

How did the Poor Law develop between 1847-1900?

In 1846, a Select Committee of the House of Commons was appointed to look into alleged abuses of paupers in the Andover workhouse. Although undoubtedly exaggerated, the scandal revealed some of the worst abuses of the new Poor Law system. This provided the trigger for the abolition of the Poor Law Commission. It was replaced by the Poor Law Board, answerable to Parliament and with a cabinet minister as president. This was the start of further change and development.

1. The central administration was changed

What was wrong with the Commission?

- Andover scandal revealed worst abuses – Commission appeared not to have noticed
- Tensions amongst commissioners, and Chadwick had always wanted to be more than just Secretary himself.

The new Poor Law Board?

- President – usually cabinet minister; several cabinet ministers on the Board also.
- So, answerable to Parliament and public opinion
- But, most of the original assistant commissioners stayed on as Poor Law inspectors.
- Inspectors were still spread very thinly across the country.

Why did the Local Government Board take over in 1871?

- Reform Act 1867 – govt more concerned with welfare of people
- New legislation passed for housing, public health etc, so natural to take on Poor Law too.
- 1871 – Poor Law Board replaced with Local Government Board.

2. The cost of the Poor Law went down

- The cost per capita for 1864-8, for example, was the same as it had been 20 years earlier, and was one third cheaper than it had been 40 years earlier!
- The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act still left individual parishes to pay for their own paupers, despite being in a union. The problems for poor parishes with lots of poor were obvious!
- 1865 Union Chargeability Act – each parish contributed to the union fund. Charges were based upon the rateable value of properties. Still many differences and inequalities across the country since the rateable value of houses was set across the country.
- Most boards of guardians were middle class ratepayers themselves – they wanted to keep rates as low as possible! Some unions claimed they could not afford to build the new workhouses, especially with the separate accommodation required.

3. The numbers receiving outdoor relief rose!

The Poor Law Commission (1834) had tried to prevent outdoor relief. Eg. 1844 the Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order re-confirmed the 1834 ideal that the able-bodied should not be given outdoor relief. Eg. The Outdoor Labour Test Order for the industrial north meant that the poor were supposed to do the 'labour test' – hard and monotonous work in return for outdoor relief. But, infrequent visits by commissioners meant that neither of these reforms were rigorously applied. In 1846, on approx. 200,000 out of 1,300,000 paupers in England and Wales received relief inside the workhouse!

The Poor Law Board (1847) also attempted to end outdoor relief for the able-bodied with a general order in 1852. This failed. Many boards of guardians continued to be flexible, aware that outdoor relief was usually cheaper for their ratepayers. A real crisis came in 1863 when the American cotton crop failed. Thousands of Lancashire cotton workers needed short-term relief. The government passed the Public Works Act, allowing local authorities to set up work schemes for paupers. It didn't solve the immediate crisis, but for the first time the government had admitted that the basis of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 didn't work!

The Local Government Board (1871) also tried to reduce outdoor relief:

- Issued a circular condemning outdoor relief
- Supported local authorities who took a harsh line
- Encouraged emigration schemes
- Advised local authorities to set up schemes eg street cleaning, for able-bodied poor.

These measures did not reduce the proportion of paupers receiving relief outside the workhouse, they did reduce the number of paupers altogether.

1870, 4.6% popn = paupers. 1900, 2.5% = paupers.

4. The treatment of paupers became more humane

The 1834 Act intended that paupers should be divided up in the workhouse. This proved too expensive and the 'general mixed workhouse' became the norm.

In the 1870s, the Local Government Board attempted to re-introduce this separation, but again, without government funding, little changed.

The Elderly – given more dignity

1847 – separate bedrooms for couples over 60. (But few were made available)

1890s – Local Government Board issued circulars:

- elderly to receive outdoor relief where possible
- grant privileges eg tobacco, extra tea, open visiting
- no pauper uniform

Sick and mentally ill paupers – illness is separated from poverty

Before and after 1834, sick, injured and pregnant paupers were often treated in their own homes. This kept costs down.

1850s – Poor Law unions set up public dispensaries, for the public as well as paupers

1850s-60s – Treatment of ill, pregnant paupers in own homes permitted

1860s – enquiry into conditions in workhouse hospitals leads to hospitals being separated from workhouses.

This marked a new policy – separation of illness from poverty. These hospitals were the only place ordinary working people could get medical help. London organised its hospitals in the late-1860s, separating general, specialist, isolation and mental hospitals. Other Poor Law authorities followed and by 1900 the Poor Law was providing a national, state-funded system of medical care for paupers and the poor.

Pauper Children – better education, more time out of workhouse

Approx. 1/3 of workhouse population.

1834 – Workhouse schools established – earliest form of state education.

1844 – District schools can be set up by groups of Poor Law unions – schools are separate from workhouse buildings

1850s-60s – several variations including boarding pauper children with working class parents.

1870 – Forster Education Act – board schools for all children. Guardians encouraged to send pauper children here.

1890s – system of housing pauper children in ‘family’ groups in town houses develops.