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# Semi Structured Telephone Interview re: Fairness Commissions

Steve Smith, Newport City Council  
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## **How significant or sustainable (in your view) the Fairness Commission approach has been?**

This is a question that has pre-occupied us. Newport City Council is a strong labour council. However, there are elections in April 2016 and so the political landscape may change and the FC may be disbanded, who knows?

We have from the start tried to maintain a long-term vision for the Fairness Commission, not based on campaign work around specific policy but rather to contribute to a wider debate about the meaning of fairness in relation to communities across Newport and beyond.

Newport is different to other Fairness Commissions. Newport doesn't campaign directly on specific policies. This approach was decided early on recognising that Fairness Commissions are not democratically elected so don't have a democratic mandate to recommend policy as such, rather we believe we have a role to have impact on how elected representatives *think* about policies and how they implement them.

Therefore, the focus of the Newport fairness commission has been to provide a public space for critical reflection on the root meanings of fairness (plural), bearing in mind that it is a highly contested concept with no shared one meaning. The Newport Fairness Commission subsequently took on the remit to build critical discourse with the council around the value of fairness, rather than arguing for a particular version of fairness. This remit was taken on board by all fairness commission members, council members, and including members of the conservative party.

Our main concern is that without this critical discourse the concept of fairness is in danger of becoming empty rhetoric. No-one argues for an unfair society after all. So, the concept of fairness needs fleshing out, asking questions about what it *variously* means across the communities in which we live. So, Newport Fairness Commission wants to get beyond the political hot air, and consider the different meanings of fairness and the trade-offs between the

different meanings when it comes to the formulation and implementation of policy.

For example, fairness can mean a systematic re-distribution of wealth to those in poverty and a lot of other fairness commissions have taken this definition and recommended specific policies accordingly. However, the Newport Fairness commission has taken the line that there is a lot more to the value of fairness than redistribution – although this is certainly an important part of it.

Responding to this understanding Newport fairness commission has drawn a conceptual map, considering the various parameters of debate in which fairness operates – and recognising that there are often tensions and conflicts within these debates. For example, when is it fair to treat people the same and when is it fair to treat people differently? This becomes an important focal point of debate which has many answers which are not easily settled. We want councillors to think hard about these questions and ask themselves how this relates to fairness as *they* understand it.

In us helping them to do this in Newport the Commission is conducting training sessions for councillors and serving officers. The aim is to provide counsellors with a 'critical lens' for evaluating their policy, to consider and value the concept of fairness more critically. Hopefully, Newport Fairness Commission will provide a legacy in this area, namely to have an impact on how politicians think about policy whatever version of fairness they are committed to.

#### **What are views on the key themes raised by the 2014 Agency in Austerity report?**

Summary of Recommendations:

1. **Recc One:** *Establishing Fairness Implementation Groups*
2. **Recc. Two:** *Establishing a Poverty and Inequality / Social Justice Portfolio*
3. **Recc. Three:** *An annual Local Conference on Fairness, Poverty and Inequality*
4. **Recc Four:** *Dissemination of Best Practice Local Approaches to reducing poverty and inequality*

Newport Fairness Commission has started training counsellors in critical approaches to Fairness in June 2015 and is rolling out the same programme in October 2015 and into 2016. The training will include council members, other members and serving officers. We also plan to offer this service to third sector organisations, campaigning groups, front line workers in the care industry, and so on. We have also started to work with council concerning the 2010 Equality Act, and Newport

City Council is starting to apply the concept of fairness into the monitoring work required around the act. While recognising that fairness and equality aren't the same thing we are trying to get councillors to think about fairness critically, its relationship to other values such as equality, and then consider the impact on policy and local communities

The Newport commission is also trying to encourage public discussion about the concept of fairness, outside of the council. For example, a local city annual art and culture festival is using fairness as its theme for 2016, and the commission will be centrally involved in organising the festival, devising forums for discussion and explorations of fairness at the festival. We are also trying to get the city university involved too, commissioning film students to make a film about fairness as part of their curriculum. The overall aim is to engage the wider public in debates about fairness.

However, encouraging honest and open debate on this subject is not easy. Newport council have been very supportive of the Fairness Commission even though the commission has said difficult things in the wake of the austerity measures being imposed.

Also, despite the above debates, underlying the commission's work is the broad principle, which seems to command a lot of agreement across the political spectrum, that the disadvantaged and vulnerable in society ought to be protected in some way. Newport Fairness Commission has engaged in discussions concerning the annual budget round and setting priorities for policy, and our central concern is that this principle is being undermined as the austerity measures continue to bite. The question is, of course, *who* are the disadvantaged and vulnerable, and *how* they should be protected?

#### *Recc Five: Living Wage in Local Authorities*

The living wage, while very plausibly part of any fairness agenda, that the Conservative Government has procured this as a policy aim, shows the highly contested nature of the concept of fairness as previously stated.

#### *Recc Six: Championing the case for the living wage*

5. *Recc Seven: Action on Inequality – Pay Differentials.*
6. *Recc Eight: Focussing on Fairness, Poverty and Inequality in the run up to the General Election in May 2015*
7. *Recc Nine: An annual National Fairness Convention*
8. *Recc Ten: A Broader UK Wide Anti-Poverty Initiative.*