Submission to the APPG on Social Integration’s Inquiry into Intergenerational Connection
From Dr. Wanda Wyporska, Executive Director of The Equality Trust.
Contact: wanda.wyporska@equalitytrust.org.uk - 0203 637 0325

Introduction

The Equality Trust is a registered charity that works to improve the quality of life in the UK by reducing economic and social inequality. Our perspective in approaching this call for evidence is, therefore, concerned with how a more equal society could improve intergenerational connection.

Overview

Whilst we support specific and innovative initiatives to improve intergenerational mixing in the UK, e.g. through creating mixed-age housing developments, Care Campuses or pairing care homes with nurseries, we think that the best overall remedy for intergenerational disconnection would be policies designed to make the UK a much more equal society.

Inequality: The Enemy Between Us

Currently, our very high level of material inequality is actively corroding our social fabric. People’s life experiences have become so divergent that it makes it increasingly difficult to relate to each other. In such circumstances, distrust and suspicion can grow and people can turn in on themselves and become detached and/or resentful. The unpleasant nature of much of our current social and political discourse directly reflects our materially divided society.

It is worth considering the sheer extent of inequality in the UK at the present time. The richest 1,000 people in the UK have more wealth than the poorest 40% of households and FTSE 100 CEOs routinely earn nearly £4 million a year while the average UK wage is around £28k p/a. Those on the minimum wage earn just under £15k p/a and that’s on the assumption that they have guaranteed full-time hours. These huge material differences create huge social distances.

A significant component part of this overall inequality is the wealth gap between older and younger generations, most commonly reflected in rates of home ownership but also reflected in savings, pension wealth and levels of debt. However, our high level of inequality cannot simply be explained by reference to this generation gap. There is an increasing number of poor pensioners in the UK paying rent and struggling to get by on fixed incomes just as there are many wealthy millennials who have been launched on to the property ladder with parental help. The focus must always remain on redistributing income and wealth from richer people to poorer people, whoever they may be. We believe that a narrative of “targeting the old to help the young” would be disastrous as it’s a recipe for resentment and, therefore, yet more intergenerational disconnection.

The UK’s problem with social immobility is also a factor here. We do not suggest that social mobility can, in and of itself, fix our inequality problem or the problems of intergenerational disconnection, far from it. However, the fact that we have such enormous wealth and income gaps does undoubtedly push the rungs on the ladder of opportunity further apart and does make it more difficult for younger people to progress towards stable, well-resourced lives, especially if they are starting out from a poorer background.
Equality As Social Balm

Vast amounts of steadily accumulating academic evidence* show that materially more equal countries have a higher level of trust than those that are more unequal. They are also healthier (both physically and mentally) and suffer less from anti-social or violent behaviour. More equal societies are also more socially mobile since advancement is less tied to parental income and wealth.

Trust is the essential bedrock for integration as it creates an atmosphere where people feel relaxed about leaving their homes and socialising with others. Good health is also massively important as it is much harder to get beyond the front door and feel socially confident when in poor health. Fear of violence, discrimination, and anti-social behaviour is also a huge inhibitor of social interaction. All these barriers to social connection – including intergenerational connection – could be markedly reduced if we became a materially more equal society.

In short, greater material equality improves the overall quality of social relations between citizens, including between the generations. Greater equality works as a social balm that soothes and diminishes society’s various ailments.

* See: https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/trust-participation-attitudes-and-happiness
also - https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/resources/the-spirit-level
also - https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/inner-level (NEW - published June 2018)

Conclusions

The best guarantee of social connectedness, including that between the generations, is to have a society where as many people as possible are physically and mentally well, trust each other and have sufficient resources to live a full life, all earned within a reasonable number of hours each week.

This way people will typically be less stressed and less rushed and feel more confident about social interaction. They will more likely have time (or make time) to have those crucial conversations and social interactions that build and sustain social capital. These could be conversations with neighbours or shop staff or with any members of the general public in wide and varied settings, as well as with friends, acquaintances and family.

More generally, people will also be able to spend more time participating in our civic life in all its forms; from charities to political parties and from park runs to school fetes. The key to unleashing a new wave of social connectedness - across and between all generations in the UK - is to reduce the material divisions between us so that our collective health and wellbeing improves.

We, therefore, need government to commit to a national mission of economic and social renewal based firmly on reducing the gap between the rich and the rest in the UK. The centre-piece of this should be an integrated, cross-department, Inequality Reduction Strategy including the sort of policies we have advocated in our national Manifesto for a Fairer Society.

END