

Summary of responses to Bruce's 'Backchat on Welfare'

Given the current state of Britain's economy, with Mervyn King, the Governor of the Bank of England, saying that the recession is far deeper than expected there was some point in running 'Welfare' for longer than scheduled. One wondered whether replies might alter with ever greater unemployment. It is pleasing to note that there has been no evidence of hardening attitudes. The desire to ensure a safety net for fellow citizens in difficulty is the driver behind your response.

Thank you to those who accepted my invitation to take part in our debate.

Welfare through the voluntary sector

The demise of Christianity or more especially the religious orders means that few people in Britain today can think of welfare not being in the hands of the state. Small wonder therefore that many respondents were sceptical about the contribution which the voluntary sector might make to the delivery of a 'welfare to work' service. Those who gave the matter deeper thought were more optimistic. They could point to organisations such as the Prince's Trust who already show the younger unemployed how to get jobs. Church communities should not be forgotten for many have the facility to provide training for such as job applications and CVs. Such voluntary bodies also had the opportunity to encourage practical skills both clerical and manual.

The appropriate time applicable to Jobseeker's Allowance drew very little interest so making it difficult to weight the response. One might possibly glean from the sample of replies a feeling that 12 months in a job should be the measure of sustainability.

There was consensus that Community Work Programmes should be founded within the locality in which the participants live. Therefore, the work should relate to local needs.

Examples quoted were fairly predictable such as the maintenance of parks, help for the elderly, conservation projects, the painting of youth clubs or similar amenity centres.

Emphasis was put on finding tasks that are of themselves uplifting. This presumably was to ensure a difference between community work and judiciary imposed Community Service.

Concern was also felt in case the chosen tasks takes work away from local government workers in paid employment.

The nature of the majority of activities listed and the last point probably prompted the suggestion that responsibility for the delivery of community work programmes should rest with Local Government. Others feared that Government involvement could be overly bureaucratic and so would look to a network of local businesses founded possibly on a local Chamber of Commerce. The latter is thought important as presumably most of the participants will then be better prepared to seek work in the private sector.

Most respondents saw a sustainable job at the end of the Welfare to Work process as one that lasted at least one year and involved relevant and meaningful training.

Some thought six months a more appropriate period given the current state of the economy.

Ideally a sustainable job is one where the new employee completes the probationary period and then secures full employment rights.

It was thought best to stage payments to providers to ensure a sustainable cash flow and limit any risk to the taxpayer. A sliding scale was also suggested to encourage the provider to persist in completing delivery of the scheme. The observation was made that none of the above lent itself to encouraging people to become self-employed. The small business plays a key part in our economy and most started with an idea.

How can we foster initiative through ideas that lead to lasting employment for the starters and then their employees?