



SPAN

Single Parent Action Network

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Welfare Reform Bill

Briefing for House of Lords Committee Stage

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Welfare Reform Bill

Who are the Single Parent Action Network?

The Single Parent Action Network (SPAN) empowers single parent families throughout Great Britain to thrive in the challenging role of bringing up children on their own.

Direct Support

SPAN provides this to some of the most disadvantaged single parents in the country through parenting courses, self-help groups, a single parent networking site and training courses. In 2008, our Study Centre was used by 247 single parents that came from two of the most deprived wards of Bristol.

Research

SPAN carries out participatory research which gives single parents skills and a voice to influence policies that impact their and their children's lives. This gives us a good insight into what enables single parents to thrive with their children and what works best for them in their journey back to paid employment.

Involvement of Single Parents

SPAN has a membership of over two thousand, including both grassroots single parent networks and individual members. SPAN holds website forums to air the views that single parents have on particular issues, with around 4,000 unique visitors to our site each month.

All the interactions that we have with single parents give us a good understanding of their concerns about welfare reform and how it could be improved to address their specific needs.

Priorities for SPAN

In the UK there are 1.9 million single parents (90% of whom are women) caring for 3.1 million children (one in four families). Single parents face particular issues in juggling employment and caring responsibilities single-handedly. Having this dual responsibility means that they face a higher risk of poverty and a more limited choice of employment available to them. They are twice as likely as non-single parents to leave work and return to welfare (Evans 2004).

Legislation and policy that make sense to single parents and that can fit with their complex and specific needs are more likely to work. SPAN would like to provide comment on three clauses in the Welfare Reform Bill where we have particular concerns for the impact on single parents; Clause 2 relating to work related activity and Clause 1 relating to work for your benefit schemes. In addition we

would like to express support for the inclusion of the proposed new Claimants Charter after Clause 24.

A) Clause 2 Work Related Activity

Amendments proposed in the Welfare Reform Bill (the Bill) will mean that for single parents who are moved onto Job Seeker's Allowance and whose child or children are aged between 3-7 will be required to undertake work related activity. They will face financial sanctions if they do not comply. Work related activity is defined as "an activity which makes it more likely that the person will obtain or remain in work or be able to do so."

SPAN opposes the work related activity provisions in the draft Bill on three grounds:

- 1) It risks penalising those who are most disadvantaged and a sanctions based approach does not work;
- 2) It does nothing about the underlying structure of work and the lack of availability of suitable work for single parents;
- 3) It is narrowly focused on addressing worklessness rather than investing in single parent human capital.

1) It risks penalising those who are most disadvantaged and a sanctions based approach does not work

The Single Parent Action Network is concerned that sanctions for single parents with young children will cause additional poverty for families that are already disadvantaged. Punishing those that are already punished by disadvantage is unfair, and other third sector organisations have already provided supporting evidence that it is largely ineffective (Gingerbread and the Citizens Advice Bureau). SPAN therefore supports the proposed revised clause to incentivise work related activity (as long as this activity is interpreted broadly).

At SPAN we are acutely aware of the disadvantage that many single parents already face. Through our Study Centre we successfully work with single parents who are predominantly on welfare benefits and over half of these individuals have physical or mental health problems.

A survey of single parents on Income Support carried out in 2000, found that they are more likely to suffer multiple disadvantage; 66% lived in social housing, half had no qualifications and 66% perceived that they had multiple barriers to work. (Lessof, 2001).

We are concerned that disadvantaged single parents have a higher risk of being sanctioned **and** enduring those sanctions. From the evidence in relation to work

related interviews for those who are currently on Income Support, the DWP have found that those affected by sanctions tend to be the least work ready, that is having been on benefits longer, or never worked, having children with poor health, debt issues and very poor knowledge about the benefit system. Those who lived with the sanctions did so not because they made an active decision not to attend the Work Focused Interviews, but because their challenging home situations and their lack of knowledge meant that they found themselves in this situation. Sometimes they thought the lower level of benefit was due to the Crisis Loan they were repaying, other times they simply did not deal with the issue.

2) Does nothing about the underlying structure of work and the lack of suitable work for single parents

The Welfare Reform Bill does nothing about two major barriers for single parents to engage in employment; first, a financial disadvantage for them to take on mini-jobs (under 16 hours a week), and second the lack of good quality part-time roles (jobs over 16 hours but under 36 hours). At SPAN we think that if these areas were addressed they would be a far more effective way to encourage single parents into meaningful and sustainable employment.

Mini-jobs are defined as jobs which are for 16 hours or less a week. They can be seen as an important way for people to gain work experience especially if they can be combined with training. Good practice has been identified at a recent Lone Parents Group where mini-jobs are combined with formalised study programs leading to an NVQ for both classroom assistants and social care roles.¹ These mini-jobs can be a vital way for single parents to develop skills and enhance their confidence to take on work with more hours in the future. However, there are financial disincentives for single parents to take these jobs by the limited disregards in the benefit system.

Quality part-time work is a vital way to encourage single parents back to work and allow them to combine paid employment with their other important role of bringing up their children on their own. However, the current provisions in the existing legislation are not being successfully applied and there is not reference within the new Welfare Reform Bill to encourage Jobcentre Plus to encourage employees to take on part-time workers.

The right to request flexible hours from an employer, although recently extended to parents of older children, does not apply unless someone has been with an employer for at least six months. It therefore does nothing for those single parents who are entering the job market after a period at home bringing up their children. Jobcentre Plus is ideally placed to identify the local needs for flexible working patterns and to encourage such work with local employers including through its Local Employment Partnerships. Jobcentre Plus are also well placed

¹ Lone Parent Group Meeting 7th May 2009 held at the Department for Work and Pensions.

to set up local job share registers and job splits to present to employees to encourage employment of single parents (90% of single parents are women).

Public bodies such as Jobcentre Plus (and those organisations that are contracted to carry out work on their behalf) also have a statutory duty in law to promote gender equality. They must promote equality of opportunity between men and women in the services they provide. Working part-time as a way of combining caring and employment responsibilities is more common for women than men and is a highly significant source of potential employment for women with children. Part-time work “plays a significant part in women’s lifetime pattern of employment.”² In 2004, 42% of women in employment worked part-time.

As James Purnell said recently (before his departure as Minister from the Department for Work and Pensions) “An active welfare system alone simply requires people to work. A proactive welfare state seeks to create those jobs and opportunities.”³

As part of supporting single parents back to sustainable employment it is important that there are opportunities created by Jobcentre Plus interacting with employers for good quality part-time roles. The Institute of Fiscal Studies with the University of Essex have recently produced revised projections of future levels of child poverty based on assumptions about changes brought about by the recession. One projection from their research is that the employment rate of single parents will be the same in 2010 as it was in 2006 (previously it was projected to rise sharply). They conclude that in order to tackle child poverty new policies will need to help provide good jobs for working parents that combine reasonable pay with flexibility⁴.

3) It is narrowly focused on addressing worklessness rather than investing in single parent human capital

The Single Parent Action Network believe that it is important for single parents to gain appropriate skills and that these should be viewed as part of work related activity. Skills fall on a broad spectrum with the softer skills of developing confidence to other recognised skills such as studying in further education. Without the emphasis on skill development we think that single parents will remain in low quality jobs and cycle back to welfare. By developing of skills it is more likely that single parents will be able to find more fulfilling and sustainable employment. This has been evidenced in the research work that we have undertaken with single parents.

² Jane Miller, Tess Ridge and Fran Bennett (May 2006). Part-time work and Social Security: Increasing the Options. Research Report Number 351 Carried out by the Centre for Analysis of Social Policy University of Bath on Behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions.

³ Speech at Public Services Trust 22 May 2009.

⁴ Dave Simmond et al (Nov 2008) Can work eradicate child poverty?

The importance of increasing soft skills amongst single parents was recognised by the 1998 Education and Employment Select Committee (1998), which recommended training opportunities to increase self-confidence amongst lone parents. In 2004, 41% of single mothers had either no or limited qualifications compared to a quarter of mothers in two parent families (Lyons et al 2006). Single parents on income support (which will transfer to JSA under the Welfare Reform Bill) tend to have even lower qualifications; in 2000 half had no qualifications and no relevant work skills or experience (Lessof et al, 2001).

SPAN has a history of developing skills and training for single parents through our study centre and our volunteering programme (Single Parent Action Network Study Centre (SSC)⁵). It is successful in reaching out to lone parents with multiple barriers to work, most lived on benefit; over half had physical or mental health problems. Many changes occurred as a result of training at the study centre, including gain of new skills, higher life and employment goals. Almost half of the participants attributed increase in self-confidence and self-awareness to the SSC, which in this respect fared much better than other parallel services.

Since 2002 we have developed a structured voluntary work experience programme. These programmes have worked best when the specific needs of single parents are borne in mind, such as need for childcare/flexible working times, and opportunities for self-development. Although we have found that voluntary work does not act as a fast track into employment for multiply disadvantaged single parents, it does raise employability significantly.

At SPAN we are successful in reaching out to single parents with multiple barriers to work. In 2005 we explored the distance travelled to employment for two groups of lone parents, young mums and those experiencing mental health problems. We found that their participation in the SPAN voluntary work experience programme resulted in a number of hard and soft changes including: increased work related skills; completion of work related training; increased work readiness, increased aspirations and clearer direction of employment plans; increased self-confidence and self-esteem. As a result of these changes the single parents' mental health significantly improved.

SPAN think that it is important that all manner of skills development is counted as work related activity. Voluntary work and training should be encouraged to equip single parents with the skills that they need to enter the workforce. In order for this to work, voluntary placements need to be designed with single parents in mind, paying attention to their need for childcare and flexible working.

SPAN is concerned that the regulations under the Welfare Reform Bill limit the ability of lone parents to undertake education and training as they are much less flexible than the rules that exist under Income Support. This is counterproductive

⁵ John, K., Payne, S. and Land, H. (2001) *Training and support for lone parents, an evaluation of a targeted study programme*; JRF: York.

to improving the employability of single parents and will impede their chances to compete for better-paid employment, especially once Britain moves from recession. Our research in 2007 (Giullari) showed that single parents identified opportunities for good training and higher education as the best way to move into sustainable jobs.

B) Work for your benefit schemes (Clause 1)

This section of the Bill enables the establishment of work for your benefit schemes (with sanctions for non-compliance) for those who have been on Job Seeker's Allowance for 24 months without finding employment. We have concerns about this provision on two grounds:

- 1) Single parents are more likely than others to end up on the work for your benefit schemes; and
- 2) It does not give sufficient value to the time that single parents devote to bringing up their children.

1) Higher likelihood of single parents ending up on the Scheme

As SPAN have stated above, single parents can experience multiple barriers in their return to work and may require extensive help if they have not been in the labour market for some years due to bringing up their children. Evaluation of private providers and employment zones indicates that single parents are more likely to be 'parked' by private providers, who have no additional resources to support their specific needs. We fear that as single parents will find it harder to find employment during the 24 month period they are more likely than some other groups to end up on the work for your benefit schemes.

Ideally we would prefer single parents to be offered voluntary work and skills training to help them in their journey back to paid employment and we know through our research that this is the most effective way to help them into sustainable employment. If single parents have to be placed on work for your benefit schemes we would support the tabled amendments proposed that ensure that they will not be forced to go on a scheme where they have not secured suitable childcare, where the journey time to the placement is impractical for the parent and where the single parent isn't given some family time with their children. We have assumed in line with other DWP regulations on employment for single parents that they will not be forced to work over 16 hours a week while they are on the work for your benefit programme.

In terms of the impact of the pilot programs we note that single parents have been chosen as a particular priority group. In addition to the impact of single parents we would also want to see the impact on the children of single parents to be taken into account.

2) Insufficient value is given to the time single parents spend with their children

SPAN are concerned that the time that single parents spend with their children is not valued and that this is reflected in the work for your benefit schemes. Ideally we would like single parents with children of any age to have the option of being with their children full-time if they think that this is in the best interests of their children. If this is not to be the case, we support amendments to the Bill which will potentially allow greater time for single parents to be with their family.

Child centred research on children social exclusion has shown that parent's time poverty has a negative impact on their children social exclusion, leading some to question the value of increased income as their result of their parent's employment (Ridge and Miller 2006). SPAN's research (Taylor et al 2007) has identified that a relationship that a child has with their single parent is very close and significantly important for that child. As a result of their parent having to manage employment and childcare single-handedly, single parent children are at greater risk as a result of their parent's time poverty. These parents find they have not enough time to dedicate to their children's education, and not enough quality time.⁶ Parents' time poverty can impact negatively on their children, including social exclusion as they end up taking on domestic and childcare responsibilities.

C) SPAN supports the introduction of a Claimants Charter after Clause 24

SPAN supports the tabled amendment for the introduction of a Claimants Charter, including the right of redress to an independent employment services ombudsman. It is our view that without being included in the Bill there is the danger that it would not have the required weight and would be more difficult to enforce. A Charter would also go some way to promote a consistent service and an understanding of what is required for claimants and for those providing the employment services. This is important for single parents where the new welfare reforms are particularly complex, for instance because there is different treatment and requirements depending on the age of a single parent's child. It has particular relevance to many multi-disadvantaged single parents, such as those that use our services, to try to ensure that they are well informed about their rights as well as responsibilities under the welfare reforms.

⁶ England National Report May 2007 S Cohen et al. Integrating children perspectives in policy making to combat poverty and social exclusion experiences by single families.

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