

Liberal Democrat Fringe - Social Care for 21st Century

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Summary

Liberal Democrat Treasury spokesperson Vincent Cable MP today acknowledged that there was a gap in long term personal care, adding that work was in progress to address this problem.

He was speaking at a Liberal Democrat fringe event entitled 'Social Care for 21st Century'. Also speaking at the meeting was Michelle Mitchell, Head of Public Affairs, Age Concern, Imelda Redmond, Chief Executive, Carers UK, and Niall Dickson, Chief Executive, King's Fund, who chaired the meeting.

Referring to the Liberal Democrat's commitment to free personal care, he explained that more thinking needed to be done. It was difficult to provide a solution to the problem when the need for care was rising, but the budget was not.

In addition to funding, he questioned how to improve the situation for carers. Support networks around carers needed to be strengthened, he stressed, adding that the Liberal Democrats needed to ensure that there was a choice for families to keep their relatives at home.

Dr Cable acknowledged the progress that had been made by including carers in flexible working, adding that he wanted to go further. For instance, he put the idea forward of carers being entitled to respite care.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson said that local councils did not want to take anymore work on because of their shrinking budgets, and neither did the NHS. This went against logic because if more social care was given, less people would be in need of expensive NHS treatment, he asserted.

Respite day centres were mentioned as a step in the right direction, but care for only a couple of hours per week was not enough, Dr Cable went on to argue. There remained a massive unmet demand for care, and the existing system could simply not deliver, he claimed.

In the question and answer session, David Rogers, from the Local Government Association, explained to Dr Cable that local authorities did want to take this social care task on, but that the lack of funds made it impossible.

He made the point that whilst funding in the NHS had risen by 90 per cent, during the same time period social care funding had only risen by 14 per cent. The lack of money meant that social care was being effectively rationed and this was not where local government or the Liberal

Democrats wanted to be.

Dr Cable accepted this, but raised the point that even if funds increased, it would still be difficult to ensure that the additional money was spent in the right areas.

He ended by promising that carers were on the Liberal Democrat's agenda, but the details had not yet been decided.

Opening the meeting, Niall Dickson, Chief Executive, Kings Fund, talked about the Caring Choices coalition. He described it as being the first step for a debate on long term care for older people. It was the aim of the coalition to engage with all of the people that were involved with old age care, he highlighted.

He then went on to talk about the report on social care written by Sir Derek Wanless. When Mr Wanless was commissioned by Gordon Brown to produce a report on the future of healthcare, he identified social care as the missing part of the jigsaw.

The report found that social care was failing all groups; from those just above the benefit level to those who were paying for their own care. It also found that the means based system was by far the cheapest method, but that it consistently failed people.

However, there had been a success in changing political minds, Mr Dickson remarked. The three major parties had all indicated that they were taking the issue seriously. The upcoming Comprehensive Spending Review would be the test of whether the Government was truly interested, he asserted.

Speaking next, Imelda Redmond, Chief Executive, Carers UK, said that most care was paid for by families. Care was paid for with the families' health, income and their opportunities, she remarked.

She stressed that any new system must take into account the whole range of care that was required. Carers had to be at the centre of the design. There were six million carers in the UK, and these people combined, put more hours into caring than the social services, Ms Redmond asserted.

The number of carers increased in areas that were socially deprived, she highlighted, adding that 52 per cent of carers were women and they were more likely to be in low paid work. Male carers were more likely to be in full time work, but with a low level of health, she stated.

Moving on, the representative from Carers UK asserted that social

services were trapped in the past. They were based on the presumption that there was a woman in the home who would be able to give care, she went on to assert, adding that society had changed whilst the system of care had not.

A new social contract was required, Ms Redmond argued. Families had always put money into care and this contribution needed to be acknowledged by making the system a lot more transparent. This way, people would know what was expected of them, she stressed.

Furthermore, a priority should be to ensure that present carers were able to save for their own future care in order to break the cycle, Ms Redmond told the fringe.

Personalisation of care had been a good initiative by allowing people to stay at home. However, she was aware that carers had had to pick up this work and this amounted to a full time job.

She called for the recognition of the contribution of carers. This should not just consist of admitting that they were poor, but the rewarding of credits for their future care, Ms Redmond asserted. Those people who refused social care should also be recognised, she added.

In short, she wanted a clear system which placed the family at its centre. There should be equality of opportunity for carers. What was a right in Northern Ireland, needed to be a right in all of the UK, Ms Redmond insisted.

Speaking next was Michelle Mitchell, Head of Public Affairs at Age Concern, who explained that withdrawal of services and the complexity of social care meant that the system was simply not working.

There was a consistent under-estimation of care, and a growing gap between the money available and the required care, she argued.

Ms Mitchell also pointed to a market failure. Even if the money was available, there was a lack of choice and reliable products to purchase, she added.

Those who received modest incomes, just missing out on benefits, were being penalised for saving, the representative from Age Concern remarked.

The reform of social care was not politically salient. People tended to be more concerned with the quality of care rather than entire reform of the system, she went on to stress.

Ms Mitchell pointed out that there were a few unusual opportunities to make a difference. For example, the Chancellor had just described it as a major problem, and the Comprehensive Spending Review would be the first test.

The Liberal Democrats would lead the debate on social care, and other parties would follow as they had done with environmental issues, she remarked.

If there was a success, and more money was given for the overhaul of the social care system, the next test would be to ensure that the injection of money achieved the desired results, Ms Mitchell concluded.

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