



SPAN

Single Parent Action Network

Millpond, Baptist Street, Easton, Bristol BS5 0YW Tel: 0117 951 4231 Fax: 0117 935 5208 E-mail: info@spanuk.org.uk
www.spanuk.org.uk www.onespace.org.uk

The Single Parent Action Network (SPAN) Registered Charity 1092929

This is a response on behalf of the Single Parent Action Network (SPAN). The charity works with single parents living in poverty to improve their lives. We have a membership of over two thousand including both single parent projects and individual single parent members. We have a Study Centre for single parents and offer training courses including those for parents wanting to return to work. Between January 2010 and January 2011 we helped 346 learners. Of these learners 81% had a level 2 or under qualification and 16% had no qualifications at all. Our online forums on issues (with around 12,000 unique visitors each month) and our research work give us good insight into the lives of single parents and their children and how policy, including skills and training could be improved to help address their poverty.

SPAN is happy to discuss the consultation response in further detail and submit details of our work with single parents if this would be helpful.

1. What risks and opportunities does this proposal present for colleges and training providers or Next Step prime contractors?

From working with single parents we know that many want to undertake training and further education but that there is a lack of availability and funding (including funding for childcare). There is a risk that the skills and conditionality policy will not work because of a lack of suitable training, lack of funding for longer-term training or training that is not available at the right level. From our research we know it is critical that single parents should have access to further and higher education training to secure better paid, sustainable employment that lifts them out of poverty. Opportunities to train before entering the job market are a valuable way of helping single parents move into sustainable employment. However, evaluations of the New Deal have shown that the level of training available is too lowⁱ. Once single parents have entered work it is very difficult for those who juggle work and family single-handedly to find the time to progress through trainingⁱⁱ. It is vital to provide good quality training before entering work. Our research has shown that those in low-paid jobs did not get any opportunities to trainⁱⁱⁱ.

Within the new skills policy ESOL funding is restricted to formal training where English language skills form a barrier to finding work and for short periods of time. At SPAN we have run yearlong ESOL training courses as community partners of City of Bristol College and have helped to equip disadvantaged women and single parents to engage in society and ultimately to find work. We provide childcare for the parents attending the courses, which have proved vital to sustain attendance on the course. City of Bristol College have cut the funding to our ESOL courses so that we are now only able to provide three rather than four courses a year (with twelve places on each course). We have an ever-growing waiting list of people to attend (at least two people to every one place). We receive no funding for the childcare element of the courses so this is directly subsidised by SPAN.

2. How can we minimise any risks for the skills system, while optimising the impact on participation and completion rates and employment outcomes?

The consultation assumes that Jobcentre Advisers and training providers are best placed to know what training is suitable for a client. Many of the learners who we meet in our Study Centre or through our research work know what training and skills they need in order to increase their chances of getting employment, particularly access to level 3 training and above. However, when they are getting advice from Jobcentre Plus they are pointed to unsuitable training, which does not fit in with their caring responsibilities, or to short term courses which offer them little development. For instance we have a case of a single parent being sent on training by in the middle of the day during school holidays where no childcare was offered. The parent was unable to complete full days of the course that did not help with her training needs.

It will also be important that skills' training is not seen as a punishment (as implied by the sanctions regime) but something that can help the job seeker.

4. What do we need to do to ensure that Jobcentre Plus advisers provide people with the best opportunities to improve their skills, whilst ensuring local decision-making and flexibility?

At SPAN we know through our interaction with single parents of the value of specialised single parent advisers within Job Centre Plus but particularly when these services are delivered by the advisers within Children's Centres. Specialist advice is particularly important for single parents as they have different work related obligations dependent on the age of their child. We are concerned that more generalist jobcentre plus advisers will not be as effective and understanding the training needs of single parents. The value of the specialist single parent advisers is highlighted in recent research evidence^{iv}. Giving single parents good advice and having specialist knowledge for instance knowing about local childcare is a positive thing.

At SPAN we see the importance of single parents having a clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities when they deal with Jobcentre Plus advisers. We are concerned that flexibility in local decision making can leave single parents confused and can result in inconsistent advice. For instance, some advisers not informing single parents that they can restrict their hours to take account of their caring responsibilities. Any local flexibility needs to be in the context of single parents having a good understanding of what they can expect from advisers as well as what is expected of them. Clear written guidance of rights and responsibilities is essential.

7. What is the best way to ensure effective feedback takes place so that everyone gets the information they need with the minimal amount of bureaucracy?

See answer to question 4 into clear guidance/ information.

8. What further steps do we need to take to ensure that claimants are clear on the requirements placed on them once they are referred to careers advice and/or skills provision and the consequences of failing to attend?

At SPAN we are conducting research on the impact for moving from Income Support onto Job Seekers Allowance and the impact for training and education opportunities. We are finding that even the threat of sanctions has a negative impact on single parents. Some of the single parents are taking up the first job available, which can be low skilled and unsustainable, rather than moving onto Job Seekers Allowance. We are concerned that a training provision with a sanctions regime will have a similar impact. Other research^v shows that sanctions meant that children would go without essentials and increased parents' ill health.

Although we note that provision will be made for vulnerable clients in terms of sanctions we are unclear how you would make this work in practice and how Jobcentre Advisers will be consistent in what they consider is "a good cause" for turning down training. Recently we have had a case of a single parent with poor literacy who needed to complete a form to get tax credits. She was unable to get help with completing the complex form and as a result submitted an incomplete form and she suffered a sanction. In terms of your vulnerable groups we would want you to include those with poor literacy and those whose first language is not English.

9. Are there any other points you wish to make about the implementation of skills conditionality?

There are 1.9 million single parents raising nearly 3 million children. Single parents have added difficulties in single handedly looking after their children and undertaking training and improving their skills. Although there is recognition in the consultation around childcare there is not an explicit commitment to fund this provision.

"We anticipate that travel and childcare costs will be met for those mandated to training. However, this is subject to availability of funding. Our intention is that claimants will not be mandated to training unless their associated travel and childcare costs can be met by Jobcentre Plus. "

If there were to be this safeguard then we would want to know that this is communicated to single parents. We are also concerned that this is an "intention" rather than something, which is explicit. In terms of childcare there is a lack of flexible childcare (which could be needed for short term training). Childcare is also more scarce in deprived areas. For instance, there are ten primary schools in the area surrounding our

charity in Bristol. Only one of the schools has after school provision.

For single parents that we work with we can see the value of longer-term skills training. For instance for someone who is learning English as a second language or who has very poor literacy a 10 week course will achieve little. In terms of the broader welfare sanctions we are concerned that short-term training will take priority and will not help single parents into sustainable employment. Single parents will also be mindful that unless they get a job in a year they will face a cut in their housing benefit. How will longer-term training fit in with the housing benefit sanctions?

Laura Dewar

Policy & Parliamentary Officer

Single Parent Action Network

Millpond, Baptist Street, Easton

Bristol, BS5 0YW

Tel: 07947 675925

e-mail: l.dewar@spanuk.org.uk

ⁱ Evans M, Eyre J, Millar J and Sarre, S (2003) New Deal for Lone Parents: Second Synthesis report of the national evaluation, DWP, London.

ⁱⁱ Hoggart et al (2006) Staying in work and moving up. DWP research report 381.

ⁱⁱⁱ Giullari S. Proofed for parents by parents: participatory one parent proofing: findings, SPAN, Bristol.

^{iv} Finn, D, R Gloster (2010) Lone Parent Obligations: A review of recent evidence on the work related requirements within the benefit system of different countries Research Report 632 DWP.

^v Joyce L and Whiting K (2006) Sanctions: qualitative summary report on lone parent customers, DWP working paper 27Stanley