

Single Parent Action Network Response to the Emergency Budget Responsibility, Freedom and Fairness?

The Coalition Government have aspired to do much for families living in poverty but the **emergency budget's priorities do not address the needs of children in poverty, nor the needs of the three million children who are being brought up in a single parent household, nearly a quarter of all families, with over 90% headed by women.** These are already struggling families with 52% of their children living in poverty. Many will be worse off under the proposed measures. Families on low income, including single parent households, will have to live on less, with the freezing of child benefit, the erosion in the value of benefits and tax credits over time, the removal of key maternity benefits if you have more than one child, the abolition of the health in pregnancy grant and the announcement that in the future those on Job Seekers Allowance for over a year will have their housing benefit cut by 10%. These measures will have a detrimental impact on some of the poorest families in the country.

A stated aim of the emergency budget is to get people off welfare and into work. Single parents will be expected to go to work when their youngest child starts school (from October 2011). The Government estimate that this will save £380 million by 2015 and would help up to 15,000 into employment. From SPAN's perspective this policy is flawed. Firstly there are not sufficient jobs (with 5 million on benefits and half a million vacancies), and public sector cuts and VAT rises will only increase redundancies and benefit claimants. Secondly there is a lack of part-time jobs that fit around childcare needs, especially ones that pay sufficiently and have any prospects.

We would argue that as well as being too rigid an answer for some single parents, that **the welfare to work policy is not in itself an anti-poverty measure.** Work is not necessarily a route out of poverty. There are more families living in poverty whose parents are working than there are living on benefits, with the very real danger that the new measures will push single parents moving from welfare into work into even greater poverty. **Changes to personal allowances will be of little benefit to single parent families on the lowest wages living in rented accommodation, the majority of whom will be receipt of housing and council tax benefits.** Since these are means tested, any rise in take-home pay will result in a loss of entitlement to these benefits. Single parents earning under £25,000 will also gain little from the change in the threshold. Those on the lowest income will gain some benefit from the increase in the Child Tax Credit but not all.

Many single parents already work (57%) and many want to do so but are constrained by the lack of jobs that would enable them to combine paid work with their caring responsibilities. **Making work pay has to do with the nature of work that they can do to fit in with the care of their children.** Parents who are entering employment have no right to request flexible working for six months and not at all if they are a contract worker. Many single parents are already being directed into contract work, with poor pay, atypical working hours and poor working conditions. The lack of affordable, accessible quality childcare outside of school hours will place children in potential danger. Parents will also need to find care in the holidays and when their young children are ill. It is difficult to know at this stage what safeguards there will be for single parents as they move onto JSA and into work. The majority of current welfare to work programmes will be replaced by the new Work Programme which could be de-sensitised to the needs of parents with children.

This budget fails to nurture responsibility, freedom and fairness for families in poverty. Pushing single parents into work when their children are 5 and punishing them if they don't comply is not a quick fix. Fairer more sustainable measures would be to support training, volunteering and stepping stones into jobs that have prospects and family friendly conditions, encouraging choice rather than the first job offered, and enabling parents to honour their responsibilities to their children.

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