



Parents & ESF in London

Background

Increasingly, government policy on employment and poverty has recognised the seminal link, for many, between the cost of raising a child and the onset of poverty. The modern western state is challenged to meet the cost of social reproduction! Conventional public wisdom across the European Union is to see work as the best route out of poverty, with ending child poverty as the driver for much policy and programming, including the European Social Fund.

The UK Government has recently published various policy documents, which recognise the key importance of specific strategies to support parents in delivering economic prosperity. In December 2009, the Department for Work & Pensions published the white paper *"Building Britain's Future: Achieving Full Employment"*, which argues specifically for:

- help for parents and carers
- tailoring services and the benefits regime to the needs of parents
- promoting family-friendly working practices
- additional support for childcare

Similarly, in January 2010 the Department for Children Schools & Families published *"Support for All: the Families and relationships Green Paper"* to launch a public debate on a range of issues, including:

- paternity leave
- parental leave when children are over 5 years of age
- clearer information for parents about financial assistance for childcare
- increased flexibility of hours offered by Sure Start Children's C
- promoting employer-awareness of family-friendly employment rights and practices

The London Scene

In London, the European Social Fund supports a broad programme of labour market initiatives under 2 main Priorities:

- to extend employment opportunities
- to create a skilled and adaptable workforce

Apart from targeting a range of disadvantaged groups, which necessarily include parents, specific reference is made in the recently-agreed ESF London Regional Framework 2011-2013 to parents:

- those with parental and/or carer responsibilities (lone parents being a key group)
- low income, single earner households with children where one parent is not working

These London priorities reflect the concern for child/family poverty in London and underpin the demand from the Mayor and many others for a London Living Wage.

If we look closely at the current ESF sub-programme of London Councils, which is the London Co-Financing Organisation dealing exclusively with providers from the voluntary and community sector, there are many specific parent target groups:

- disabled parents
- homeless families
- parents in workless households
- parents of disabled children

In the words of the external appraisal panel for this latest round: *"London Councils is keen to fund projects under this ESF Programme that also contribute to reducing child poverty in London by raising family income and skills"*. Such an emphasis points to the enduring link between the employment and poverty agendas. The family is a key stage for the "acting-out" of these agendas, with ESF providing

invaluable resources for innovation and engagement. Similarly, in having promoted Community Grants in London, the London Development Agency has encouraged the development of micro-projects closely linked to street-level networks involving neighbourhoods and families.

ESF will also be playing an important role in the London Regional Activities Programme of the European Year Against Poverty (EY2010). Here, the principal event will be on Saturday 2nd October during the UK Week. The planned "*Spark in the Park*" will be taking place at the Paradise Park, Islington, and is conceived as a family event that will highlight the family dimension of poverty in London and the potential for strategies, such as ESF, to combat such disadvantage.

Providers in the voluntary and community sector are often physically closer than other agencies to the parents, children and youth who make up London families. The sector's holistic approach to service provision and problem solving is often more in line with parental approaches. The volunteering ethos is also one shared by the sector and parents. Indeed, a parent has been described as "the first generalist and the first volunteer"!

If you would like more information, please contact Ray Phillips rayp@lvstc.org.uk at LVSTC by email or telephone 0845 262 2006 / 020 7538.

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