



**SPAN**  
Single Parent Action Network

## **Welfare Reform Bill: Briefing for MPs**

February 2009

### **About Single Parent Action Network (SPAN)**

Single Parent Action Network is a diverse organisation working to empower one parent families throughout the UK. SPAN envisages a society that values the vital contribution of one parent families and enables them to participate fully in all areas of life.

## **Introduction**

This briefing contains a summary of Single Parent Action Network (SPAN) views on the Welfare Reform Bill. First we outline our key concerns over this Welfare Reform, then comment on those specific provisions of the Bill, which are most relevant to the single parents we represent.

We undertake participatory research and policy programs with marginalised lone parent families to raise their capacity to have a say on their experiences of policies and services, and to increase understanding of the difficulties that they face in trying to move forward.

Marginalised single parents tell us that most of all they want respect, and support tailored to their specific circumstances; support that will enable them to move into a well-paid sustainable job, *when they feel they are ready to do so*.

**SPAN therefore welcomes the focus on personalised support, and work related activities in this Bill, but we completely oppose its proposals to increase conditionality and sanctions. We believe that the two are in contradiction to each other, and therefore this reform is not going to work. This approach devalues the unpaid care work that parents and carers undertake and its great contribution to the economy and society. Most of all it risks further distancing those who are hard to reach and/or experiencing multiple disadvantages, and those who want to care full-time for their children when they are young.**

- We are very concerned with the proposal of moving all single parents onto Job Seekers Allowance, and that mandatory work-related activities and sanctions will be applied to parents of children as young as 3.
- We believe that harder to reach single parents, who are experiencing acute barriers to work, will be far more at risk of sanctions and of enduring those sanctions with disastrous effects on their children's financial and social and well-being. Indeed they may disappear from the benefit system all together.
- Despite the good intentions of increasing claimants control and choice, we believe that marginalised single parents are more likely to have work-related activities imposed on them by their adviser or their private providers.
- We believe that hard to reach single parents with older children will be far more likely to end up in low paid part-time work or on the "work for your benefit schemes". This will have a negative impact on family well-being because it will increase parents' time-poverty significantly without increasing their income, and increase the risks to children when their parent is not at home.

## **Work related activity (clauses 2-6)**

This section of the Bill allows for regulations requiring participation in work-related activity, for Employment Support Allowance (ESA) claimants and for parents of young children, including single parents with children aged 3 to 6. Failure to undertake such activity will incur sanctions. The White Paper *Raising expectations and increasing support*, also indicates that advisers and private providers will have the power to direct parents to take specific work-related activities, in specific circumstances; For example if they believe that the activities chosen by the claimant are ineffective, or the client does not address an agreed significant barrier.

- The high level of advisers' discretion sets an unequal power relationship, in contradiction with the vision of personalised support, where claimants have a say and control.
- There is also a real risk of adviser misinterpreting legislation and guidance.
- This will make it much harder to build a good rapport and trust to reach effective agreement between advisers and claimants.
- It is those harder to reach single parents, who are less likely to have the confidence, the skills and the information to address advisers' practice that are more likely to be subjected to undertake activities, which they believe are not appropriate to their needs.
- Mandatory activities are least likely to generate enthusiasm and participation, therefore less likely to be effective.
- A claimant charter should be introduced setting out the rights of claimants and level of service that they can expect from providers. Claimants should have a right to appeal on sanction decisions, be entitled to high quality, individually tailored support, treated with dignity and respect by all providers. A copy of this charter should be given to each claimant on first contact with providers.

## **Work related activity (clauses 2-6): Sanctions**

Although conditionality might have a positive impact on traditional Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) clients as the Gregg's review has found, single parents are a very different group.

- At present we have no evidence on the impact of conditionality to attend training for lone parents. What evidence we have on the impact on conditionality for lone parents relates to work focused interviews (WFI). Synthesis of WFI effectiveness found that it did not succeed in persuading those lone parents that did not want to work,  $\frac{2}{3}$  of these saying it made no difference at all<sup>i</sup>.
- Most of all we are concerned that those experiencing multiple disadvantages might endure sanctions. Recent qualitative research<sup>ii</sup> on effects of WFI sanctions is supporting our concern. It found that those affected by sanctions tend to be the least work ready, i.e. having been on benefits longer, or never worked, having children with poor health, debt issues and very poor knowledge about the benefit system. Even more worryingly those who lived with the sanctions did so not because

they made an active decision not to attend the WFI, 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. In this respect we are particularly concerned that the White Paper suggests an intention to testing out mandatory full-time activity for those who repeatedly do not meet their obligations.

- Evidence<sup>iii</sup> indicates that although advisers used it as a last resort, the impact of sanctions was damaging: poverty of all family members increased; many had to go without essentials; many were unable to provide trips for the children or pocket money; their stress levels increased, compounding existing depression/anxieties. In the light of the strong reaction to last year's UNICEF report which placed the UK at the bottom of 21 advanced nations, the implications of benefit cuts on those who are not work ready and their children need to be taken seriously.
- Perceived pressure can be counter-productive. Many of our members worry about going to JobCentre Plus, as they fear that they will be pressurised into work. We believe that this increase in conditionality is likely to put many lone parents off, and reduce trust in work related activities, and in the organisations that deliver them.

### **Work for your benefit schemes (clause 1)**

This section of the Bill enables the establishment of full-time 'work for your benefit schemes' for those who have been on Job Seekers Allowance for 24 months without finding employment, therefore including single parents with children as young as 9. This is wrong and very likely to affect single parents disproportionately.

- Single parents are currently caring for 3 million children. Care is work. But single parents are neither being adequately financially rewarded for this work, nor valued. To force them in a full-time job that is effectively unpaid is to increase that devaluing even further.
- Single parents, who engage in paid work, tell us of the struggle of juggling employment and caring responsibilities single-handedly. This often entails high levels of time poverty, with parents feeling that they have not enough time to be there for their children when they are sick, to support them in education or other activities, have quality time together, or even keep them safe<sup>iv</sup>. Single parents' time poverty affects children significantly. They end up spending more time with friends than their parent, or even take care of chores or younger siblings. They already question whether the increase in financial well-being is really worth this loss of quality time<sup>v</sup>. How can we now ask these children and their parents to endure all of this for nothing?
- Single parents are more likely than other claimants to end up on these schemes. If a single parent with youngest child over 7 has been on JSA for 12 months, she will be transferred to a private

provider of Flexible New Deal (FND), who have no additional resources for supporting this group. Single Parents facing specific barriers to employment require additional support. Evidence indicates that they are more likely to be ‘parked’ by private providers, and therefore much more likely to end up on a ‘work for your benefits’ scheme.

### **Abolition of Income Support (clause 7)**

In terms of long-term aspirations, having a dual benefit system, which simply distinguishes between job seekers and those who cannot work on health/disability grounds, ignores parents and carers and devalues the vital contribution that their unpaid care work makes to our society and economy. Making this dual benefit system simple is problematic when the aim is also to make it flexible and personalised. The system is streamlined but not simplified, because it still needs many strands to provide additional safeguards for a variety of different groups, parents, carers, lone parents with children of different ages, drug users etc. This renders JSA rules extremely complicated to administer for staff, hence creating too much scope for unfair treatment. The benefit system should be transparent to claimants. Instead it is going to be very difficult for claimants to understand why they might be treated differently to others claiming the same benefit, hence a rising potential for mistaken expectations and misunderstandings, which can have detrimental impact on compliance and result in sanctions. Universal benefits provide a much better alternative.

### **Conclusion**

Single parents want to work, many already do so, and if they do not want to work it is because they want or need to prioritise taking care of their children over paid employment. An approach that makes it conditional for single parents to seek work when their children are aged 7 or above, and conditional for those with younger children to take up mandatory work-related activities, or otherwise face sanctions, is neither workable, nor respects the right single parents to choose what they know is best for their children. These proposals increase the risk of marginalising those hardest to reach and who need support the most. Some might disappear from the benefit system altogether, others will endure sanctions, with devastating impact on their finances rendering them time poor. Others may take up the first job available out of fear and insecurity, and when this proves unsustainable to them, cycle back into welfare. Single parents are already twice as likely to cycle back to welfare. Single mothers, make choices about work and childcare on the basis of what they believe is the right thing to do by their children. As research has found lone mothers hold diverse ideas of what is right. For some the right thing to do is to be a full time mother, for others it is to be a breadwinner and a mother<sup>1</sup>. It is risky if not impossible to ask those who hold the ideal of full motherhood to take up a job and go against what they and their social networks believe to be the right thing to do. After all historical evidence shows that over and over again people find ways to resist policies

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<sup>1</sup> Duncan S and Edwards R (1999) *Lone Mothers, Paid Work and Gendered Moral Rationalities*, Macmillan

that are at odds with what they believe to be right (Finch, 1989), even if they risk losing income.

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas A (2007) *Lone Parent Work Focused Interviews: Synthesis of findings*, DWP Research Report 443

<sup>ii</sup> Goodwin V (2008) *The effects of benefit sanctions on lone parents' employment decisions and moves into employment*, DWP Research Report 511

<sup>iii</sup> Joyce L and Whiting K (2006); Goodwin V (2008) cited above.

<sup>iv</sup> Guillari S. (2007) *Proofed for Parents by Parents: Participatory One parent Proofing: Findings*, SPAN; Taylor, F., Cohen, S., Crawford, K., Guillari, S. and Walker, J. (2007) *Integrating Children's Perspectives in Policy Making to Combat Social Exclusion Experienced by Single Parent Families: a Transnational Comparative Research Project*, Cyprus College, SPAN UK and University of Lincoln.

<sup>v</sup> Ridge T and Millar, J (2006) *A fine balance: managing work and family life*, *Poverty* 125: Autumn, CPAG London