less radical policy progress could be made under the social exclusion agenda. 'Invest to save' arguments pursued by many charities can risk falling on deaf ears in government.⁵⁵ Charities working with the most disadvantaged could play a powerful role in the public debate by uniting around a campaigning aim of improving public perception and understanding of the lives their clients lead, with the framing of their experiences led by service users themselves.

Statecraft

Rather than being centrally determined, priorities should be set according to local need, with the role of central government being to define key challenges. Instead of driving social change through target-led systems and centralised services, the goal should be to decentralise services and introduce more subjective approaches to accountability.

New approaches to accountability

More meaningful systems of accountability should be introduced over models such as payment-by-results (PBR) or 'black box' commissioning for the most disadvantaged groups. PBR may have a role for some groups, such as those closest to the labour market in welfare to work, but for those with the most complex needs, PBR provides little incentive for the intensive, long-term support required. 'Black box' commissioning⁵⁶ can also lead to loss of insight and accountability in relation to the

'hardest to help' groups. Beyond these practical concerns, both systems set objective outcomes with little or no input from the service user. A different approach for those most in need of highly relational support would place equal value on process as on outcome, so that chasing results wouldn't compromise the quality of the frontline relationships that are needed to achieve them. It would empower individuals or families to shape the nature of their support and the outcomes they aim to achieve as some innovative services already do⁵⁷ and base these outcomes on personal well-being and participation as well as on employment or educational goals (see 'Politics'). Commissioning would change too, relying more on close collaboration with local services and knowledge of local need rather than arm's-length audits

Reconciling localism and entitlement

Linking community priorities more closely with social exclusion policy could create more integrated services and target resources more effectively. However, greater localism also means tough choices, such as not reversing the recent withdrawal of ring-fenced funding in a number of areas, which places some disadvantaged groups at risk of losing out on support. In the past, government has sought to promote equality of rights for the most disadvantaged through legislation or statutory requirements on local authorities, such as equality duties. In a more localist future, new ways need to be found to improve prospects for marginalised groups. Some have argued for greater public scrutiny or voluntary agreements on entitlements or service guarantees. Others suggest that greater equality is more likely to result from communities having the freedom to negotiate better solutions to local problems. Understanding what entitlement for the most disadvantaged will look like in a more localist future urgently needs to be debated.

Stronger organisation of service users to challenge institutions

Crucial to balancing localism and entitlement will be deciding how the most disadvantaged gain power and voice alongside those around them in the community. A priority for this should be stronger organisation of service users to challenge institutions. On some issues such as mental health, service users are well represented and organised through groups holding institutions and services to account and linking into commissioning priorities. But for other issues such as substance misuse or long-term unemployment, service-user groups are not organised on the same scale and few groups have direct links to commissioning and formal

⁵¹ See Layard (2012) How Mental Illness Loses out in the NHS where for example calls for a major expansion in psychological therapy for those who have mental illness on top of other chronic conditions beyond 2014 <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/special/cepsp26.pdf>

⁵² Other majority concerns in which the multiply disadvantaged have a stake and which could form the basis of such a coalition also include securing a job guarantee for those out of work with forms of intermediate employment for the most disadvantaged or campaigning on localism to secure a clearer national/local settlement on support for the most

⁵³ A model for this comes from children's advocacy, where groups supporting the poorest and most disadvantaged children for example have invested in achieving the long-term objective of securing universal childcare. This has become a mainstream, shared political concern which has widespread public support, potential economic benefits and, if introduced, would improve the lives of the poorest and most disadvantaged children

⁵⁴ See for example <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/9354163/David-Camersons-welfare-speech-in-full.html>

⁵⁵ This is still a difficult argument to make to government. It is rarely the department making the up-front investment that accrues the savings, and when these do come they are not always cashable or realisable in the short term. In tough times, a value for money argument might not rest in favour of spending on the most disadvantaged.

⁵⁶ 'Black box' commissioning gives independent providers flexibility to innovate and involves a 'hands-off' approach to commissioning from the state.

⁵⁷ This is best exemplified at a service level by one organisation, which provides intensive support to 'chaotic' families where families themselves recruit professionals, decide what problems they want to tackle and help shape outcomes. The focus on process as well as outcome creates space for professionals to prioritise building relationships with the families. Families having a say in the outcomes they aim to achieve gives a sense of ownership, boosting their capability and creating deeper and more sustainable change - see <http://www.participle.net/projects/view/3/102/>

processes of decision-making, representation and review. Changes in the way services are commissioned could help to set this as a priority for public and voluntary sector services.

For more responsive services for the most disadvantaged, institutional and systems reforms should be prioritised over small-scale initiatives, mainstream over marginal spending, and preventative reach over crisis responses. Reform should include freeing up for resources for more relational support through greater automation and/or transactional responses for those who don't require personalised support. As a starting point, changes in the mental health system and social services/criminal justice system provide examples for this.

Stronger settlement for those socially excluded by mental health issues

One in six of the population now experience mental health problems and a mental health condition is often a core and exacerbating factor in multiple disadvantage. There have been calls to make available psychological therapies available to more of those with depression and anxiety disorders by extending the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme at a cost of around £300m.⁵⁸ This would be unlikely to reach the most excluded, many of whom will need highly personalised interventions to ensure that they can receive support through mainstream systems as they are currently configured.

As part of any general expansion, there should be commitments to reach more socially excluded people, providing highly personalised interventions where necessary, while working to change organisational cultures by building professionals' skills and knowledge in relation to multiple disadvantage. For example those in the criminal

justice system (just over 70 per cent of whom have a mental disorder compared to just under 5 per cent of the general population) and in homelessness services (almost 40 per cent of London's rough sleepers are estimated to have a mental health problem).⁵⁹ Young people with mental health problems should also be a priority due to high levels of unmet need. At a time when the NHS needs to make savings of around £20bn, the associated benefits (for example mental illness is the cause of half of all incapacity benefit claims) mean mental health should be strongly considered for additional spending and at the very least its budget should not be cut.

A better balance between enforcement and prevention

While preventative services such as social services and probation have become more narrowly focused on the management of risk and enforcement, services with an enforcement remit like the youth justice system and policing have taken on more social support functions. This reflects the enforcement-led response to tackling many social problems under New Labour, and which has not significantly altered under the Coalition. But the approach had varying levels of success. For example nearly all of the targets on education and training, mental health, substance misuse, and housing provision in the youth justice system under New Labour were missed. Challenging this balance could help determine whether the funding going into these services could have better preventative reach. In the same vein there is a strong case for a review of the core functions of social services and the extent to which it can still serve its original purpose ('the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being').⁶⁰

⁵⁸ By extending the IAPT programme. See Layard (2012) How Mental Illness Loses out in the NHS which calls, for example, for a major expansion in psychological therapy for those who have mental illness on top of other chronic conditions beyond 2014 <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/special/cepsp26.pdf>

⁵⁹ See www.revolvingdoors.org.uk

⁶⁰ See <http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/>

Conclusion

Our call in this paper is for a new agenda for preventing social disadvantage, which is part of a bigger argument for social renewal and which connects with majority concerns. It should be based on a different understanding of state power, one which doesn't attempt to drive social change simply through a service delivery mechanism but which also sees it as an exercise in partnership and coalition building. It should take a rigorous and creative approach to designing public services for greater productivity and preventative reach, and it should advocate localism and more meaningful systems of accountability. Most importantly, it would be based on an ethic that sees empowerment as a better route to social responsibility than obligation alone, and would demand this responsibility from all parts of society, not just the most vulnerable.

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Appendix

Table of descriptions and indicators relating to social exclusion 1997-2012

Report/Speech	Description	Individuals/groups
Tony Blair (1997)	'The poorest people... the forgotten people'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single mothers • Five million people of working age living in homes where nobody works • People who have never worked since leaving school • 150,000 homeless • 100,000 children not attending school
Peter Mandelson (1997)	'Today's Underclass' 'Our fellow citizens who lack the means, material and otherwise, to participate in economic, social, cultural and political life in Britain today'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 million families in which no one of working age works • 150,000 homeless; • Single parents of children who are not attending school • 3 million people living in the worst 1300 estates
Social Exclusion Unit (2001)	'People affected by the most extreme forms of multiple deprivation' 'A fraction of one per cent of the population'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teenagers pregnant under 16 • Young people excluded from school • Those sleeping rough
	'People suffering significant problems'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16-18s not in learning or work • Alcohol dependents
Social Exclusion Unit (2004)	'Those with multiple disadvantages'	<p><i>Five or more of the following:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being a lone parent or a single person • Having low qualifications or skills • Having a physical impairment • Being over 50 • Being from an ethnic minority group • Living in a region of high unemployment
David Miliband (2004)	'Wide exclusion'	<p><i>Those deprived according to a single indicator:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.8 million working-age people in workless households • 194,000 16- to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training • homeless people
	'Deep exclusion'	<p><i>Those who are excluded on multiple counts</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those struggling with basic skills and long-term unemployed • a child in poverty, in poor housing, with a parent suffering mental illness • homeless, on drugs, without skills, and without family.
	'Concentrated exclusion'	Deprived areas where there is a geographic concentration of problems
Respect Task Force 2005/ Respect Task Force, cited in Tony Blair (2006)	'Families with complex needs'	7,500 families with problems ranging from behavioural difficulties amongst children to problem parenting
Tony Blair (2006)	'The "hardest to reach" families'	<p><i>Individuals including:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • looked after children • families with complex problems • people with mental health issues • pregnant teenagers

Report/Speech	Description	Individuals/groups
Social Exclusion Unit (2006)	'Individuals and families who have failed to benefit from the improvements and opportunities available'	3.7 million pensioners and people of working age
Social Exclusion Taskforce (2007)	'The 2-3 per cent'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those who suffer from moderate to severe mental health problems • young problem drug users • young offenders • 16-18 year olds who are not in employment, education or training • children in care • people who lack functional numeracy or literacy (SEU 2007)
Social Exclusion Taskforce (2007)	'Families at risk'	2% of families – or 140,000 families across Britain experiencing complex and multiple problems.
Social Exclusion Taskforce (2007)	'Adults facing Chronic Exclusion'	<p><i>Adults experiencing some or all of:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor health prospects – mental and/or physical health issues • A history of exclusion, institutionalisation or abuse • Behaviour and control difficulties • Skills deficit – unemployment and poor educational achievement • Addictions
Gordon Brown (2009)	'50,000 most chaotic families'	50,000 households who have complex needs and have received multi-agency intervention for a considerable period of time
Department for Work and Pensions (2010)	'Individuals experiencing multiple disadvantage'	11% of UK adults or 5.3 million individuals
	'Individuals persistently experiencing multiple disadvantage'	7.7% of population 3.7 million individuals
	'Individuals experiencing multiple disadvantage according to a tighter definition'	2.5% of all adults or 1.2 million people
	'Individuals persistently experiencing multiple disadvantage according to a tighter definition'	1.7% of all adults or 800,000 people
David Cameron (2011)	'Troubled families'	<p><i>120,000 families living troubled and chaotic lives</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are involved in crime and anti-social behaviour; • Have children not in school; • Have an adult on out-of-work benefits; • Cause high costs to the public purse

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