

## **Social justice and community cohesion – what are they exactly and how do we respond?**

This is an expanded version of the workshop given at Umbrella, 14 July 2009.

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We're going to grapple with two terms that have become contested!

### **What is social justice?**

Although 'social justice' is frequently used (eg by Gordon Brown), it is hard to find a definition.

Tony Blair defined social justice as:

“policies to expand opportunity and tackle the most deep seated causes and symptoms of social exclusion.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the way in which the term 'social justice' is used in Scotland, for example in the Scottish Executive's strategy document<sup>2</sup>.

In a recent book on social justice<sup>3</sup>, the think-tank, ippr, talk about the four principles of social justice, being:

- Equal citizenship
- The social minimum – “All citizens must have access to resources that adequately meet their essential needs, and allow them to lead a secure and dignified life in today's society.” [p5]
- Equality of opportunity
- Fair distribution – of “Resources that do not form part of equal citizenship or the social minimum ...” [p5].

The MLA Social Justice and Inclusion Topical Workshop (5 July 2007) working definition was:

Giving people access to the information, services and facilities that they have a right to, and making sure that they are fully aware of and know how

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<sup>1</sup> In his letter to Lord Falconer, the former Prime Minister used this definition (taken from: <http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page9458.asp>, accessed 6 June 2007).

<sup>2</sup> *Social justice. a Scotland where everyone matters*. Scottish Executive, 1999. Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/158142/0042789.pdf>, accessed 6 June 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Nick Pearce and Will Paxton (eds). *Social justice: building a fairer Britain*. Politico's Publishing, 2005.

to take up their entitlement to these services – with a particular emphasis on providing services for the most needy.<sup>4</sup>

### **And what is community cohesion?**

In terms of *community cohesion*, a cohesive community is one where:

- “there is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities
- the diversity of people’s different backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and positively value [sic]
- those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities
- strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods.”<sup>5</sup>

Being a cohesive community is also part of being a *sustainable community*:

“Sustainable communities are places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all.”<sup>6</sup>

However, ‘community cohesion’ has become another contested term. Critics have suggested for some time that, for example:

“... the very concept of community cohesion became incorporated within a political circle of exclusion, segregation and control”<sup>7</sup>.

Increasingly, the Government is conflating ‘community cohesion’ with religious extremism – see, for example:

“The reshuffle in May 2006 saw responsibility for [preventing extremism] pass to Communities and Local Government, combining central policy on cohesion and faith with an extended reach into local authorities and communities to make a difference at the local level. Communities and Local Government will be responsible for tackling disadvantage in all

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<sup>4</sup> See:

[http://www.seapn.org.uk/content\\_files/files/social\\_justice\\_and\\_inclusion\\_paper300707.doc](http://www.seapn.org.uk/content_files/files/social_justice_and_inclusion_paper300707.doc).

<sup>5</sup> Taken from: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1503278>, accessed 6 June 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Taken from: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1139866>, accessed 6 June 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Burnett, Jonathan “Community, cohesion and the state” *Race & Class* 45 (3) January-March 2004, p9.

communities, and for working in partnership with them to improve their capacity to fight extremism.”<sup>8</sup>

## Context

Given that social justice and community cohesion are major Government policies, what’s the context that public libraries are working within? I carried out a quick check of key websites to see what they say about these two policy areas.

- DCMS – nothing on website.
- MLA:
  - Put the community at the heart of developing and delivering services, engaging with people and responding to their needs.
  - Embed excellence, creativity and diversity; innovate and adapt to new working methods.<sup>9</sup>
- CILIP – only a reference to community cohesion in article by Tony Durcan (SCL)
- Conservative vision:
  - Libraries should be about innovation and the future
  - Libraries should be at the heart of their communities. Libraries are at the heart of place making. Co-location, with GP surgeries, or other community facilities, is a wonderful way not only of keeping libraries alive but helping them to thrive.
  - Libraries should be a place to go for every member of the community of whatever age. To read. To study. To hang out. They need quiet places for contemplation, but also places for conversation and activity and events that bring people together.
  - And libraries are about freedom. They should be a neutral place where people are free to find out things for themselves. In an age where the state is ever more intrusive, and where spin is all around, a library should stand as a place for access to untarnished knowledge.<sup>10</sup>
- However, the Conservative Party does support the think-tank, the Centre for Social Justice<sup>11</sup>, which has produced some excellent work, eg on the needs of children in care<sup>12</sup>.

## What are libraries currently doing?

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<sup>8</sup> Taken from: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/preventingextremism/>.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/strategies/~media/Files/pdf/2008/library\\_action\\_plan](http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/strategies/~media/Files/pdf/2008/library_action_plan).

<sup>10</sup> Taken from: <http://www.shadowdcms.co.uk/newsshows.aspx?ref=134>, accessed 3 July 2009.

<sup>11</sup> See: <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/>.

A small handful of examples:

- Working with prisoners and ex-prisoners to help them maintain and develop their links with their families
- Supporting migrant workers
- Supporting looked-after children and young people and their carers
- “Books on Prescription” schemes, organised, for example, with the local Primary Care Trust
- Supporting healthy living
- The public libraries and other services that worked in partnership to deliver “Welcome To Your Library”
- Finally, a good cross-section of imaginative work can have been showcased in the CILIP Community Services Group “Libraries Change Lives Award” winners and finalists<sup>13</sup>.

### **What should libraries be doing?**

- Engaging with local people – and as many people as possible, rather than just those who always engage – to develop joint approaches to providing services which reflect local people’s needs (recognised and unrecognised).
- Ensuring that the ‘distance’ between the library and the community is made as small as possible, for example by recruiting local people to work in the library service (this in itself may, of course, contribute to community cohesion by showing that the library reflects the local community).
- Ensuring that libraries are seen as community spaces – or developed within another facility (such as Children’s Centres, as in Leicester and Suffolk).
- Library staff are fully aware of the complexities of working with their communities. This requires a shift in thinking about whose library it is, how to manage tensions between different community demands, etc.
- Working with partners (eg via Local Area Agreements) to ensure that libraries are part of achieving wider outcomes, and that partners fully

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<sup>12</sup> *Couldn't care less: a policy report from the Children in Care Working Group*. Centre for Social Justice, 2008. See:

<http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/Couldn't%20Care%20Less%20Report%20WEB%20VERSION.PDF>.

<sup>13</sup> See:

<http://www.cilip.org.uk/aboutcilip/medalsandawards/LibrariesChangeLives/lclafinalist09.htm>.

understand what skills and resources libraries are offering and become advocates for our services

- Removing barriers, including:
  - Institutional
  - Perception
  - Social
  - Environmental.
  
- Consider new ways of working, including:
  - Emphasise 'outward-facing' skills, rather than internally-focused work – the importance of dialogue with local people
  - Adopt a radical, forwards-looking agenda for libraries
  - Focus on outcomes
  - Work in partnership, making alliances with others
  - Learn how to work to achieve wider outcomes than just those of the library service
  - Develop greater political awareness, especially when we become more involved with different factions within a community
  - Continually assess the role that libraries play – are we the right people to be delivering this particular service, or would we be better commissioning/supporting someone else to do it?
  - Take positive action – for example to recruit people who otherwise might never consider working in a library.
  
- Library services review their staffing profiles (for example, how far they reflect their local community, what age/gender spread they have) and look at ways of changing this as necessary (eg by recruiting people with qualifications and experience in other fields, who can take on a more community-based, entrepreneurial role).
  
- Library services review their training priorities to ensure that they are investing in frontline staff.
  
- As part of this development of work towards social justice, library services also actively embrace a change of culture (for example, towards a whole-service approach).
  
- All development work also involves challenging staff attitudes.
  
- Library staff are trained to deal with the complex issues that arise via full community engagement – for example by learning to analyse what the issues are, who might be able to assist in resolving them, etc. Real community engagement is a dynamic, exciting process, not one to be shied away from.

- Leadership is critical. Libraries need leaders who will advocate, engage, communicate, support ... and who will ensure that these required changes actually occur.
- Prioritise resources.

### **Where next?**

So – do we have key principles and values at our core? Does this lead us to a sense of purpose, or are we buffeted by the political winds?

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