



**SPAN**

## **Single Parent Action Network**

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### **Welfare Reform Bill**

### **Briefing for House of Lords Report Stage**

**21 October 2009**

## Welfare Reform Bill

### Who are the Single Parent Action Network?

**National Network** -The Single Parent Action Network (SPAN) is a registered charity that empowers single parent families throughout Great Britain to thrive in the challenging role of bringing up children on their own. SPAN has a membership of over two thousand, including both grassroots single parent groups and individual members. SPAN holds website forums to support single parents and allow them to share their experiences, with over 5,000 unique visitors to our site each month. We have included a whole section of our forum to welfare reform which provides evidence on the impact of the changes to single parents.

**Local Support** - SPAN provides direct support 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. For example, our Study Centre was used by over 300 single parents in the last year from two of the most deprived wards of Bristol.

**Our Participatory Research** - gives us valuable insight into what enables single parents to thrive with their children and what works best for them in their journey back to paid employment.

### Introduction

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 are nearly seven times more likely to have a total family income in the lowest income quintile. Single parents, regardless of the age of their child, face particular issues in juggling employment and caring responsibilities single-handedly.

### SPAN's Main Priorities

#### 1) Well-being looking after older children (Before Clause 1 and Clause 1A)

SPAN are pleased that the Government has tabled amendments which will mean that the well-being of the children (up to age of 16) of single parents will be taken into account in the provisions of the Welfare Reform Bill. We also support the amendments which seek to clarify the meaning of child well-being. However, the way that the provisions of the Welfare Reform Bill have a staggered approach (in terms of children's age) to single parent engagement with employment there is an inherent assumption that single parents with older children should seek work and that these children need their parent less. **This is not necessarily the case and safeguards should be put in the Welfare Reform Bill to allow for single parents of older children to be at home in some circumstances. It is our view that there is insufficient protection in allowing discretion with Job Centre Plus advisers or their contractors to allow for the safeguarding of the interests of older children.**

From our online Forums:

"My oldest boy needed me more than he ever has before when he hit a crisis. He was 15."

One single parent described the support that she had needed to give to her 11 year son who had been excluded from school and was in trouble with the police. She dedicated a year at home to be with her son.

"I am certain that my efforts have prevented my son from becoming an asbo-burden on society. Parenting my son to become a good law-abiding citizen is my job."

For the well-being of their children some single parents think that they are best placed to care for their children and see good parenting as a positive role in itself.

“being a parent is a job in my opinion and in most cases being a single parent is not a career choice most cases are victims of circumstances... my children are growing up well rounded happy kids and are very distressed that I wont be at home full time”

## **2) Children’s Well-being and Time Poverty (Clause 1A)**

SPAN notes from discussions at the Lords Committee stage, in particular from Lord McKenzie, of the positive advantages for children of single parents undertaking paid employment both financially and in terms of self-esteem. SPAN thinks it important to balance this with the other evidence that exists in relation to some of the more negative aspects for children’s well-being when their parents take on paid work.

SPAN’s research 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.<sup>1</sup> Parents’ time poverty can impact negatively on their children, including social exclusion as they end up taking on domestic and childcare responsibilities, leading some children to question the value of increased income as the result of their parents’ employment (Guillari 2009).

We know through our online forum of the value of single parents spending time with their children.

“Unfortunately my ex doesn’t have any contact with our son now so I think it’s really important to spend as much time with him as I can and build up his confidence. I am dreading the day he asks me why he doesn’t see his dad. I just hope I’ll still have the time to support him it worries me that I might have to be rushing off to work when he needs me.”

**SPAN is requesting that Job Centre plus Advisers should have more discretion with regard to the long-term impact of divorce and separation on child well-being before directing parents who are the sole carers into employment. In particular we are concerned for the safeguarding of children in areas where there is gang violence, drugs activity etc.**

## **3) Develop skills**

SPAN is concerned that the regulations under the Welfare Reform Bill limit the ability of single parents to undertake education and training as they are much less flexible than the rules that exist under Income Support. For instance, not being able to undertake a full-time degree course. This is counterproductive 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 (Guillari) showed that single parents identified opportunities for good training and higher education as the best way to move into sustainable jobs. Without the emphasis on skill development we think that single parents will remain in low quality jobs and cycle back to welfare.

We believe that rather than advising single parents with young children to be involved in work related activity, that support should be given for long-term career planning that will enable parents to consider further and higher education as part of their employment routes.

## **4) Good Quality Part-time work**

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

SPAN are pleased that revisions in the Welfare Reform Bill will mean that single parents can restrict the hours that they work to fit in with their caring responsibilities. However, we are disappointed that the amendments do not address a significant barrier to single parents thriving in the workplace; good quality and flexible job roles. This does not show joined up working with either the Department for Work and Pensions Gender Equality Duty, which provides a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity for men and women, nor the body of research evidence that shows single parents tend to get low paid and low skilled jobs (because these are the jobs that are open to part-time working). Over 40% of women in employment work reduced hours to combine caring and working, but there is a lack of “good quality” part time work. 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.

Work is not a guaranteed route out of poverty. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>2</sup> has shown that half of single parents are not in a position to generate sufficient income to be above the income poverty line while meeting their basic obligations to their children (for example by paying for their children to be looked after) “*however long or hard they work.*”

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 projections from their research is that 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 flexibility<sup>3</sup>.

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 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). They could advertise their own vacancies on a part-time or flexible basis.

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 and should be included in the provisions or guidance notes of the Welfare Reform Bill.

For further information or to clarify points made in this briefing please contact:

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<sup>2</sup> Time and income poverty by Tania Burchardt. November 2008. JRF.

<sup>3</sup> Dave Simmond et al (Nov 2008) Can work eradicate child poverty?

