

Quality of Life

Consultation Paper 97



Background

This consultation paper is presented as the first stage in the development of new Party policy on quality of life. It does not represent agreed Party policy. It is designed to stimulate debate and discussion within the Party and outside; based on the response generated and on the deliberations of the working group a full quality of life policy paper will be drawn up and presented to Conference for debate.

The paper has been drawn up by a working group appointed by the Federal Policy Committee and chaired by Jeremy Hargreaves. Members of the group are prepared to speak on the paper to outside bodies and to discussion meetings organised within the Party.

Comments on the paper, and requests for speakers, should be addressed to: Debbie Enever, Quality of Life Working Group, Policy Unit, Liberal Democrats, 4 Cowley Street, London SW1P 3NB. Email: d.enever@libdems.org.uk.

Comments should reach us as soon as possible, and no later than 30 September 2009.

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Contents

Introduction.....	4
Work and work-life balance	5
Unemployment.....	6
Communities and Activities.....	6
Mental Health.....	7
Levels of Inequality	7
Relationships & Families.....	8
The environment.....	9
Media and Advertising – Consumer Society.....	9
Religion, psychology and values	10
Power to the People.....	10

Introduction

1.1 Over the last fifty years, people in the UK have generally grown wealthier and healthier, yet many believe that we are not much happier¹. In a time of economic uncertainty, it is more apparent than ever that the pursuit of economic growth alone can have limited and sometimes detrimental effects on our broader quality of life. A growing body of scientific research is also now increasing our understanding about how public policy influences our wellbeing, making this an important topic for political parties to consider.

1.2 To achieve the changes we desire we may need to change the way that governments and society measure success. The traditional method is Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which counts economic activity as a positive irrespective of whether the outcome of that activity is good - adding to people's quality of life - or bad - for example, by increasing pollution, and takes no account of non-economic factors.

1.3 As Liberal Democrats, we approach this issue committed to building and safeguarding a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community, and in which no-one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity. We champion the freedom, dignity and well-being of individuals, we acknowledge and respect their right to freedom of conscience and their right to develop their talents to the full. We aim to disperse power, to foster diversity and to nurture creativity. We believe that the role of the state is to enable all citizens to attain these ideals, to contribute fully to their communities and to take part in the decisions which affect their lives.²

1.4 Wellbeing is often determined by very personal individual choices which we would not expect the state to interfere in, so intervening in them can challenge our liberalism. However the state arguably has a role in shaping the context in which we make our decisions and providing the levers by which we can determine our own wellbeing.

1.5 The Liberal Democrat quality of life working group has just started looking at these issues and would value your input on the questions posed (and any we have missed). Throughout this paper we address areas of policy directly because we are looking to produce a paper which is grounded in positive policy suggestions which we can make to the Liberal Democrats at the start of a new Parliament.

Questions:

1. Should government be more concerned to increase their citizens' wellbeing than their wealth? What is the proper role of government in promoting quality of life?
2. Should governments concentrate on minimising misery rather than augmenting happiness? If so, do they need to do more or less?

¹ Richard Layard, *Happiness – Lessons From a New Science*, (Penguin, 2005)

² Preamble to the Liberal Democrat Constitution

3. Are the ways our public services work detrimental to our quality of life?
4. What additional or alternative indicators should government use in place of GDP?
5. People are often bad predictors of what will improve their own quality of life. What role should government play here? What happens if our liberal commitments to equality and freedom of choice appear to conflict with our desire to enable people to enjoy a good quality of life?

Work and Work-life Balance

2.1 Working, whether in paid employment or other constructive activities, helps to give us a sense of self-worth, a purpose and often provides people with their main social contact. Security of employment is also important as being in an insecure job has been noted to significantly decrease wellbeing, more or less halving the benefit of employment over unemployment³.

2.2 However, poor work-life balance is increasingly blamed for low levels of happiness and wellbeing. People often live far away from their workplace and commuting is particularly linked to stress. How we work is also a major determinant of how happy and fulfilled we feel. What is the Liberal Democrat response?

Questions:

6. Should there be compulsory limits to working hours? Can employees make a genuinely free choice to opt-out of the European working time directive? Is it liberal to restrict how much we work?
7. Would a more flexible approach to working make a difference to people's happiness? How would this be achieved without creating unnecessary bureaucracy?
8. Should we incentivise part-time jobs through NI or other employment tax breaks, especially to encourage employers to create senior part-time roles?
9. Are there ways we can promote greater employee responsibility for their work, and/or involvement in deciding how they work? How could we encourage staff stake-holding?
10. How could quality of life thinking shape our approach to education, training and career choices?
11. Should we have more public holidays or increased holiday entitlements? Or even statutory education and training days where employees would be free to pursue skills related either to their current job or future employment prospects?
12. Technological developments have changed the way we work and at times can contribute to unemployment as companies need fewer people to do the same work. Would it be better for wellbeing if we reversed this trend?

³ Layard, *Happiness*, p64.

Unemployment

3.1 Studies consistently show that people are happier if they are working than if they are unemployed⁴. Long-term unemployment is particularly detrimental to well-being and youth unemployment can blight someone's entire working life prospects. Although job protection has had a welcome effect in discouraging redundancies, it has had the unhelpful effect of increasing youth unemployment, as existing staff are kept and new recruitment is stopped.

Questions:

13. How can we tackle the stigma of unemployment?
14. Should employment policy be refocused on creating a more flexible employment market with more active government intervention, like Denmark, where it is easier for the unemployed to find new work and consequently less necessary to have high job protection? How would this be achieved?
15. Can we better use unemployment as an opportunity for people to retrain and gain new skills?

Communities and Activities

4.1 People's sense of belonging in the wider community is a key component of their happiness and wellbeing⁵, but increasingly our society is fragmented and at times it seems like we don't know our neighbours anymore. The New Economics Foundation (NEF) have found that watching TV actually reduces well-being, whilst time spent volunteering increases it quite a bit⁶. Although the Westminster government may seem very distant from our local communities, they do have financial and policy tools which can influence the facilities and support which is available at a local level.

Questions:

16. How can we actively promote 'good neighbour' policies?
17. Should government provide greater financial support for community activities – community spaces, clubs, other collective activities? Should it provide other support? If so, what?
18. Should we try to increase significantly the status of those who carry out voluntary activities? If so, how? Should some kind of honours or rewards system play a role? If we increased the status of these activities, would we reduce the stigma attached to unemployment?

⁴ Hetan Shah and Nic Marks, *A Well-being Manifesto for a Flourishing Society*, (New Economics Foundation, 2004), p6.

⁵ Layard, *Happiness*, p68

⁶ David Boyle, Sherry Clarke and Sarah Burns, *Aspects of Co-production, The Implications for Work, Health and Volunteering*, (New Economics Foundation, 2006), p4.

19. How can we ensure everyone, including people of diverse ages, ethnic, social and religious backgrounds, regardless of their gender, sexual orientation or ability is included and welcome in the life of their community? How do we combat prejudice while respecting difference?
20. Watching large amounts of TV is a major contributor to lower wellbeing. What is the right Liberal Democrat approach to discouraging or limiting it?
21. How do we combat loneliness, and in particular the isolation of the elderly?
22. Should more public money be spent on improving the appearance of local areas?

Mental Health

5.1 Mental illness is one aspect of unhappiness; it can be both a cause of unhappiness and one of its symptoms. 1 in 4 British adults experience at least one diagnosable mental health problem in any one year, with one in six suffering at any given time⁷. There is still a huge amount of stigma attached to mental health problems which can stop people accessing the support they need. Improved mental health would have a huge impact on improving wellbeing.

Questions:

23. How should government be involved in promoting good mental health?
24. How can we use education to enhance public understanding about mental health issues?
25. If we make mental health treatment a much higher priority for government spending – do we spend more on health or make cut-backs elsewhere?
26. How do drugs and alcohol impact on mental health? What should government do to reduce demand or supply?

Levels of Inequality

6.1 There is strong evidence that, for people living above the basic subsistence level, large disparities in income promote greater unhappiness – relative wealth (or poverty) rather than absolute wealth (or poverty) typically affects people's sense of wellbeing⁸. Economic resources have the potential to empower people – such as the women who are enabled to leave abusive partners. The FPC is commissioning another working group to look in detail at this area, but what key policies in this area have a direct relationship to quality of life?

Questions:

⁷ <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/information/mental-health-overview/statistics/>

⁸ Layard *Happiness*, p51.

27. Do we accept that wealth disparities generate lower wellbeing which the state should aim to do something about?
28. Should we have a higher minimum wage or even a statutory maximum income?
29. How far and in what ways do poverty and inequality affect our wellbeing? How should this affect our economic policies on things like tax, benefits and the minimum wage?

Relationships & Families

Relationships

7.1 There is clearly a limit to the extent to which the government should intervene in people's private relationships, but they are a huge determinant of people's happiness. Are there policy changes government could reasonably make which would support more rewarding private relationships?

Questions:

30. How can we ensure children have the opportunity to socialise from a young age, so they have the skills to build relationships when they are older?
31. How can we use education to enhance social capital?
32. Should there be some form of compulsory preparation in advance of marriage/ civil partnerships? Should there be greater government financial or other support for creating and maintaining stable relationships (marriage and civil partnerships)?
33. How can we normalise counselling so people are free to seek help without fearing stigma?
34. Are there ways we can reduce the negative impact on wellbeing caused by separation and divorce – for both adults and their children?⁹

Parenting

7.2 Today, children are typically seen as the responsibility of their parents, but historically this was usually shared with the extended family and the local community. Better parenting can both directly improve children's happiness and wellbeing immediately, and also dramatically improve their prospects for more happiness and wellbeing in the future¹⁰, but at the moment support is usually made available only after things have started to go wrong – rather than universally to all families.

Questions:

35. Should we have compulsory parenting classes? Is the government qualified to determine what should be taught?

⁹ <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/159067.php>

¹⁰ Julia Margo and Sonia Sodha, Get happy - Children and young people's emotional wellbeing, (NCH, 2007), p15.

36. Should the state take a more interventionist approach to improve the quality of life of children who are in troubled family situations and if so, how?
37. Should we propose much stronger financial support for parental leave – including for older children?
38. How can we support wider family involvement in raising children? Should we make it easier for families to live geographically closer? If so how do we ensure this does not force people to stay closer together?

The Environment

8.1 A good quality local environment is crucial to our quality of life, with a recent study showing that people with access to green space enjoy significant health benefits and a longer life expectancy – particularly among less advantaged social groups¹¹. Unfortunately, it remains true that the most socially and economically deprived communities are often those with the poorest quality environments and least amount of green space. Our increasing urbanisation may increasingly challenge wellbeing. It has been suggested that involvement with the natural world can help to heal physical, mental and social problems¹².

Questions:

39. What can we do to improve the local environment, particularly in socially deprived areas?
40. What do well-planned public spaces look like?
41. Should the state seek to encourage individuals to be particularly involved with the natural world, and if so, how?
42. If outside space is important for child development, should we act to ensure children do not grow up in high-rise flats and ensure they all have access to a garden?

Media and Advertising – Consumer Society

9.1 We live in an increasingly commercialised society. The idea of deferred gratification has given way in the face of instant availability (for example through the explosion of consumer credit). Children are exposed to these forces from a young age as, for example, everything from breakfast cereal to school computers and sports equipment carry heavy branding messages. All this creates pressure to compete and raises stress, especially among women¹³.

¹¹ Study carried out by Richard Mitchell of Glasgow University and Frank Popper of the University of St Andrews, published *The Lancet*, Volume 372, Issue 9650, Pages 1655 - 1660, 8 November 2008.

¹² MIND, *Ecotherapy – The Green Agenda for Mental Health*, (MIND, 2007).

¹³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jul/26/women-wellbeing-unhappiness>

Questions:

43. Should there be more restrictions on advertising and media, particularly where they influence children? How do we square any restrictions with our beliefs in freedom of speech and expression?
44. Currently advertising is tax-deductible for businesses. If we consider this to be negative for wellbeing, should we tax it instead?
45. What other steps could a government take to tackle excessive consumerism?

Religion, Psychology and Values

10.1 There is evidence that people who have faith, in religion or other values, are more content than their peers¹⁴. Recent research has shown that meditation can have a hugely positive impact on mental wellbeing¹⁵. NEF have also found that intrinsic values (which are inherently rewarding and need no other validation, such as freedom) have a positive effect on wellbeing, but extrinsic values (which are pursued for external rewards such as financial success or popularity) do not¹⁶. As Liberal Democrats we believe in freedom of religion, but that it is not for the state to encourage any particular belief.

Questions:

46. Is there a role for government in creating an environment where religion or other values can thrive? Should government support people in following their own beliefs and if so, how?
47. Are there grounds on which a government might step in and say a particular religion or value is unacceptable on the grounds of wellbeing? Examples might include female circumcision.
48. How does society currently promote extrinsic values (such as wealth creation)? How can we value intrinsic values (such as freedom and health) more?
49. How do our lifestyles, goals and aspirations affect our quality of life? Do we need to change them?

Power to the People

11.1 Studies of wellbeing across countries show that people are more content in those places where they have a greater say in their governance – something Liberal Democrats have been committed to since at least the seventeenth century. The current political crisis may have put this issue on the agenda as never before – but changes which are to have a long-term impact on voter participation and broader engagement in the system will not be

¹⁴ Layard, *Happiness*, p72.

¹⁵ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/the-happiest-man-in-the-world-433063.html>

¹⁶ Nic Marks, Andrew Simms, Sam Thompson and Saamah Abdallah, *The Happy Planet Index: An index of human well-being and environmental impact*, (NEF, 2006), P31.

a quick fix. Trust in general, and especially trust in the police, are very important determinants of happiness.

Questions:

- 50. Will proportional representation increase people's sense of empowerment and wellbeing?
- 51. What changes are needed at national and local level to give people real political power?
- 52. How do we build (and rebuild) trust in authorities and institutions?

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