

British Welfare Services and Dilemmas

By David Scott, Executive Director of the Brotherhood,
who recently returned from the United Kingdom.

In Britain education, health, welfare, housing and recreation are now the responsibility of the local government.

Slowly the British have worked through a series of reforms and reorganisations which now provide an effective framework for welfare administered by the government which is closest to the people.

Following the Seebohm report, welfare services were co-ordinated under the local authority and, in April this year, a massive reorganisation of local government boundaries came into effect. This reduced the number of local governments from over 1300 to 134.

These and many other reforms, including a commitment to increased local participation in decision-making, are consequences of the reports of independent commissions of enquiry. Australia neglected to use this procedure until the Labor Government established a series of commissions which are now beginning to produce their reports.

In the actual provision of services, Britain is still confronted with the dilemma of trying to provide welfare and income security measures that are universal. That is, everyone is eligible regardless of their income or assets if they have need of the services.

Universality

Universality was the basis of the post-war Beveridge report which rejected any form of means-tested services. This was a natural consequence of the experiences of the poor in the depression of the 1930s and of the earlier poor law measures.

Universality is a fine philosophy, but it produces its own contradictions. In a society where there are already gross disparities in income and opportunities and where governments are reluctant to introduce any radical redistribution, universality accentuates existing inequalities.

In almost every area where services or subsidies were not means-tested, it has now become necessary to concentrate increased resources in the most deprived

areas or on the most deprived groups.

This means that a new form of means test has had to be introduced.

Although pensions are free of means test, a Supplementary Benefits Commission now supplements wages or pensions that are not sufficient for the poorest to live on.

Three million people now have to apply, to the Supplementary Benefits Commission and undergo rigorous examination to prove their poverty and their entitlement to a meagre extra income.

The recently published Penguin Guide to Supplementary Benefits is a 230 page reference to the maze of regulations that have been introduced.

Housing subsidies have always been applied to all Council housing schemes. But they proved insufficient to enable low-income families to enjoy housing at rents they can afford.

Selective rent and rate rebates had to be introduced and these are based on individual need.

The imposition of selective assistance on top of universal schemes is expensive, costly to administer and simply moves the indignity of being means-tested from the more affluent to the poorest.

Community development

In an attempt to improve the environment and to increase opportunities for people in some of the very depressed areas where industrial decline is added to the misery of earlier industrial exploitation and government neglect, the central government now makes special grants to educationally and socially deprived areas.

Community development experiments have been established in 10 areas to try and find new ways of assisting people.

These five year experiments still have time to run and are very varied in their approaches. Some community development teams have concentrated on trying to stir local opinion to bring about local political change. Others have seen their role as helping people to make better use of local services.

Although it is too early to come to conclusions about these experiments, there is a growing realisation that most of the factors that cause or perpetuate deprivation lie outside the control of local neighborhoods or even local government.

Whether or not, poverty, educational and social deprivation can be removed or prevented will depend on national employment, housing, education and industrial policies.

Housing

Housing associations and societies are an interesting part of general housing policy. These cost-rent or cost-ownership associations are non-profit bodies, financed by Government loans.

They can build new housing projects or buy and improve existing homes and so retain them for non-profit ownership. Although housing associations meet only a small part of the immense housing need, they concentrate on the most vulnerable groups of people whose needs are not met through the conventional housing programs of the local authorities.

Housing management is recognised as a skilled task. The Institute of Housing Managers provided a three-year training course through 20 colleges in the United Kingdom. The Institute now has about 3000 members and housing managers' salaries are similar to those of teachers, which is an indication of the status given to Housing Management.

Active tenancy associations exist on most housing estates. In the Greater London Area, there are 500 Housing Estate Associations which promote welfare services and act for tenants in negotiations with estate managers and housing management committees.

In London, four local boroughs now allow tenants' associations to elect representatives to housing management committees. Other boroughs are likely to follow this trend.

Volunteers

There is a renewed interest in using volunteers in welfare services.

The Volunteer Centre has been established in London to investigate the use, selection and training of volunteers and to advise local authorities throughout the country on ways of involving more voluntary and non-professional people in the provision of services.

Community Service Volunteers' (CSV) recruit people for full-time voluntary work on the lines of overseas' volunteer schemes.

Some two thousand CSVs are working at any one time in general and mental hospitals and a wide range of institutions or with voluntary agencies. CSV also has a section concentration on ways of including community service in the school curricula.

Social action

In the United Kingdom there is a large number of activist groups trying to create new social values and to bring about changes in public attitudes and in government policies.

SHELTER continues to confront the government and the public with the appalling housing needs of a large section of the population.

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) is focused on the need for extra income for low-income families and is effective in its public relations and lobbying program.

Other groups are concerned with the needs of the mentally ill and handicapped, prison reform and new policies for the physically handicapped.

Educational and income inequalities, consumerism, the economic pressure on women to work creates demands for more and more welfare services. These often become more concerned with preserving their own interests than with social change.

In the United Kingdom, as in Australia, most of the health and welfare services are remedial in character. Prevention of social need and distress and concentration on social development require fundamental changes in social values, and the more equal distribution of income and resources and educational opportunity.

YOUTH NEEDS MORE

Broadmeadows is a particularly youthful area. Half of the population are under 25 years. And, according to the Horne report, Broadmeadows also has the highest delinquency rate of suburbs with a Social Welfare Department Office.

Mike Bullock, of Fawkner, is a youth worker in the area. His work is financed by the Leith Trust through the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

Before going to Broadmeadows about a year ago, Mike worked in West Heidelberg.

'The areas are similar' he said. 'I used to work with the kids in clubs. But it was difficult to come to grips with their problems because I never saw them in their home situation.'

'Working with kids in their own homes is different from Club youth work, because parents now can be involved in the activities of the young people. At the same time, they take on more responsibility', Mike said.

Families in the area have made their homes available for all kinds of activities. In the back garden of one house, the kids are building a 29' boat.

The garage of another house was donated where they played billiards and darts. In another house they congregate to play records.

'The point is that they have somewhere to go now' said Mike.

He said Broadmeadows was sadly lacking any type of commercial facilities. 'There are no bowling alleys, Pizza Parlors, Theatres or skating-rinks. There is nothing at all for them and yet there are such large numbers of kids.'

Mike said even though the home activities were successful, they had their limitations.

'The kids often feel stifled and bored. One way out is to go on camps, but it's only temporary and they still have to face going back to Broadmeadows.'

So there is always pressure to provide wider facilities for young people.'

Mike is involved with the Broadmeadows Youth Services Group who are trying to provide some facilities.

'We're trying to obtain a double decker bus. It will be used as a mobile youth club in different areas by different age groups,' he said.

He said they are also trying to set up a film centre. They were arranging to hire a hall and form a film club.

They have also started a play arts group. Arts and crafts are done in the garage of a Broadmeadows home and rehearsals for plays are held in a hall.

Mike said, his work didn't involve just the setting up of these activities.

'I'm involved with the kids in many different phases of their lives, including their school life.'

He said he sometimes acts as a liaison officer going between the pupil and teacher. He said he is sometimes involved with the kids in legal situations by

arranging for a barrister to defend them in court.

'The kids in Broadmeadows need a lot more than they're getting. Maybe if we can get some grass-roots activities going, we'll be able to voice our needs to Regional Councils who are able to do something to help.'



Above: Mr Mike Bullock, youth worker at Broadmeadows . . . it was difficult to come to grips with their problems because I never saw them in their home situation''

MAILING LIST

Since the last issue of Brotherhood ACTION we have had a complete check of the mailing list and have removed a number of duplications. However, it is quite possible that some have been overlooked.

If you receive two copies of this issue, or if your wrapper is incorrectly addressed, would you please let us know.

NEW SHOP OPENING IN GREENSBOROUGH VOLUNTEER HELPERS NEEDED

for a new Brotherhood shop opening soon
at (rear) 35-39 Main Street, Greensborough
(was Delta Hardware)

If you'd like to help, ring

Thelma Tuxen on 41 4151