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188 53-1

1(1) Page



**OPINION:**

**Solutions must be local**

**THERE** is no question that our welfare system is failing to help enough people back into work.

The costs of this failure over time are huge, with the Government's own report indicating that it can cost them – or more accurately you and me – around £62,000 to keep someone out of work.

In Kent alone, each year around £1.7 billion is spent on supporting welfare dependency.

But the human cost and wasted opportunity is even greater. Currently almost five million people are on 'out of work' benefits, while the number of young people out of work is rising.

We have the highest number of children in workless households within the EU.

Not only does the current system fail individuals, it undermines the voluntary sector, it undermines families and, through the New Deal programme – which should be raising the aspirations – it simply provides a 'revolving door' for far too many young people back onto benefits.

Iain Duncan Smith's groundbreaking Social Justice Policy Group made a fundamental recommendation for change, that "clear work expectations must be attached to the receipt of benefits for people who can work".

This must be right. We must support people back into work,

**The human cost of the welfare system is too high, argues MP GREG CLARK**

not abandon them to benefits. This support must be personalised and take account of local factors which will help them into a job.

The Social Justice report recommended the use of voluntary providers to run such welfare programmes.

Similar welfare reform in Australia and the United States has led to significant falls in benefit rolls, saving money and giving people a helping hand back into society.

We must draw upon their expertise, while linking closely to the local education system and the work of other local public service providers to ensure we get maximum benefit from the range of public spending in an area.

Kent County Council's supporting independence programme has received national acclaim by doing this. By joining together local services and targeting help on specific groups and areas of the county, it has increased by almost a third, the chances of someone getting back into work. By concentrating on 14-24 year olds and offering new vocational opportunities and apprenticeships, it is now tackling

the so-called NEET group – those "not in education, employment or training".

The experience of both KCC and organisations like Tomorrow's People led by Debbie Scott – deputy chairman of the Social Justice Policy Group – in providing personalised support into work are demonstrating that solutions are much more likely to be found locally than in central government.

Local solutions are a major part of the answer, and in Kent, as everywhere, the primary aim of any welfare system must be to help people into long-term employment.

Nationally, the current system rewards providers if they get

**'The primary aim of any welfare system must be to help people into long-term employment'**



unemployed people into jobs for a matter of weeks even if they then regrettably fall out of employment immediately after. We need to help people into the world of work long-term, providing continuing support in that all-important first job if necessary.

Nationally and locally, it is an exciting time for welfare reform.

While it remains a Government objective, the publication of the Social Justice report and David Cameron's recent interventions have brought it firmly to national attention.

In Kent, new work is underway and success is already being seen in helping people into employment. It is simply a waste of the talent in our communities that currently after two years on incapacity benefits, a person is more likely to die or retire than to find a new job. We cannot patch up such a system, it needs change. The human cost it generates demands it.

*• Greg Clark is MP for Tunbridge Wells and Shadow Charities Minister. He was a member of Iain Duncan Smith's Social Justice Policy Group.*