

Positive Action Group

*Response to the Social Policy Debate Public Consultation
from IOM Department of Social Care, July 2012*

A) Introduction

1. Positive Action Group (PAG) is a political lobby group, not a political party. It is a not for profit Association the objectives being to promote an awareness and understanding of politics and citizenship. We encourage members of the public to participate actively in politics by taking part in discussions, making their views known, voting, standing for office and holding public office.
(See Appendix 1)
2. We are pleased to be one of the bodies consulted regarding this Social Policy Debate.
3. PAG regularly makes consultation submissions as well as contacting government departments with proposals outwith the formal process.
4. In order to stimulate public interest in this consultation process PAG organised a well attended public meeting (10.09.12). The Minister and Chief Executive spoke and answered questions from the audience.
5. We are concerned that this has not been a true consultation but an attempt by the department to gain public support for a plan they have already decided upon, a plan for targeting benefits using fewer resources.
6. Our detailed response follows.

B) Detailed Comments

Question 1 Broad principles

A true Social Policy for the residents of the Isle of Man would encompass all aspects of well-being including their health, educational opportunities, legal rights, transport and community development etc It would not be the responsibility of one government department. This consultation is narrowly focussed on reducing welfare payments and balancing the budget.

We agree 'welfare' is not solely the responsibility of government and requires all departments of government and communities on the island to work together. You can have a caring community without increasing wealth.

It is not an optional extra 'when we can afford it'

All taxpayers contribute not just those with the highest incomes. Welfare services like health services are for all since we are all part of the human condition and society. We can all be needy at different times in our lives.

We have a shared responsibility to support each other. Whatever our situation most of us don't want to be protected or labelled as 'vulnerable'

We heard the words '*Progressive*' and '*Fairness*' mentioned frequently on 10th September. We would argue most strongly that a fair and progressive regime is one where those with the greatest ability to pay support those on the greatest need through taxation.

To truly fulfill that aspiration tax rates ought to be applied to all individuals including those few whose level of tax is now capped by Treasury.

The tax cap deliberately creates a division which does not accord with the aim of sustaining an egalitarian society.

Question 2 Additional principles

It is vital that systems are fair and seen to be fair so that members of the public are more likely to understand and support them.

Question 3 The four groups based on income.

This appears to be a divisive approach perpetuating the stigmatisation and separation of people who have low incomes.

The assumption that disabled people and lone-parents will be reliant on the government for their income is unfortunate.

It is not only the well-off whose contributions pay for the 'supported and the coping'.

Everybody who pays income tax, VAT and National Insurance contributions provide the income for the government enabling them to supply benefits and services for the whole population.

We would prefer a model where everybody is on the journey of life and will require different kinds of support and services at different times of their lives. This applies to Social care as much as to Health care.

Having lots of money does not exempt people from having various needs and wishing to contribute to society in different ways. They cannot buy their way out of society. Some might say those favoured by the tax cap are not paying their full share.

Question 4 Households as basis for assessing needs and income.

Easy to say –not so easy to do.

In modern society where relationships are fluid and changing it may be difficult to track 'households'.

People may be contributing to the household through practical means such as childcare rather than financially and the government cannot force them to do otherwise.

Separate taxation for each person may be a move in the right direction. Women would be treated as discrete individuals rather than 'appendages' of their husbands.

The definition of a 'household' is too vague to agree or disagree.

Question 5 Targeting public resources to those in greatest need.

Again, easy to say – not so easy to do.

Targeting means testing and needs testing cost money to administer.

You have to explain to the public why resources are scarce. People may be willing to pay more tax to increase the sum total. An increase of 2p in the £ would bring in 10 million pounds per year. Furthermore, a progressive tax regime could have a 30% band introduced for those earning £100,000 per year. The Island would remain a low tax jurisdiction.

Question 6 Greater use of means testing.

Again, Easy to say- not so easy to achieve.

Needs testing and Means testing are superficially attractive but may be difficult to achieve.

Income is not the only measure of need. People have different levels of outgoings at different times in their lives e.g. paying for students to go to university, which affect their position over the short term.

Are you going to have the Department of Health means testing the household for prescriptions?

The Department of Social Care means testing the same household for child benefit, and the Department of Community Culture and Leisure assessing the same household for bus passes? Or will departments be sharing information among themselves?

Increasing means testing and needs testing will create more bureaucracy with attendant costs.

Question 7 Different levels of support to avoid 'cliff edge'

Any tapering of support will require costly administration. When benefits are paid

universally surplus funds will be spent within the Island's economy.

If people realise that it is better for them to claim benefits rather than improve their situation by working it may be that they are correct and increasing the minimum wage or paying a living wage should be the government's aim. Some cleaning jobs offering low wages even expect people to run their own cars to get to round to different venues.

The 'cliff edge' of support for house purchase probably does need looking at.

Question 8 Giving services rather than money

Presumably people are on long-term benefits because they cannot find work or they prefer not to do poorly paid jobs. This is the situation that needs to be addressed. People are receiving and accepting what they are entitled to.

A much more creative approach to getting people into work is needed e.g. green jobs insulating properties.

At our public meeting it was pointed out that IoM College courses were full for September so you cannot blame youngsters for not being in education when they leave school. All government departments and the private sector need to co-operate to address situations such as this.

If there is an expectation that disabled people will work and become self-sufficient the government needs to introduce the Disability Act or an Equality Act and work to change attitudes. Even in special interest groups there can be patronising attitudes towards people with special needs and they are not integrated into society as equal members. Teachers are not the ideal people to give careers advice as they have rarely worked outside school and university.

Question 9 More assistance in form of services rather than financial support

Yes many people may prefer to have pre-school education provided fairly rather than being given a voucher for £350 to spend in a private sector nursery.

If a multitude of services is going to be available and provided by different agencies you will need to provide good information through help lines and websites so that people know what is available and how to access them.

Figures will be needed to demonstrate to the general public that outsourcing services and delivering them via the third sector and private companies are actually more efficient and beneficial than having the government doing it themselves.

Some disabled people may prefer to have financial benefits to spend as they wish on carers, transport etc rather than having a particular service offered to them which may not meet their exact needs.

Question 10 Penalties for abuse of benefits system

We assume there are robust systems in place to prevent abuse of the system. On the other hand people should not be condemned for claiming support they are entitled to under the present conditions. E.g. Income Support until their child reaches the age of 16. Penalties for vulnerable people are counter productive.

No evidence has been given on the size of the benefit abuse problem on the Isle of Man rather than in the minds of Daily Mail readers.

Question 11 Two-way escalator

A patronising and inaccurate model.

We prefer a level moving walkway rather than an escalator. Having 'loads of money' may not be the ambition of all members of society.

Funding comes sideways from all taxpayers including pensioners and the poorly paid. We are all supported, as our needs are universal.

Most of the supported are coping so separating them is a false dichotomy. The escalator model perpetuates class division.

Question 12 All groups treated fairly?

Putting people at the bottom of the pile is not conducive to a healthy community. Research shows that more equal societies have fewer problems.

See [The Spirit Level: Why equality Is Better For Everyone](#) by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett and the research work of the Equality Trust.

Similarly putting the 'well off' at the top of the pile does not make them immune to social, emotional or health needs.

Question 13 Pace of change

At our public meeting it emerged that the department and government as a whole has a job on its hands to convince the public that any changes in the present system are needed and will be an improvement. The public would like to see figures to show that new systems are more efficient. Also people would like more transparency and to see where ALL the department's money is spent. Systems will only be seen to be fair if people understand them.

You also need to be aware of the consequences (Intended or unintended) of other policies within other departments e.g. the recent Tax Strategy Consultation and the Scope of Government Consultation.

Only when the outcomes of all three have been considered and published should any proposals be brought to Tynwald

Question 14 Strong feelings about Social Policy?

Have you enquired whether people would be willing to pay something (say £25 per year) towards their bus pass?

Have you considered the knock on effects of some of these proposals e.g. social isolation, loneliness etc

Higher earners already pay more in tax and National Insurance. Are you now going to take benefits away from them even though they have contributed generously towards funding these benefits?

Social Policy should be integrated throughout all the 'Social' departments-Health, Social Care, Education and Children, Home Affairs and Community Culture and Leisure.

Question 15 general comments about policy development

Consult users of services as well as providers regularly and be open to suggestions from any source.

Invite outside an outside and experienced agency to review the provision of social services and benefits on the island as a whole not piecemeal.

Outsourcing is not always the answer as it can lead to lack of accountability, loss of information and the expensive provision of services that could be developed within the community.

These fundamental changes to our society need abroad consideration with full public disclosure based on factual evidence if they are to have the support of the people of the Isle of Man.

Look at alternative ideas elsewhere e.g. by establishing the charity [Rotherfield St Martin](http://www.rotherfieldstmartin.org.uk/) the village of Rotherfield in East Sussex has set up a self-help community partnership to enable older people to stay in their own homes longer and retain their independence.

<http://www.rotherfieldstmartin.org.uk/>

**Positive Action Group
September 2012**

Positive Action Group (PAG)

Appendix 1

Objectives

To promote awareness and understanding of politics and citizenship

To encourage members of the public to participate actively in politics by taking part in discussions, making their views known, voting, standing for office and holding public office.

To encourage an increase in the percentage turnout of the electorate, by raising awareness of the importance to the electorate of exercising their democratic right to vote - a consequence of which will be that they can help to shape and secure the future of the Isle of Man.

To bring to the attention of Tynwald Members, the Government of the Isle of Man, or any other appropriate bodies, issues or matters of public interest raised by members of PAG; and which may include submissions in response to public consultation exercises.