

Tackling Child Poverty and Improving Life Chances: Consulting on a New Approach

Consultation Response Form

The closing date for this consultation is: 15
February 2011

Your comments must reach us by that date.

THIS FORM IS NOT INTERACTIVE. If you wish to respond electronically please use the online response facility available on the Department for Education e-consultation website: (<http://www.education.gov.uk/consultations>).

Information provided in response to this consultation, including personal information, may be subject to publication or disclosure in accordance with the access to information regimes, primarily the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data Protection Act 1998.

If you want all, or any part, of your response to be treated as confidential, please explain why you consider it to be confidential.

If a request for disclosure of the information you have provided is received, your explanation about why you consider it to be confidential will be taken into account, but no assurance can be given that confidentiality can be maintained. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the Department.

The Department will process your personal data (name and address and any other identifying material) in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998, and in the majority of circumstances, this will mean that your personal data will not be disclosed to third parties.

Please tick if you want us to keep your response confidential.

Reason for confidentiality:

Name	Laura Dewar Parliamentary and Policy Officer Sue Cohen Chief Executive Officer
Organisation (if applicable)	Single Parent Action Network
Address:	SPAN, Millpond, Baptist Street, Easton, Bristol, BS50YW

If your enquiry is related to the policy content of the consultation you can telephone: 0370 000 2288 or email:

Childpoverty.strategy@childpovertyunit.gsi.gov.uk

If you have a query relating to the consultation process you can contact the Consultation Unit by telephone: 0370 000 2288 or e-mail:

consultation.unit@education.gsi.gov.uk

Please select ONE the box which best describes you as a respondent

<input type="checkbox"/> Local authorities and organisations of local authorities	<input type="checkbox"/> Families and organisations representing families and children	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Voluntary and community sector organisations
<input type="checkbox"/> Research bodies and academics	<input type="checkbox"/> Public bodies and named partners in the Child Poverty Act	<input type="checkbox"/> Employers and business organisations
<input type="checkbox"/> Practitioners working with children, young people and families	<input type="checkbox"/> Central Government	<input type="checkbox"/> Social Enterprises
<input type="checkbox"/> Other		

Please Specify:

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 family projects and individual single parent members. Our online forums on our One Space site funded by the Department for Education, (now with around 15,000 unique visitors each month) and our participatory research work on welfare reform funded by the BLF, give us good insights into the lives of single parents and their children and how policy could be improved to help address their poverty and life chances.

We have a Study Centre based in the inner city and offer training courses including a range for parents wanting to return to work. Between January 2010 and January 2011 the Study Centre helped 346 learners move forward in their lives. We deliver highly regarded parenting courses helping 600 parents in the last year in the South West region. Many of these parents have children on the Child Protection Plan (on a recent course 13 out of the 14 participants had children on a Plan).

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.

Building our Approach

1 What do you think are the key points from the [Frank Field Review](#) which the Government needs to incorporate into the child poverty strategy?

The Single Parent Action Network thinks that it is important that the Review considers the position of single parents and their children as a special group needing particular support because they have a high risk of living in poverty. Half of children in single parent families are poor, compared to 25% of children in couple families. There are 1.9 million single parents raising nearly 3 million children. 9 out of 10 single parents are women.

SPAN agrees the importance of investment in the 'Foundation Years' for children's development and well-being. From our work with single parents we also see the importance of investing in the parents of these children during these early years. From our participatory research¹ SPAN knows 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. From the DWP's own research the positive results of training and getting people into sustainable employment are evident.

In Oregon, USA, participants are encouraged to take good jobs above the minimum wage and with potential for advancement. "Case managers assigned many people to short periods in education, vocational training, work experience and life skills training to improve their employability"ⁱ. Evaluation of their employment schemes over five years showed their results to be greater than the six other state experiment evaluationsⁱⁱ.

Although we support investment in the Foundation Years we also think that investment is needed once children have reached five and throughout their childhood, otherwise there is a danger that gains made in the early years will be wasted. It should also be considered that parents can become single parents when their children are at any age and are then at an increased risk of poverty, not just during the Foundation Years.

An increasing number of single parents have to seek work as a condition of their benefit entitlement, from next year when their youngest child reaches five years of age. An overall concern is not only the financial poverty that they and their families suffer but also the expectation that they will increasingly have less time to spend with their children which will impact on their life chances. To improve the life chances of the children of single parents it is important that they are allowed time together as a family.

SPAN's research shows that time poverty is a significant risk for single parent families, that it has a negative impact and results in poorer outcomes for children. Children living in single parent families are at greater risk of suffering the impact of time poverty, because single parents have to juggle employment

¹

and childcare responsibilities single-handedly. Current policies fail to fully recognise the importance that children and single parents place on 'time to care' and the everyday impact that time poverty has on the children's own experiences of social exclusion, as they end up taking on domestic and childcare responsibilities. In SPAN's EU funded transnational researchⁱⁱⁱ with children living in single parent families, children of secondary age told us that when their parents were working some of them ended up caring for their younger siblings; others had no quality time with their parents. They felt strongly that this compounded their social exclusion from peer activities, which were paramount to their happiness and well-being, and also prevented them from achieving in education.

Give greater value to the time that single parents spend with their children.

Welfare reform needs to consider the important caring role that single parents undertake, and in particular reconsider the negative impact of the policy of getting single parents of younger children into work.

2 What are your thoughts on the best way to incorporate early intervention into the child poverty strategy? (Note: We expect that the Graham Allen Review's interim report will be published before our consultation closes on the 15th February 2011. Respondents are welcome to include any reflections on the report in their responses).

Comments:

SPAN agrees in principle with early investment in children's lives although it is not clear from Graham Allen's Review how funding will be secured for this. We are especially concerned that in spite of the value given to parenting, there is as yet no coherent policy of how investment can take place in a fair and comprehensive way. We note the importance that is placed on evidence to show the impact of parenting programmes which we support. A recent evaluation of one of our programmes shows the ways in which parents can turn their lives around following these courses.

For example

When we deliver the highly regarded Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities (SFSC) Parenting Programme we expect certain results or changes within the family. SFSC is an evidence based programme and we know that the changes are positive. We expect parents to improve discipline techniques, to think about what's important to the family culturally and spiritually and we expect relationships to be enhanced. We also, because of the

Community Involvement component, expect parents to get involved in what's going on in their communities. Our courses have enabled many parents to improve their parenting skills and have resulted in children being taken off their Child Protection Plans.

With one of our programmes we worked in a deprived inner city area in partnership with a Children's Centre who was able to track the longer-term benefits of our parenting programme. 5 parents went on to do First Aid and 8 went on to do the Cook 4 Life course. Two parents are attending an Away Day with the Children's Centre to be empowered around being advocates for the centre. One parent has become a Home Start volunteer, 1 has become Chair of Governors at the centre and 2 parents attended the Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities Annual Conference organised by the Race Equality Foundation with one of them getting up to speak to around 300 people.

Many voluntary sector providers, like our own, know the difference that our work makes, but we are not funded to carry out formal assessments. Any early intervention strategy needs to fund not only the direct programmes but also the SORI evaluation of these programmes. In terms of demonstrating impact Graham Allen would do a service to voluntary sector providers if he could emphasise the importance of this funding. SPAN and other voluntary sector providers would be able to provide more positive information regarding progression rather than relying on the goodwill of Children's Centre managers (or other partners) and anecdotal evidence. This would help to show the programmes that provide the best outcomes and impact for parents and ultimately the best value for money.

The Child Poverty Act 2010

3 Do you agree with our working definition of socio-economic disadvantage?
(paragraph 4.2 and 4.3)

Yes

No

X Not Sure

Comments:

SPAN would refer to our answer to question 1. We think it is important that families are also allowed time together and that financial poverty is not just replaced with time poverty. The evidence already shows from our own EU funded research with Lincoln University (2007), that if this happens children's well-being can be affected and that their educational attainment may suffer which will not help lift them out of poverty as they get older.

4 Are these the right areas for the child poverty strategy to cover?
(paragraph 4.4)

Yes

X No

Comments:

SPAN thinks that employment law changes and infrastructure need to be included in the strategy if child poverty is to be realistically addressed. Otherwise single parents will continue to have poorly paid, unskilled work, often with poor work conditions which fails to lift their family out of poverty. Critical to this approach is a work model that has a gendered approach – that sees that women are more likely to take responsibility for the family. A Parent Worker model (the Scandinavian model) needs to replace the Adult Worker model that we have in this country. Many of the challenges that single parents face are the result of structural inequalities that lead to a high level of women's poverty in the UK.

The Parent Worker Model. There are equally high numbers of single parents in Scandinavian countries. Underpinning this model is a knowledge base that understands that adults should be supported as paid workers **and** parents, through good quality childcare provision and employment opportunities, valuing parental care with generous parental leave policies. In Sweden, whether a 2 parent or 1 parent family, parents are entitled to 480 days parental leave 80% of which can be taken any time before the child is 8, paid at 80% of earnings. 120 days of parental leave can be taken when a child is sick 60 of which if childcare has broken down, again paid at 80% of earnings. Almost all families take this until the child is 2 after which extensive, affordable childcare is available.

SPAN is very concerned that the jobs that are open to single parents entering

the job market and the work first philosophy of welfare providers, will further consign mothers on low income to long term poverty. We think that these measures will prove a false economy. Given the present dearth of jobs with good advancement opportunities and no right to request with a new employer, single parents are limited in the jobs that they can apply for, trapping them into low paid, insecure, vulnerable employment.

Evaluations of the New Deal for Lone Parents found that single parent mothers tended to move into low-paid, low- skilled jobs. In addition the nature of jobs that are presently available can mean that they are asked to change their working pattern at short notice. Our research with single parents has meant that they are consequently unable to sustain the job.

It is also an issue of financial capability, as we have found in our debt advice work with CAB. Single parents working in the care sector have told us of their experiences of unpredictable hours of work and of the great pressure placed on them to work out-of hours. This type of work means that single parents may not have the time to invest in their children or secure adequate income to sustain their family.

In terms of employment solutions SPAN thinks that it is important to take a longer term view to improve life chances and help turn around the prospects of families in poverty. We would suggest two important changes:

Increase access to training and education for single parents and allow them to find employment that will be sustainable for them and their family.

Improve employment rights. Extend the right to request part-time hours that fit around family life to all employers from when a job is advertised, which would have the added advantage of widening the range of jobs becoming available; include the way in which hours could be worked (such as a later start time to enable a parent to take their child to school). Also, include protection for parents from a change in the hours of work. There is legislation in other countries (for e.g. France) that shift patterns cannot be changed and an employee can turn them down if they are at odds with family life. Extend parental leave for parents of children of all ages and make this right available on a daily rather than a weekly basis. This will help make employment sustainable for single parents and help prevent them cycling back onto welfare.

Reviewing the role of the Child Poverty Commission

5 Do you agree that the role and the remit of the Child Poverty Commission should be broadened to reflect the new approach?

Yes

No

Not Sure

Comments:

The Commission needs to be established as soon as possible.

What is important in determining children's life chances?

6 What do you think makes the most difference to the life chances of children?

Comments:

From our work on poverty and disadvantage for over 20 years, we know that improving the conditions of life and life chances of parents leads subsequently to the greatest improvement in their children's prospects. Income poverty remains a central consideration. Single parents' caring responsibilities, inflexible working conditions and lack of skills and training support are all central causes of the poverty experienced by their children. More holistic measures are needed dove-tailing together across government departments to address single parent and thereby child poverty, including a gender impact analysis of government funded training initiatives; extension of the right to request part-time work to cover parents with older children; single parents being enabled to work more hours per week before benefit is withdrawn; and, clearer information on tax credits. We hope that the Universal Credit will address some of the latter issues.

It is also important to talk to children and young people about what they think improve their life chances. The principles of Every Child Matters were founded on interviews with young people. SPAN's involvement in the EU funded transnational research project interviewing children of their experience of poverty (2007) found that it was the older children rather than the younger children who were cognisant of being poor. They faced the constant worry that

they would not be able to afford to go out with friends and were aware they enjoyed less family days out, less regular family holidays and less pocket money than their peers.

- It is exclusion from friendship that matters most to children and young people, and their stories highlight how poverty has a significant negative impact on their capacity to make and sustain friendships, which has serious implications for their social mobility in later life.
- Comparatively poor home environments can add to children's sense of social exclusion. They complain about shared bedrooms, a lack of space at home to play or that peers have greater living space. Housing policies should be reviewed with these findings in mind, given the increasing gap in facilities between home owners and those in social housing/private rented accommodation. Strong recommendations also come from children for investment in leisure activities, youth clubs, swimming pools etc. and for cheap accessible transport to get there, particularly in rural areas.
- Some children from single parent families worry about their parents' social isolation and recommend more community support groups where family members can socialise and make new friendships which in turn can relieve pressure on children. More investment is needed in family peer-support groups, helping to develop community solutions with regard to emotional and social support, rather than the increasing child adult separated policy model.
- In general, single parent children are very positive about school, especially younger children. However, there are many examples of poverty associated disadvantage experienced in and outside school by secondary school children, likely to negatively impact on their school performance as well as their post-school life expectations. Yet some teachers, as well as educational support professionals, fail to appreciate the links between family poverty and the school experiences of single parent children. Instead they can hold some stigmatising notions that when single parent children do exhibit achievement or behavioural problems it is predominantly because of negative factors associated with the child having only one parent.
- Greater awareness is needed amongst teaching and educational professionals about: the potential for discrimination in schools because of poverty and low expectations; the diversity of single parent families; the role of the extended family and friends; the impact of single parent's time poverty; and, avoidance of institutional discrimination. These issues should be acknowledged in educational material, with training for teachers to gain insight into single parent children's lives, and a teachers' guide to family diversity.

Emerging proposals for radical reforms to the system

7 Are there additional measures, compatible with our fiscal approach, which could help us combat poverty and improve life chances?

Yes

No

X Not Sure

Comments:

Poverty of experience limits aspirations and opportunities. People in poverty become ghettoised, contributing to the lack of social mobility. Research by the RSA on connected communities continues to find that it is not what you know but who you know. On a deprived peripheral estate in Bristol, 25% did not know anyone who could help them to contact someone with influence and power. If parents do not know people who can further opportunities, then children will have much more limited horizons. Single mothers and BME families are particularly disadvantaged in this respect due to the structural inequalities in society.

Further research is needed on addressing poverty of experience and limited social mobility but a few ways forward are:

- After school homework clubs for children in deprived areas with individual coaching opportunities
- Activities that take children into positive environments outside of their experience
- Community networks and empowerment groups that introduce parents and children from disadvantaged areas to new creative environments and activities
- The continuation of community empowerment funding linking women's groups, BME groups, parents groups - with local decision-makers and people of influence

At the same time it is important not to denigrate traditional working class qualifications and skills. These skills have historically been a passport to a better life for upper working class families. But with the loss of manufacturing skills in this country there is a huge vacuum, leading to intergenerational unemployment and lost ambition.

A significantly increased apprenticeship programme could have a huge SROI impact, nurturing new and traditional skills e.g. plumbing, building skills, new media skills, environmental improvement skills

8 What further steps can be taken to help local authorities to reduce poverty and improve life chances?

Comments:

Public sector providers need to assess and improve the delivery of their services to some of the most deprived families in the country by examining how initiatives:

- Offer opportunities to gain medium/high level qualifications and work related skills
- Develop links with local learning providers including those in further/higher education
- Provide access to information on courses available and allocate funding or provide information to cover training fees
- Provide opportunities for soft-skills development (i.e. personal development including increasing self esteem) by ensuring that those with low self-esteem and low level depression can engage in activities that boost their self-confidence through referrals to locally provided soft-skills training
- Provide related transport and childcare costs
- Address needs for holistic advice to deal with acute need such as ill mental and physical health; disability; debt; domestic violence and homelessness
- Build an understanding of the impact of these barriers and of the time it takes to tackle them into the design and review of targets and time frames
- Work more creatively with family self-help groups, community empowerment groups and local statutory/voluntary advice agencies

9 How can the voluntary, community and private sectors contribute most effectively to local approaches to tackling child poverty and improving life chances?

Comments:

Local voluntary organisations like SPAN who work in deprived areas and with people with complex lives (including alcohol and drug dependency) are well placed to build up trust and ensure that people get the support they need to turn their lives around. Many of these people would not initially go to statutory services as they may see them as having a potentially authoritative role over their lives.

The SPAN Study Centre - Vision and Delivery

SPAN's vision is to engage and empower families living in poverty and isolation, from different backgrounds and cultures, to improve their lives and play a greater part in society. This overall vision is presently realised in the SPAN Study Centre based in the inner city of Bristol involving local single parents in a range of activities and actions including:

A '**holistic learning package**' focussing on the needs of parents living in disadvantaged situations. Services currently on offer are:

- **Informal engagement activities and personal development**, including weekly 'Time 4 me' (formally known as parent drop-ins), courses focusing on health and well-being and the development of new skills.
- **Soft skills training and employment readiness**, including courses focusing on confidence-building, assertiveness, communication skills and career planning to support personal progression towards greater financial independence.
- Support to parents with low qualifications or lack of English language skills to access basic skills training – **ESOL, numeracy, literacy and ICT** – at SPAN Study Centre and in other accessible community venues including Children's Centres.
- The development of **Childcare Training** in the community in partnership with Bristol City Council and City of Bristol College, supporting local parents' employment prospects and contributing to a qualified and culturally sensitive childcare workforce in the inner-city area of Bristol.
- **Volunteering opportunities** allowing single parents to develop new skills and prepare for work or further education. Volunteers can work towards a Certificate in Community Volunteering.
- **1:1 support and signposting to other services**. Our Outreach Development Worker can offer 1:1 support session and through partnership with other agencies and organisations we are also able to offer on-site counselling, money and debt advice and legal advice to single parents.
- **Free Childcare** in our high quality multi-cultural crèche when single parents access our services.
- **User involvement and participatory consultations/workshops** allowing parents to have a say about the services we offer and making sure that they meet local needs.

10 Please use this space for any other comments you would like to make.

Comments:

11 Please let us have your views on responding to this consultation (e.g. the number and type of questions, was it easy to find, understand, complete etc.)

Comments:

Thank you for taking the time to let us have your views. We do not intend to acknowledge individual responses unless you place an 'X' in the box below.

Please acknowledge this reply x

Here at the Department for Education we carry out our research on many different topics and consultations. As your views are valuable to us, would it be alright if we were to contact you again from time to time either for research or to send through consultation documents?

X Yes

 No

All DfE public consultations are required to conform to the following criteria within the Government Code of Practice on Consultation:

Criterion 1: Formal consultation should take place at a stage when there is scope to influence the policy outcome.

Criterion 2: Consultations should normally last for at least 12 weeks with consideration given to longer timescales where feasible and sensible.

Criterion 3: Consultation documents should be clear about the consultation process, what is being proposed, the scope to influence and the expected costs and benefits of the proposals.

Criterion 4: Consultation exercises should be designed to be accessible to, and clearly targeted at, those people the exercise is intended to reach.

Criterion 5: Keeping the burden of consultation to a minimum is essential if consultations are to be effective and if consultees' buy-in to the process is to be obtained.

Criterion 6: Consultation responses should be analysed carefully and clear feedback should be provided to participants following the consultation.

Criterion 7: Officials running consultations should seek guidance in how to run an effective consultation exercise and share what they have learned from the experience.

If you have any comments on how DfE consultations are conducted, please contact Donna Harrison, DfE Consultation Co-ordinator, tel: 01928 738212 / email: donna.harrison@education.gsi.gov.uk

Thank you for taking time to respond to this consultation.

Completed questionnaires and other responses should be sent to the address shown below by 15 February 2011

Send by post to: Consultation Unit, Floor GB, Castle View House, East Lane, Runcorn, Cheshire WA7 2GJ.

Send by e-mail to: Childpoverty.strategy@childpovertyunit.gsi.gov.uk

ⁱ Finn, D, Glositer, R. Lone Parent Obligations Research Paper 632 DWP.

ⁱⁱ As above