

Work and Pensions Select Committee Inquiry
Work Programme: the experience of different user groups

Submission of evidence from Single Parent Action Network
(SPAN: registered charity 1092929)

1. Summary

- 1.1. SPAN has interviewed single parents across England about their experience of the Work Programme (WP) and is sharing findings for this inquiry.
- 1.2. Given their experience of the WP, we are not surprised that single parents fair less well than the average WP user, nor that their satisfaction with the programme is low.
- 1.3. The evidence illustrates three realities:
 - That the WP does not take adequate account of their need to care for their children as well as participate in the programme;
 - That single parents are too often denied appropriate flexibility in the work that they are expected to obtain; and
 - Their experience of the programme is characterised by a lack of clarity over rules to which they are required to abide and a lack of predictability about the services that they should expect to receive.
- 1.4. All these findings are evidence of a lack of fairness and consistency in the treatment of single parents and help explain why the service is not achieving success. If the scheduling of participation clashes with caring responsibilities, if the provisions that allow single parents to balance working hours with caring responsibilities are ignored, if there is little co-ordination with Job Centres and scant information on how to seek advice or redress, the programme will not work.
- 1.5. We propose simple recommendations with the potential to improve the service: building on the need to accommodate caring responsibilities; respecting rights and working on realistic expectation of working hours; and bringing clarity and consistency to the programme.

2. Context

- 2.1. Single parents are a significant user group on the Work Programme (WP) making up 7.4%

(62, 333) of all attachments between June –July 2012¹. In terms of long-term employment outcomes single parents do worse than jobseekers overall. Out of the 31,240 job seekers who have moved into longer-term work 1,650 were single parents (3.7% for all clients compared to 2.7% for single parents)².

- 2.2. SPAN is a Bristol based charity and directly works with single parents. We also operate nationally, helping membership groups and individual members. We have a national online forum called One Space. In March 2012 we published an analysis about single parents transferring onto the Work Programme³. We have followed this up with a more comprehensive study, funded by Oxfam UK, looking at the experience of single parents nationally. This submission contains results from this study; the full report is scheduled for publication in January. This submission is the first time these results have been shared.
- 2.3. We concentrate on two areas of the Inquiry: first the level of service provided; and second the effectiveness of the “black box” approach to service delivery.

3. Background

Requirements for single parents to become jobseekers

- 3.1. There are 2 million single parents (9 out of 10 are women) the majority are already in employment (59%). Both the previous and current Government want to further increase this number. Since 2008, 400,000⁴ single parents have moved from Income Support to job seeking requirements.

What makes single parents preparation and seeking requirements different?

- 3.2. Single parents on Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) are subject to the same requirements as other job seekers showing they are available and seeking work. Like all jobseekers those that are longer term unemployed are transferred onto the WP. However, it is recognised that as well as being a job seeker single parents have responsibility for children. The Welfare Reform Act 2008 contains a provision to protect the wellbeing of children⁵. There are also ‘Lone Parent Flexibilities’⁶ such as the ability for a single parent to ask to restrict their hours of work.

¹ DWP November 2012 <http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=wp>

² Gingerbread analysis of DWP data www.gingerbread.org.uk/news/180/work-programme

³ Is the Work Programme Working for Single Parents? Analysis of the Experience of Single Parents Moving onto the Work Programme SPAN March 2012 pdf <http://span.org.uk/publications>

⁴ Grayling C PQ March 2011 and figures from DWP report 736 May 2010 p11.

⁵ Section 31.

⁶ Set out in regulations.

- 3.3. Like all public sector organisations, the DWP (including Jobcentre Plus) and contracted services under the WP are subject to the public sector equality duty⁷. Services should be designed to take account of the particular needs of single parents.

4. A. The level of service provided to single parents on the Work Programme

The source of our evidence

- 4.1. During the second half of 2012, SPAN used national and local networks to advertise for single parents on the WP who were willing to be interviewed in order to share their lived experience of the programme.
- 4.2. Sixteen single parents across England were interviewed, eleven from different regions and four from London. The ages of the single parents' children ranged from 5-15 years. The time spent on the WP ranged from one week to one year. Two single parents have left the WP, one into work and one has come off benefits. Satisfaction levels with the WP were low averaging 3.5 out of 10. More details are set out in Appendix A.

Accommodating single parents and their children

- 4.1. WP offices cater for all types of job seekers including ex-offenders and there is divergence as to how Providers will accommodate single parents and their children particularly in school holidays.
- 4.2. Three single parents were told before the school summer holidays they should not bring their children to the WP (SP3, 10 & 14). Three single parents (SP's 4, 6 and 15) were initially turned away from the Work Programme during school holidays. SP4 was told that she could bring her child in for her weekly job search meetings but on arrival was told he could not be there for 'health and safety reasons'. SP15 first appointment at the Work Programme was in half term and she was turned away for the same reason. SP6 was told on arrival with her child in the school holidays that she should not do that. She was then told to leave her child (aged 9) in a room on her own (something her daughter did not like) whilst she had her appointment. For subsequent appointments she paid a neighbour to look after her child. The same single parent was offered employability training but then this was withdrawn because it clashed with the school holidays and childcare was not provided.
- 4.3. Consideration around term time appointments for single parents varied. SP6 and SP4 initially thought the Provider was fitting appointment times in with school pick-up but this flexibility diminished over time. SP4 was recently offered appointment and training times without negotiation. When she attended a workshop she had to pay for her child to attend the school breakfast club. SP11 was given an appointment time that clashed with school

⁷ s.149 of the Equality Act.

drop-off. When she tried to change the appointment she was told she must come in or lose her benefit. SP15 was offered an advanced job-seeking course but the hours were 9am - 4pm and so she would not be able to pick up her youngest child from school (aged 9) so was unable to attend.

- 4.4. This contrasted with some good practice. SP2 was informed by the WP that childcare costs were covered, while SP5 & 13 said their advisers made sure appointments were during school hours.
- 4.5. SP 12 was told that courses arranged by her Provider would be held in the school day and she did not need to attend the WP during the school summer holiday. Both SP9 & 1 were positive that their Providers agreed to change appointment times because they clashed with school pick up times. In addition SP9 was also told that if her child was ill that she could rearrange an appointment.

Poor coordination between JCP and Work Programme

- 4.6. DWP research has found that there can be poor co-ordination between Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and the WP for all groups⁸. Our findings support this with over half of the parents (8) reporting a lack of co-ordination.
- 4.7. For two parents this meant receiving no back to work support from either organisation. SP1 had one appointment in three months. The WP cancelled her next appointment and she has not been given an appointment since. SP8 was suspended from the WP for being late for an appointment. For four months she has not been offered any back to work support. Both parents informed JCP about their situation but were told they were the responsibility of the WP.
- 4.8. The parents who had a more positive experience appreciated knowing what the WP would involve. Their Providers gave induction training, setting out practical support (like money towards interview clothes or childcare) and details of services that they could access (such as training). It also worked well where the JCP offered support to single parents before transfer and could inform them about what the WP would involve. For instance, SP12 had an interview before transfer with a Lone Parent Adviser at JCP to go through a new Jobseekers' Agreement.
- 4.9. The WP and JCP could be inconsistent concerning the application of the "lone parent flexibilities". All claimants should have a Jobseekers' Agreement, which should be applied by JCP and the WP. This was not always the case. For instance, two single parents (SP4 & 6) were told by the WP to apply for jobs that went against their Jobseekers' Agreement. SP 4 had been told to apply for jobs where she would have to work Saturday and Sunday even though her Agreement specified work between Monday and Friday.

⁸ Work Programme Evaluations: Findings from the first phase of qualitative research on programme delivery. Nov 2012 DWP

- 4.10. SP14 felt she had “two people to please” in her job search. In addition she was given inconsistent messages from the two organisations. JCP had agreed under ‘Lone Parent Flexibilities’ that she did not have to sign on during the school summer holidays. She was then offered her first appointment at the Work Programme on the first day of her child’s school holiday. They insisted that she attend and she was threatened with a sanction.
- 4.11. The WP has inherited some inconsistent practice in the application of ‘Lone Parent Flexibilities’ from JCP. The DWP’s own commissioned research report (2011) found that the majority of single parents "were not aware of the specific flexibilities, a proportion had been told they were allowed to only look for work that was during school hours only (12%) or have the availability and costs of childcare taken into account when working out their availability to work (8%)"⁹.
- 4.12. This lack of consistency from JCP led to a number of single parents having unrealistic Jobseekers’ Agreements. The WP’s task of helping these parents move into sustainable work may be impeded. For example, SP 9’s Agreement includes that she must work the hours from the moment she drops her child off at school to the moment she picks her up, allowing no time for her travel to a place of work.
- 4.13. There was also evidence that flexibilities were not necessarily applied to the single parents that might have the greatest needs. SP8 has a child in primary school with an educational statement. He needs support including being taken to and from school and would struggle in an after-school childcare setting. She had left work two years earlier because of the need to support her son. Her Agreement specifies that she must apply for full-time hours because “there were not many part-time jobs available” and this was applied at JCP and the WP.

Recommendations

- 4.14. SPAN believes this evidence supports six recommendations.
- i) There needs to be better account taken of single parents’ responsibilities to care for their children whilst on the WP. Clearer provision for term time appointments and certainty as to how single parents will be accommodated in the school holidays.
 - ii) Single parents should be given the same opportunities to train and develop as other job seekers, so training needs to be scheduled at times when single parents can attend.
 - iii) Work Programme Providers should pay for childcare when it is needed for

⁹ Lone Parent Obligations supporting the journey into work" DWP Research Report 736 May 2011 Page 86

single parents to attend appointments or training.

- iv) At present no figures are kept for the reasons why sanctions are threatened or applied to single parents on the Work Programme ¹⁰. In order to show that single parents are treated fairly these figures need to be collected and published.
- v) Account needs to be taken of 'Lone Parent Flexibilities' and these need to be consistently applied on the WP. JCP should make sure that before a single parent transfers that a lone parent specialist is available for the parents final interview before transfer and that a Jobseekers' Agreement is drawn up that reflects a claimants caring responsibilities.
- vi) Better co-ordination is needed between JCP and the WP. In particular single parents should be made aware of how they can complain and have the support of JCP (including access to specialist Lone Parent Advisers).

5. **B. The "black box" approach to service delivery**

Flexibility on the Work Programme

- 5.1. For three of the single parents the flexibility around support and attendance at the WP was positive. SP13 valued the support she was given by her "really brilliant adviser". Her appointments were every two weeks because it was recognised that she knew what she was doing. The Provider then gave her substantial practical support including sending out flyers for her and paying membership of a regulatory body for her qualification to help her move into work. They also paid her train fare to attend a job interview in another city.
- 5.2. SP15's adviser was trained in Human Resources and was really useful at helping her with her CV and referring her to appropriate agencies to find work. She had to attend once a month but was in regular email and telephone contact. The WP offered more support when it was needed such as when she was going for an interview. SP 5 thought her adviser was "really nice". She was offered courses although it was made clear these were optional. She felt her Adviser recognised her skills (as a qualified teacher) and did not push her into low skilled work.
- 5.3. However, the gaps in appointments left some parents feeling abandoned by the WP. SP3 attends every two or three months "as they don't feel there is much they can do for me." She has a degree and postgraduate qualification and was told, "they cannot cater for all kinds of needs." SP12 &16 had infrequent contact with their advisers.
- 5.4. There was concern about the lack of training or its poor quality and that it was geared at a

¹⁰ Parliamentary Question about single parents on the Work Programme and Sanctions Kerry McCarthy MP 21 May 2012.

basic level. SP8 & 11 were told that there was no money for training on the WP. SP14 was only offered a course in food hygiene (she is a qualified teacher). SP4 wanted to improve her basic skills in Maths and English and found a course at her local college only to be told that the WP appointments must come first and she could not attend.

- 5.5. Single parents wanted predictability in the services they received including specialist support to go through a better off in work calculation. This was raised as an issue by SP4, 6 & 12. These parents (and SP 10) also raised concern about not having access to the specialist support of a Lone Parent Adviser (they had valued this at the Jobcentre).

Recommendations

- 5.6. SPAN believes this evidence supports four recommendations.
- i) Single parents need some basic predictability about the services and support that they will be getting under the WP. It needs to be made clearer what activities are mandatory or optional.
 - ii) The WP should have specialist advisers for single parents including those that can help with better off in work calculations
 - iii) The good practice of WP Providers should be shared to show how tailored support could work better for single parents.
 - iv) Single parents are likely to have been out of employment for a significant time and require a wider range of training courses on the WP to enable them to compete in the job market.

Appendix 1: Information about Interviewees

Single Parent	Ages of dependent	How long on WP?	Work Programme Provider Area	How often do you attend?	How satisfied with the WP?¹¹
1.	11 & 15	3 months	Avanta, East Sussex	Once	2
2.	10 & 13	One week	A4E, East Midlands	Once	3
3.	14	One Year	Progress, Bristol	Every two or three months	0
4.	11	9 months	A4E through Knowsley Works, Liverpool	Varied between once a fortnight to 4 times in one week.	1
5.	12	9 months	A4E, London	Varies.	7
6.	9	9 months	ESG and Sencia, Staffs	First every two weeks and now every week	1
7.	12 & 11	One Year	Ingeus Wardwick, Derby	At first once a fortnight but recently less often.	6
8.	16,15 & 10	6 months	Reed, London	Once a month but suspended from WP	1
9.	10	6 weeks	G4S delivered by Pertemps, Eastbourne	Every two weeks but flexibility	9

¹¹1 the least satisfied, 10 most satisfied.

10.	12	5 months	Sarina Russo Coventry	Every fortnight	0
11.	5	3 months	In Training, Leicester	Once a month	3
12.	12 and twins aged 9	8 months	Prospect, London	Not consistent	2
13.	8	5 months	Ingeus, London	First once a week and then once a fortnight	9
14.	16 & 13	4 months	Ingeus, Nottingham	Varied but attended 4 times in the 4 months	1
15.	9 & 13	2 months	Kennedy Scott, Harpenden	Once a month	6
16.	10	8 months	G4S, Scunthorpe	Varied three times over period	5