

Looking at the whole picture: an interview with Naomi Eisenstadt

Enver Solomon and Roger Grimshaw of CCJS talked to Naomi Eisenstadt, Director of the Social Exclusion Taskforce.

Enver Solomon: As head of the Social Exclusion Taskforce you're leading a drive to strengthen prevention work with multiply disadvantaged people. How would you characterise what is being attempted – are you trying to ensure that services are improved to meet the needs of a hard to reach group?

Naomi Eisenstadt: It is a hard to reach group but I don't like the language of 'hard to reach'. I think what we're trying to do is make sure that the public sector sees people in the whole and sees families in the whole. I can give you two specific examples: John Hills talks about it in terms of the failure of housing and employment to join up. So you go to the housing office and they sort out your housing problems, but do they ever say to you, you might want to think about finding work. Or the pregnant woman who goes to her antenatal class with her six-year old son – in the course of the conversation it turns out that the six-year old has a different father. Does the midwife say, how does your new partner get on with this little boy? If the midwife thinks her job is just the bump, she won't ask that question, but just by asking the question, she could be preventing serious problems down the line. Antenatal take-up is very, very high; and we know that people who use housing services often have a range of other problems. My point is that opportunities to pick up problems through universal services are often missed. Maybe there's no problem at all but picking up the cues could make much better use of the huge range of services available. I say this as an American because I think the services we have in Britain are brilliant; there is so much more available, but they don't join up.

Roger Grimshaw: I want to focus on early intervention, one purpose of which is to stop children becoming the prolific criminals of the future. How do you think it's possible to identify tomorrow's criminals and target them with effective support?

Naomi Eisenstadt: Well, it's a language I don't like because I think that there are tomorrow's criminals, there are tomorrow's teen parents, but there are also tomorrow's agoraphobics

and tomorrow's depressives and tomorrow's whatever. It seems to me that if you are focusing just on preventing tomorrow's criminals you are thinking about wider society and the impact on wider society, which is of course important, but I'm also interested in the impact on the individual themselves, and particularly the impact on their children if they have children. It is not only criminal behaviour that we are trying to prevent. If you're depressed, if you're agoraphobic, or if you have great potential that is untapped, these are also issues of importance to a productive and content society. How do you identify the people most likely to grow up to have these difficulties? Well, to quote John Bynner, 'never too early, never too late'. Starting very early, our work on the Family Nurse Partnerships, and particularly on infant attachment is phenomenally important. Anyone who has watched new babies in the first six months understands how important those first few months are in terms of psychological and social development. But never too late is also important. Stuff happens as children grow and develop. The more you build up good experiences in those first five years, the more resilient the child is to peer influence, but good early experience is not inoculation. There will be some children who have a wonderful first five years and because of where they happen to live, because of the community, because of their peers, they may be subject to negative influences. It is a combination of working with parents in very early years, working with schools in terms of lessening the kind of peer influence that can lead children into criminality, and it's about a lifetime approach to prevention.

Roger Grimshaw: Looking back at your previous role working on the Sure Start programme. The evaluation so far suggests the most disadvantaged were less well served than they should have been. What would be the lessons from that for your current task?

Naomi Eisenstadt: It was a very important lesson, and it does inform a lot of my thinking now. One of the things that I utterly reject is middle class takeover. The outcome data demonstrates that the most disadvantaged did not benefit, but the people who did take advantage

were just above the poverty line. If you divided the sample group by teen parents and non-teen parents, 86% of the non-teen parents were beginning to show positive effects – not great, but moving in the right direction. Fourteen per cent, the teen parents, not only weren't doing well but weren't doing as well as teen parents in other areas, and that was the finding that was really upsetting. What that said to me was how do you segment the market? The teen parents were about £30 a week poorer than the non-teen parents, who were just above the poverty line. So it was the very poor versus the poor. I think what was happening was exclusion inherent in community development. If you have people for whom Sure Start works, they are a pleasure to

about government's agenda. What am I trying to achieve and what does the family, usually the mother, want from this service? In early years services, if the mothers don't like what is on offer they won't come. But even if they like it, it doesn't mean it helps their kids. Parent satisfaction with the service is essential but not sufficient. In terms of the co-operative model that you describe, it's about figuring out what's going to pull service users into a programme, but not leaving them there without an explicit discussion of the aims on both sides; user and staff. We need to be very open about what the service agenda is, what are the core aims, what are the expected outcomes, what does the parent think is good for the kids? What does the support

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work with, they're very happy, they really love the staff, and they use huge amounts of staff time. The staff of Sure Start centres get very busy working with those who like the service, and can easily lose track of who is not coming. If you ever visit a children's centre, it will be full of women who say 'this place has changed my life'. The real challenge is getting to those who are not there; how do you facilitate their entry when there is this group who already feel so happy and comfortable? The people who feel happy and comfortable join the steering committees and want to shape a service that meets their needs. The early days of Sure Start put huge emphasis on local control by service users, but probably not enough emphasis on ensuring reach for those who found it harder to join in.

Roger Grimshaw: I'm sure we will come back to that. Can I continue by asking about risk intervention? I think philosophies of risk intervention suggest two rather different approaches. One has been labelled 'adversarial risk intervention' and this model seems to be 'target, capture, tame'. Another model, I think, that emerges from the discussions is 'partnership risk intervention' which says, okay, some of us in our community have problems with your behaviour, and maybe you have some problems with the way you've been treated, let's work together to sort this out. How do you make sure that second approach wins out over the first?

Naomi Eisenstadt: You're assuming that I think the second approach is the right one, and for most people I think it is. I think the trick is, particularly on the second approach, to negotiate with the family, to look at their agenda and your agenda. One of the things that is very difficult for front line staff is being honest

worker think is good for the kids? How do they come to agreement? We would like everyone to have great aspirations. We would like everyone to want their children to be able to read and write and add up, and we want everyone to want their children to go to university. The impact on the child of the parent's aspirations is phenomenal. But while virtually all parents really care about their children, that care does not always translate into high expectations. Indeed, some parents who themselves found school a struggle, will feel protective of their children, and might dampen aspirations so as to avoid a sense of failure. Some children will have disadvantages, and we constantly aim to mitigate those disadvantages. There still isn't enough of a joining up between economic policies and social policies that would, I think, provide longer term solutions.

Enver Solomon: In what way?

Naomi Eisenstadt: In that if we're about anti-poverty it's about making people 'un-poor', really driving the Welfare to Work agenda. We don't want to just mitigate the impact of poverty, we want to reduce the number of families experiencing poverty.

Enver Solomon: But doesn't that demand a more universalist approach rather than a targeted approach? Because the way I understand it, and certainly the message that one gets from government ministers – though that might be changing now with the new Prime Minister – is that the focus is very much targeting particular people who are seen to be problem families or children who are likely to be causing antisocial behaviour and upsetting communities.

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Naomi Eisenstadt: The language of ‘progressive universalism’ is about ensuring that with universal services for everyone, those that need more help and support get what they need. I know it is simple to say it and hard to do. The whole basis of ‘Every Child Matters’ is that you use the universal service in order to identify who needs the extra help. It is not about universal *or* targeting, it is both. What we need is a universal service, both for adults and for children, that is more sensitive to the signs and signals that there might be a problem, before the problem becomes so serious. But our success at intervening early will be limited by entry barriers to higher need services. Entry barriers change between adults’ and children’s services, so if you are a child using child and adolescent mental health services you get one kind of service; as you become 17 or 18, you get a different kind of service. Worse still, you may not be entitled to a service at all because your problems are not considered sufficiently serious. Whilst we have made real progress in collaboration between children’s services, we have a long way to go to develop collaboration between adults’ services, and between children’s and adults’ services.

Roger Grimshaw: I want to bring you back to this issue of criminal justice interventions and social issues around that. We have seen how the Youth Justice Board has colonised much of the preventive work in the primary school and transitional years, through the Children’s Fund and Junior Inclusion Panels etc. Now we are moving toward unified children’s services. How can preventive work be organised so that the service experience is coherent and effective?

Naomi Eisenstadt: I think it is already beginning to get there. The Youth Justice Board have been very good about using evidence-based parenting programmes. There are always questions about the

sort of incentives that get people to behave in ways that we know are good for their children.

Enver Solomon: But do you think it’s the role of a criminal justice agency like the Youth Justice Board to be providing prevention programmes? Would it not be more effectively delivered away from the criminal justice system?

Naomi Eisenstadt: It should be delivered and it is being delivered through Sure Start children’s centres and extended schools, but that is not the only place it’s being delivered. The whole point is that no matter where along the system something happens, somebody should be there to help, and if it happens to be the Youth Justice Board I don’t really care. That is what I mean by sweating the system, as long as there is progression along it. What I think is a shame is when people say, ‘I knew there was a problem, but I couldn’t get anyone to help’, and that still happens. We are never going to have a perfect world where everyone gets exactly what is needed when it is needed, but we could do much better.

Enver Solomon: Finally, at times there has appeared to be a contradiction between an approach taken by ministers that focuses on enforcement and one which emphasises the need to support so called problem families. Do you think that is a fair assessment and do you think there will be a change of emphasis in the future?

Naomi Eisenstadt: I’m not sure I agree with you that it is completely contradictory in the sense that it is a continuum. If we were much better at prevention and early intervention, then we would have fewer so-called problem families, but at the end of the day I don’t believe we are ever going to come to this perfect world where we have none. I’m sure even in Sweden they have one or two problem families. I think that

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drop out rate in parenting programmes. The research says that they’re great for the people who stick to them and not so good for the people who start a programme and don’t complete it. Interestingly enough, the people who stick to them are the people who are pretty desperate by the time a programme is offered. They know that there really is a serious problem. The evidence suggests that a lot of the parents who are required to attend parenting programmes have asked for help for years and it wasn’t until they got to such a serious stage that support was offered, albeit with compulsion. This is what I was saying before; there is a real balance to be struck between what is to be gained by criminalising parents and finding the right

if we become really good at a preventative agenda we reduce the likelihood of the need for enforcement measures – you get a virtuous cycle rather than a vicious cycle. I’m not Pollyanna, but I do believe social change is possible. Otherwise I wouldn’t be doing the job I’m doing. So I don’t agree with you that it is contradictory. I think they are held in tension and will always be held in tension. I think to get a perfect world where you go for either support or enforcement is not possible nor even desirable. There will always be a need for some form of punitive response as well as support, and sometimes both at the same time.