

Audio Transcript

Pete Alcock - What is Social Policy?

Julia Waldman: Can I ask a sort of obvious question, what is social policy?

Professor Pete Alcock: It's interesting you're asking that at the annual conference of the social policy association because it's a question that's been asked in at least two of the sessions that I have been to. I think a lot of the people both studying social policy and seeking to implement social policy as it were doing social policy in the world, would say that it's about promoting welfare and well-being. It's about how we make the lives of all of the citizens in our country how we make it possible for them to live safe, fulfilling, healthy lives. How we make it possible for them to achieve what they want to do within their lives. And that's often captured in this notion of welfare and wellbeing. So what we were studying when we were studying social policy is we were studying how we deliver welfare and wellbeing to people. What that turns into in practice actually is a number of different ways in which we conceive of the issue of welfare. What do we mean by it, for example, it presumably includes health, what do we mean by good health, can we define health, can we measure health and then what we do to try and promote good health. So we end up then moving from a very general notion of what you study to look at particular aspects of policy development and policy delivery, so in a social policy student will study things like the national health service, how it's developed, how it's changed, how it operates, they will study education systems, the role of education for school children and then how education is taken forward, and into later life and what they call these days life-long learning. Increasingly important to recognise that education is something that happens to kids at school. They will study how we provide for people's material needs, how we provide for housing how we provide transport, and other environmental factors. And of course in particular how we provide people with the means with all to meet their own material needs. In other words the question of distribution of resources, particularly cash resources, people's incomes, and the social security that can help to support or replace the incomes they might lose. So we certainly see those different policy areas and how they're implemented, how they developed and how they're implemented in practice. And that of course when we were studying that is often an assumption I think in particular when people start out studying social policy that you're mainly looking at what the state and what the government does, in other words, social policy is about delivering welfare for citizens and it's the government that does that and they do it predominantly through the public entities like the national health service. But actually when you begin to look at

how social policy is played out in the world its not just what the government does that contributes to our welfare, our welfare is developed and is improved and is enhanced by a range of different agencies which includes private and commercial agencies providing for example, people that make the glasses we wear to help us to see, the different wide range of voluntary and community agencies who contribute in a number of different areas including much of the provision for social care, people that cant look after themselves or who need assistance in looking after themselves are provided by voluntary agencies, so its what we do on a voluntary basis for each other but also actually and probably the most unsung area is what happens informally in individual relationships between individual citizens and an awful lot of our welfare we do on a more or less face to face, certainly person to person faces and of course in particular through the family and the importance of the family, and different family structures, different family shaves that are all the same, and the role of those informal relationships. So it's not just about what happens in the NHS, and indeed it's not just about what people in government and policy makers say. The implementation of social policy covers a wide range of relationships that start perhaps with the formal governmental and also include the informal family voluntary and community and so on.