



All-Party Parliamentary Group On Youth Affairs

**Minutes of the meeting, held on 7th December 2011, The Boothroyd Room,
Portcullis House, House of Commons**

**Guest Speaker: Jon Bright, Director of Homelessness & Support, Building
Standards & Climate Change, Department for Communities and Local
Government**

1. Pre-Meet

Prior to the meeting, there was a pre-meet for young people to discuss issues around homelessness. The following issues were raised during the session:

- The impact of spending cuts on young people – in relation to housing support, education and training opportunities
- Access to Family support and Early Intervention
- Whether the Housing Benefit system discourages young people from working or entering full time education
- The local availability of affordable accommodation – with an emphasis on London
- The regulation of the private rented market
- The availability and consistency of information for those who are at risk of homelessness
- The cycle of debt for vulnerable young people

2. Introduction and Welcome

Stewart Jackson MP welcomed all those present and apologised that he would have to leave the meeting early. Simon Hughes also apologised that he would have to leave the meeting early.

3. Election of Officers

Following Stella Creasy's resignation as Co-Chair of the group, Julie Hilling (Lab, Bolton West) was elected in her place. The motion to elect Julie Hilling was moved by Stewart Jackson and she was unanimously elected.

The officers of the group are listed below.

Co-Chairs	Stewart Jackson Julie Hilling Simon Hughes	Con Lab LD
Vice-Chair	Sir Peter Bottomley	Con

Treasurer Secretary	Lisa Nandy James Morris	Lab Con
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4. Discussion and feedback from young people

Simon Hughes (SH) gave a short speech summarising his views on housing:

He highlighted four main themes: 1) overcrowding and availability of housing 2) house building 3) budget cuts 4) landlords

On overcrowding SH highlighted the issue of overcrowded housing in the South East and London and contrasted this to the North East. He compared statistics on house prices from the North and South and went on to speak about uneven job distribution. He emphasised the link between availability of employment and demand for housing, and said that the Government needed to take action to balance the distribution of housing with the demand for jobs.

On homebuilding, SH said that there were not enough houses to meet demand given the natural increase in population levels and immigration. He highlighted the use of empty homes as a way to resolve this issue.

SH spoke on the issue of budget cuts and affordability of housing. He highlighted statistics on the age at which people can afford homes and, in relation to the housing benefit changes affecting shared properties, he said there was an issue surrounding the age at which the state was able to offer support.

SH spoke on problems surrounding private landlords and highlighted concerns about high levels of demand allowing landlords to force up rent levels and neglect the standard of properties. He argued that there was a need for a balance between allowing landlords to make a profit, and not allowing rents to become artificially inflated at a significant cost to the taxpayer.

SH stressed the importance of young people following up any concerns or questions they have with their local MP. He explained that he had to leave the meeting early but would be happy to pick up any questions arising, and feed back at the next meeting of the group.

A number of members of the audience raised questions about tuition fees. SH spoke about the Government proposals and argued that the repayment system effectively served as a tax and highlighted that repayments only began once a graduate was earning over a set amount. He highlighted the context of higher attendance at university to the increased cost and went on to speak on job availability.

Question and Answer Session

The meeting was then opened out for questions and discussion and the following issues were raised:

- Overcrowding in the South East and impact of lack of social housing
- Concern about the lack of availability of supported accommodation and impact of the implementation of changes to the welfare system from April 2012

- Issue of vulnerable young people aged 18 sharing accommodation with adults up to 35
- Impact of the housing benefit changes – argument that there is a lack of logic in Government reforms, in relation to the costs of providing emergency accommodation following evictions in contrast to sustaining private accommodation and argument that reforms could encourage families to break up in order to receive greater support.
- Specific concerns about London – costs of living, impact of service cuts
- Cap on tuition fee charges and the availability of free higher education
- Concern about the 'NEET' label, young people only receive negative media coverage and that Government use of the term reinforces this perception
- Links between education and crime
- Social exclusion of young people
- Cuts to young peoples services and education
- Argument that the Government is out of step with young peoples needs and concerns, concern that the Government releases reports and takes action but doesn't engage with young people.
- Tax rates
- Payday loans, bank charges and concern about cycles of debt
- Impact of Coalition policy on those in poverty and argument that on cycle of poverty
- Families with fourth generation of benefits recipients

In relation to the points raised on tuition fees, Stewart Jackson (SJ) stated that although grants had been available to previous generations to support students, this was no longer financially viable due to higher numbers attending university. He highlighted the impact of increased university attendance rates on the decision to increase fees. He argued that the increased fees were accompanied by the caveat of higher quality courses and the greater development of scholarships.

On the availability of housing in the South East, SJ said that homes are being built, albeit at a low level. He highlighted the issue of affordable rents and the Governments Welfare to Work programme. He also spoke on the importance of encouraging people to live where homes are available, and highlighted the issues arising from the lack of jobs in the North East. He went on to say that there needs to be a stronger incentive to work, and increased opportunities for apprenticeships and training.

In relation to a question on payday loans, he referred to Stella Creasy's Private Members Bill on payday loans. He highlighted the issues of regulation, loan sharks, financial education in schools.

Julie Hilling (JH) spoke on the impact of the cuts. She said that there was cross-party acceptance that cuts had to be made but argued that there was a difference between the parties about where the cuts should be focussed. JH emphasised that cuts have to be made across the country, but highlighted that each local authority should focus on different issues according to local needs.

JH introduced the keynote speaker, **Jon Bright, Director of Homelessness & Support, Building Standards & Climate Change, Department for Communities and Local Government** , JH explained the role of the civil service.

Jon Bright (JB) extended Housing Minister Grant Shapps apologies that he was unable to attend the meeting and explained that although he was unable to speak as frankly as a Minister he would be happy to take feedback to the Department. He expressed concern that organisations felt that the Government was unaware of their views, and said that the Department greatly valued feedback from organisations and would welcome reports and evidence on youth homelessness and the impact of recent Government reforms. He explained that this would serve to highlight any unexpected consequences of policy, which could then be brought to the Minister's attention.

Responding to the issues raised throughout the meeting, he highlighted concern about the issue of payday loans and the need to address the issue. JH spoke on credit unions and the need to expand their role in communities on a larger scale.

JB highlighted figures comparing the UK to Europe and commented that, in comparison, the UK offers a strong safety net against homelessness. He highlighted that in the UK all 16 and 17 year olds, all care leavers aged up to 21, and some vulnerable young people over 21 are given priority status for accommodation. He commented that in some countries the social rented sector is for those on a moderate income. He commented that the UK was seen to have a strong record on youth homelessness and tackling rough sleeping. He highlighted the difficult financial situation but emphasised that the Government had ensured that money is available for hostels and homelessness services at a comparable level.

In relation to comments on the availability of affordable housing, he highlighted the recent announcement of the Governments Housing Strategy and explained that this policy was intended to "kick-start" the housing market. He emphasised that more housing would help rents and prices to drop. He admitted that the housing shortage was not an issue which could be addressed overnight, but that it was a key Government priority. He said that the Prime Minister, David Cameron has a weekly report from Government Departments on progress of the Housing Strategy.

Responding to concerns about prospects for young people, he spoke about the educational reforms undertaken by the Education Secretary Michael Gove, and on cross-party support for Early Intervention policies. In relation to the NEETs label, he acknowledged that it was a difficult term, but stressed that it was an issued which needed to be addressed and which was a key focus of Government policy. He said that the Government had a strong focus on helping people into work. On this, he highlighted changes to the benefits system intended to incentivise people to work. He explained that Government strategy had a strong emphasis on work as a way out of poverty.

JH spoke to highlight the need for 'joined-up thinking' in service provision and for quality contracts. She expressed concern that the removal of services supporting those with moderate need could push them towards acute need, and thus place further strain on emergency support services. She argued that there was a need to assess the overall cost of support networks.

5. Conclusion

JB thanked attendees for their input and questions and encouraged attendees to write to the Department with reports and evidence.

JH encouraged attendees to engage with their local MPs to talk about the issues raised, either through writing to them about specific circumstances or through attending surgeries. She emphasized that there was a need for young people to contact and engage with local Councillors and MPs in order to draw attention to the issue. She thanked JB for attending and speaking on the issue.