

UK Focus Groups: report

DATE	TIME	FOCUS GROUP	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS
10 OCTOBER	6-8 pm	Middle class	10
11 OCTOBER	6-8pm	Younger people (under 35)	9
12 OCTOBER	3-5 pm	Retired people	9
12 OCTOBER	6-8pm	Working-class	9
13 OCTOBER	6-8pm	Women with care responsibilities	8
14 OCTOBER	6-8pm	"White British"	9

The focus groups took place in Battersea (London), in the offices of the Breaking Blue Research agency which was contracted for this work. Recruitment was based on the criteria agreed between the research teams at the third co-ordination conference in Berlin. Each discussion group lasted for two hours with no break (the group consisting of working women with care responsibilities lasted 2 hours and 20 minutes). Discussions followed the structure mentioned in the specification:

1. Introduction and warm-up exercise

Participants were asked to introduce themselves and state what the welfare state means to them, and the issues they think of when they hear about welfare. This introduction worked very well in terms of framing the discussion and giving the opportunity for participants to raise any issues and concerns (if any). The moderator was then asked to read the definition of welfare state mentioned in the focus group specification, and participants were then given the opportunity of raising any questions. Some participants asked whether public transports are considered as part of the welfare state.

2. Vignettes

The moderator then started introducing vignettes as discussed in the focus group specification. These vignettes remained broad and no names were specified in order to let participants frame the discussion and introduce conditions for access to benefits and services. If participants asked for further specifications (e.g. "how many children does the family on median wage have?"), then the moderator returned the question, i.e. "does it make a difference to you?" or "why does it matter?" Each vignette was written down on an A3 chart. No further equipment or instruments (e.g. pictures, PowerPoint slides,...) were used. Each vignette was formulated as such (in order of discussion):

- *Unemployed person of working age in good health*
- *70-year old person in good health*

- *Family earning £28,100 per annum (i.e. the median household disposable income for non-retired households) with children under 3 in good health*
- *Low-income worker, on minimum wage or earning less than £13,500 (before tax) per annum*
- *Worker earning over £40,000 (before tax) per annum*
- *Immigrant*

Here is a summary of focus group discussions:

Group 1 (Middle-class):

In general terms, the group were quite positive about the need for a welfare state, often describing it as a safety net for those with short (or longer) term needs. Several participants were relatively open-minded about the level of financial support, and type of support services, that should be made available to different people, and felt that this should be determined bottom-up by need, rather than imposed by the state according to rigid criteria such as age (suggesting for example that age does not guarantee the attainment of a life-stage).

While age and gender were not felt to play a role in determining level/type of entitlement, some participants felt strongly that benefits and support should usually be means-tested. There was a more tentative acceptance that levels of outgoings were also important: e.g. that people living in London would have higher rent, that people with health conditions would have higher expenses.

One criterion that elicited stronger views was the presence of children in a household: participants generally recognised that a household with more people on it would have to make an income stretch further. While one or two were concerned that some people have “too many” children without considering if they can afford them, more people felt that children should not suffer the consequences of their parents’ decisions, and therefore that a certain level of support should be provided regardless of the number of siblings. When it came to the card-sorting exercise, participants were hesitant to place one vignette above another without knowing more about each person’s general circumstances – but there was a general consensus that a family on an average income was more deserving than other vignettes.

Group 2 (Under 35):

The group were again very positive about the need to maintain the welfare state as a safety net for those in need, although a small number mentioned concerns about people taking advantage of available benefits.

When discussing the vignette of the person aged over 70, the group spoke primarily about the need for health services, and also assumed that older people would need support to use the internet. They were less focused on financial support for older people, and tended to feel rather that most older people were better off than their generation, and benefited from assets such as property, pensions, savings and work opportunities that were less available to their generation.

Childcare was again an issue that some participants felt strongly about: four of them had children, and felt that more needed to be done to bring down prohibitively high childcare costs and make it more affordable for parents to return to work quickly.

Participants were generally very positive about immigration, with a few arguing that immigrants of any status or category should be treated the same as UK nationals: even from day 1 of arriving. One or two participants were concerned about benefit tourism, but generally participants were more concerned about current political and media rhetoric demonising immigrants.

A few participants were also concerned about the current support for people with disabilities and physical or mental health conditions, particularly in terms of financial support for those with long term needs. One participant was particularly vocal about the role of ATOS in making it more difficult to receive benefits, and mentioned the EU report which recently criticised the UK state's treatment of disabled people.

Group 3 (Retired):

Overall, this group was in favour of the welfare state, seeing it as a 'safety net' for those in need. The group acknowledged that they were becoming more aware of the need for the welfare state as they got older, as a way of supporting people through retirement and old age.

However, the group felt that age was a less useful criterion in determining what benefits people should get, whilst health, working status and income were felt to be more important factors.

Participants felt that the state pension should take outgoings into account, particularly considering the vast differences in housing/ rental costs across the UK.

Disability was felt to be a key criterion throughout the discussion, and participants felt both mental and physical disabilities should be treated with equal weight in determining type and level of benefit entitlement. Mental health support was felt to be particularly pertinent for those in unemployment. However, a few participants felt it was difficult to distinguish between those had genuine disabilities preventing them from being able to work, and those who were unemployed out of choice to take advantage of the benefits offered.

The group was dubious about future of the welfare state, acknowledging that the ageing population means the number of people funding the welfare state through taxation is becoming outweighed by the increasing number of elderly people living on it.

Group 4 (Working class):

The general consensus among the group was that the welfare state was required as a way of providing for those most in need. However, several participants were concerned that benefits won't always go to those who need them, e.g. people choosing not to work in order to receive benefits.

With regard to the unemployed person vignette, the group spoke about the need for training, as well as financial support. They felt that apprenticeship opportunities should be made available to people at any age, and also that housing benefit should not be determined by an age criterion.

Again, the issue of cost of living came up; with the group suggesting that those living in expensive areas such as London should receive higher housing benefits relative to the higher cost of renting and general cost of living.

The group felt that soaring childcare costs had to be dealt with, in order to make it feasible for parents to return to work should they choose to do so. They felt that the number of children living in a household should be a criterion to determine the level of benefits they receive; whilst they thought people should only have as many children as they can afford, the children shouldn't be penalised if this isn't the case and every child should be treated the same.

Group 5 (Women with care responsibilities):

The group felt that there's a need for a welfare state to support and protect people when "times are hard".

The group felt strongly about the issue of childcare; that more needs to be done to manage the rising cost of childcare. They felt that breakfast and afterschool clubs should also be subsidised to enable parents to return to work.

The need for health services across all vignettes was highlighted, with mental health issues being a key criterion - particularly in relation to the low-income worker vignette. A few participants suggested that mental health issues were becoming more prominent as working hours increase and people lead more stressful, busy lives. They felt that charities could have greater involvement in order to increase support for these people.

The group was generally positive about the topic of immigration. When talking about refugees, the group talked primarily about the need for healthcare and housing support as soon as the person entered the UK. There was also a general feeling that once immigrants of any other category had shown willingness to contribute, they should be entitled to the same benefits as UK nationals. The group felt that the media was to blame for creating panic around immigration, and that immigrants should be treated as equals when it comes to benefit/service entitlement.

Group 6 ("White British"):

The last group was generally very egalitarian and willing to indulge those who appeared in need of financial support. Their default was to think about what people "deserve", deservingness being conditioned by what income they were on for example, and working on the assumption that any income was hard earned – as opposed to, say, an investment or inheritance.

The group broadly agreed that everybody needs a basic standard of living, whatever their circumstances: they were less inclined to believe some people should get less if they were "responsible" for their situation (e.g. failing to seek work, "self-inflicted" poor health). They saw the state as responsible for topping everybody up to this basic minimum income level. On the other hand, they didn't want to set this "minimum standard" too high, due to the concern that it might then disincentivise people from seeking work, looking for better paid work etc.

In terms of services and other support beyond financial benefits, the group held fairly simple views and struggled to come up with many ideas of what might be needed. One suggestion (as in other groups) was that people need training and opportunities to find work, or higher paid work. Means

testing again was an issue that came up spontaneously. Respondents tended to assume that “that’s how it works”, with a low awareness that not all benefits are means-tested, and low understanding of how means testing works in practice. Some were potentially in favour of reducing the level of entitlement for better-off people. Outgoings were also spontaneously recognised as being a relevant factor to take into account, with the group focusing in particular on the fact that rent in London is typically higher. They also felt that people with health conditions might need a different kind of support, although this didn’t translate into “more money” necessarily, with the focus staying instead on social services.

Some participants felt that we shouldn’t give people benefits as cash, and that it would be better to provide services instead. There was support for food vouchers in particular: some suggested that you should restrict how people spend their benefit, particularly if they have children. However, some warned on the other hand that vouchers risked becoming too “nanny state”, with a few feeling strongly that a balance should be kept between intervening too much and too little.

There was a general consensus that older people and children were particularly deserving of support. Several argued that childcare is woefully underfunded, and people shouldn’t be penalised for having more children. There was also widespread respect for older people, with the assumption that they would have paid into welfare system and “therefore” now deserve to get something back.

3. Card-sorting exercise

15 minutes before the end of the discussion, participants were asked to sort the six vignettes in order of deservingness, as stated in the circulated focus group specification. This exercise was collective and thus included a deliberative element. This exercise did not work well for the middle class group but worked for the other ones. Participants were then asked to reflect on what they think the welfare state will look like in 25 years’ time.

Here is the ranking for each group:

- Middle-class group: no ranking (though more critical of the comfortably-off worker)
- Under 35 group: 1. Unemployed; 2. low-income worker; 3. family; 4. immigrant; 5. Old-age; 6. comfortably-off worker
- Retired group: 1. low-income worker; 2. unemployed; 3. family; 4. old-age; 5. comfortably-off worker and immigrant (both at the same level)
- Working class group: 1. old-age and family at the same level; 3. low-income worker; 4. immigrant; 5. comfortably-off worker; 6. unemployed person
- Women with care responsibilities group: 1. Family and low-income worker at the same level; 3. Old-age, immigrant and unemployed at the same level; 6. Comfortably-off worker
- White British: 1. Immigrant; 2. Old-age; 3. Family; 4. Unemployed; 5. Low-income worker; 6. Comfortably-off worker

4. Preliminary analysis

Overall, the majority of the discussions were (somewhat surprisingly) pro-welfare, pro-redistribution and left-leaning. No major cleavages were discussed, except in the younger group (under 35) where some participants voiced concerns over benefits for old-age people (e.g. free public transportation or the level of the basic state pension). Issues such as fairness, trust and solidarity were often mentioned

and dominated the discussions. For instance, in the “White British” group, one participant said “we live in a civilized society, so everyone should live a decent life”. Discussions were very lively and respectful, with a very low level of conflict between participants. However, in the middle class group, one participant who expressed an individualistic opinion regarding access to benefits and services for the unemployed was criticized (in a very polite way) by two participants (“I strongly disagree with the gentleman”).

Means-testing was often discussed and there was a lot of variation between the different groups regarding its fairness. The middle class group overwhelmingly agreed that means-testing is needed but could not agree on the criteria for means-testing. In contrast, the “White British” group expressed concerns over means-testing, with some participants believing that it leads to stigmatization of specific groups. The women with care group talked about setting a proper gradient of needs critical of the current poverty trap (i.e., how benefits stop due to all or nothing system).

As far as the NHS is concerned, the overwhelming majority of participants believed it should remain as it stands. Even for the comfortably-off worker vignette, participants believe that healthcare should remain a public service accessible to everyone, no matter what their background / level of income are. Some concerns about sustainability in working class and retired groups, but interestingly no mention of problems of sustainability of pensions. Free childcare was often mentioned as a service that everyone should be entitled to, even the well off.

The state is considered as responsible for providing the wide range of benefits and services discussed in the six focus groups. Sometimes, other providers (especially the employer) or families were mentioned in terms of sharing responsibility for specific issues such as childcare, but this was not the case for all groups.

Two main reasons might explain why the discussions were rather unusual. Firstly, the focus groups took place in London (Battersea). Secondly, even though participants had diverse socio-economic characteristics (in terms of age, income levels, education background, sector of employment, number of children if any, etc) most participants placed themselves on the left of the political spectrum (including some Conservative voters) n.b. many were state sector workers. As London is more left-wing than the North of England (e.g. Birmingham, where the democratic forums were conducted), this could explain why discussions were more pro-welfare than anticipated. Furthermore, the way in which the questions were posed did not prompt respondents to think about budgetary constraints – i.e., the DFs talk about future, which may have changed people’s expressed views.

Participants were also given the opportunity of raising any issues, questions or comments by email after the discussion. Some participants sent comments which are included below.