

Council of Europe Social Cohesion Ministers Conference, Moscow 26-7 February 2009: UK Contribution : Liz Tillett : 27 February 2009

Thank you Madam Chair.

Distinguished Ministers and colleagues, I am sorry that my Minister, James Purnell, was not able to attend this conference. He sends his apologies and has asked me to contribute to this discussion on his behalf.

First of all, thanks to the Russian Government for hosting this conference and for their excellent organisation and hospitality.

Thanks also to the Council of Europe and the High Level Task Force. The report gives a comprehensive picture of the importance of social cohesion in the context of modern challenges and opportunities.

We particularly welcome the focus on 'transversalism' in the report. Coherent and coordinated policies are crucial and we fully support the development of this cross-cutting approach to social cohesion across the Council of Europe.

Using this perspective we have recently published a cross-government paper, called 'New Opportunities', which sets out our plans to improve social mobility in the UK. The fact that 11 Ministries in the UK put their logo on the front page of the paper is an indication of transversalism in practice.

Our approach is based on a modern definition of social justice: not just social protection, but real opportunity for everyone to make the most of their potential.

Building on previous work that evidence suggests is making a real difference, we have broad-ranging plans, covering children, education, work, family and communities, to equip more people to help themselves and share in future prosperity.

The importance of investing in equal opportunities is highlighted by the times we are in. The economic crisis should not lead to less investment here. We are currently providing extra help for the unemployed, families, children and older people, protecting those most in need. However, we are also stepping up efforts to prepare ourselves fully for the upturn, investing now in the potential of individuals at every stage of their lives.

Discussion this morning has addressed the particular needs of young people. Both poverty, and poverty of opportunity, must be tackled to enable them to look forwards positively. We have a strong focus in the UK on child poverty – we will soon give the formal backing of legislation to our target of eradicating child poverty by 2020.

And wealth of opportunity is crucial – our goal is for every young person to have a clear path to their future, through a skilled apprenticeship, a job with prospects and training or a place at college or university.

We will provide support, such as mentoring and advice, to help young people from poorer backgrounds get into university, addressing all the barriers to education, whether financial, cultural or aspirational.

The High Level Task Force report rightly pointed out the importance of an appropriate balance between rights and responsibilities. Mistakes have been made in the past, where for example social protection has been provided passively, without being accompanied by adequate individual responsibility or opportunities. Active labour market policies, including integrated skills training, are important to help more people find work. As others here have said, a job is the best way to achieve social cohesion.

And as the report states, this is true not just for those claiming unemployment benefit. Other groups detached from the labour market, such as disabled people, should be helped to get into work, advance in work and live independent lives.

Where support is given, there should be an expectation that people will use that support to look for and take up work. We are addressing these issues through reform of our benefits system and better-targeted, flexible help for the unemployed.

This is vital now, to prevent people who have lost their jobs moving into damaging long-term unemployment, which can lead to a loss of skills and is a cause of persistent social exclusion and inequality.

Our long-term approach underlines our determination that, as well as helping people through the present global downturn, we prepare our citizens, whatever their background, to benefit from the new jobs, industries and markets that the world economy will deliver.

Our plans have been developed in consultation with individuals, families, communities, social partners, NGOs and academics, and our policies will continue to be informed by a broad range of stakeholders.

Whenever we need to overcome challenges and make the most of opportunities, international cooperation and idea sharing is vital for success, and ever more so as we have become more interconnected.

Our own plans have been developed drawing on the experiences of others, and we will continue to use good practice examples from other countries as we reform our policies.

We hope that the evidence gathered, and recommendations made, by the expert groups on social mobility and shared responsibilities will provide valuable insights for us all as we continue to reform.

Final version – as delivered

One final point. Several people have mentioned the G20 and the London Summit on 2 April. The Prime Minister has made stability, growth and jobs the key themes of the Summit.

The UK government is keen to ensure that other countries and organisations can contribute to the debate. The summit website londonsummit.gov.uk provides the opportunity to input views and ideas direct to the London summit team in London.

I am grateful for the opportunity to share our plans here, and we look forward to sharing our experiences at the next ministerial meeting in Turkey.