

Appendices to Policy Priorities – The Issues

Single Parent Action Network



SPAN

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The following paper draws together the research and evidence from our work with single parents, to show the key barriers facing them and their children, at home and in the workforce. This paper shows how current policies contribute to the existing poverty of a large number of single parent families. This paper complements our Policy Priorities 'Empowering Single Parents and their Children out of Poverty', where we set out what policies the Single Parent Action Network (SPAN) want any new Government to address within the next five years. From the research evidence and learning from the direct experience of single parents and those that work with them, we are convinced that the policies that we put forward will create a real positive change for single parents and lift them and their children out of poverty and help them to thrive.

1. Financial Security

Welfare Support

The welfare environment has changed dramatically for single parents and a complex system of obligations has been introduced dependant on the age of a single parent's child. The principle underlying welfare reform is more personalised support in exchange for stricter benefit conditions which can include sanctions for non-compliance. It is therefore really important that single parents understand what is expected of them and what support and services are open to them and their children.

However, the information available on welfare changes for single parents remains patchy and out of date. This can cause anxiety for single parents and prevents them from planning ahead both for themselves and their children.

From our online forums and interactions at our Annual Meeting there are single parents who have been given wrong advice by Jobcentre advisers especially about what they are required to do to fulfil obligations when being moved from Income Support to Job Seeker's Allowance.

We are concerned that Jobcentre Plus advisers do not have sufficient time to offer tailored advice. The Institute for Public Policy Research study showed that Jobcentre Plus advisers were increasingly overworked as a result of the recession¹. In early 2008, there was a ratio of almost 40 interviews a month per Jobcentre Plus adviser for claimants of Job Seeker's Allowance. In February 2009, this rose to 65 as the number of benefit claimants surged. Almost half of advisers surveyed (47%) said they did not have as much time as they would like to support their clients.

Work is not necessarily a route out of poverty

Over half (52%) of children in single parent families are poor compared to 25% in coupled families². Paid employment has been seen by the present Government as the route out of poverty for single parent families. However, whilst figures of paid employment for single parents have increased to over 56%, it is not a guarantee that this lifts single parents out of poverty. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that half of single parents

1 Now It's Personal: Personal advisers and the new public service workforce Clare McNeil 17 June 2009
Institute for Public Policy Research.

2 Families and Children Study data 2005.

are not in a position to generate sufficient income to be above the income poverty line while meeting their basic obligations to their children (for example by paying for their children to be looked after) “however long or hard they work.”³

Poor Quality Work

SPAN’s participatory research with single parents found that the single-handed juggling of employment with caring responsibilities makes it difficult for single parents to access and sustain good jobs⁴. Once in employment, single parents are twice as likely to go back on welfare and therefore experience poverty again. Recent welfare reform changes mean that single parents of older children are now obliged to seek work in order to satisfy their benefit conditions. There is evidence that this is further pushing single parents to take any job rather one that might offer them the prospect of lifting them out of poverty. Recent research by Gingerbread found that single parents are feeling under pressure to take any work. “Some parents were downgrading their hopes and plans or expectations were changing so that they thought they would take a low-quality job that was easier to get rather than look for the type of job they really wanted”⁵. The report found that there were generally modest gains from work for single parents and that there were additional costs of work such as travel.

A significant barrier to making work financially pay for single parents has to do with the nature of work that they can get to fit in with their children’s lives. Evaluation of the New Deal supports this as it found that single parents tend to move into low paid, low-skilled jobs. Women get jobs below their qualifications to fit in with their caring role. Nine out of ten single parents are women. Therefore many of the issues for single parents directly correlate to the poorer position of women in the labour market, particularly women that work part-time. Over 40% of women in employment work reduced hours to combine caring and working, but there is a lack of “good quality” part-time work. A survey of part-time workers showed that just over half had had previous jobs in which they had used higher qualifications or skills or had more management responsibility⁶.

Part-time Work Pay Penalty

The difference in earnings between men in full-time employment compared to women part-timers has recently increased to 36.3%⁷. This is also highlighted in recent research into low pay and part-time work: under £7.20 per hour for half of part-timer workers.⁸ Although there are also pay gaps for part-time workers in other European Countries “...The UK has the highest part-time pay penalty and one of the worst problems in enabling women to move between full and part-time work without occupational demotions.”⁹

Single parents face difficulties that other parents have in the workforce but are not protected financially by another earner in the household as parents are who are in a coupled

3 Time and Income Poverty Tania Burchardt November 2008 Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

4 Proofed for Parents by Parents November 2007 Single Parent Action Network

5 Signing on and Stepping Up October 2009 Gingerbread.

6 People working part-time below their potential 2005 Darton & Hurrell Manchester Equal Opportunities Commission.

7 Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, Gender Pay Gap November 2008 Office of National Statistics.

8 An Anatomy of Economic Inequality in the UK January 2010 The National Equality Panel.

9 The Part-time Pay Penalty Manning & Petongola February 2008 London School of Economics – The Economic Journal.

relationship. This has a particular impact on mothers. One of the policy challenges identified in the National Equality Panel is stated as “Low Pay for part-time work is a key factor in gender inequality. It reflects the low value accorded to it and failure to create opportunities for training and promotion...Most women do not benefit from career progression, underlying the importance of policies related to parental leave, flexible employment and childcare”⁸.

The recently launched Green Paper on the Family and Relationships¹⁰ put forward some welcome good practice initiatives to promote better quality part-time work. However, in view of the extent of the problem and the entrenched inequality in pay of current part-time work, promoting good practice to encourage employers to change is not enough. More radical measures which are enforceable are needed to change things in a much shorter timescale.

Limitations of the Right to Request Flexible Work Legislation

Single Parent Action Network welcomes the right to request flexible working as a valuable tool to potentially negotiate flexible working patterns or part-time work. However, the right to request does not apply unless someone has been with an employer for at least six months and does not apply to agency or casual staff. The current legislation does nothing for single parents who are entering the workforce or who want to seek a job with a new employer. This again restricts the jobs that are open to them. The Institute of Fiscal Studies with the University of Essex have recently produced revised projections of future levels of child poverty. One projection from their research is that the employment rate of single parents will be the same this year as it was in 2006 (previously it was projected to rise sharply). They conclude that in order to tackle child poverty new policies will need to help provide good jobs for working parents that combine reasonable pay with flexibility¹¹.

Limited and Inflexible and Unpaid Parental Leave

Parental leave offers parents the right to take unpaid time off work to look after a child or make arrangements for their welfare. This can be useful to parents if their child is unwell or if there is a crisis in their childcare. The entitlement is for a period of up to 13 weeks for each child but only until their 5th birthday (18 if they are disabled). Parental leave is only available once you have been employed by the same company for a year or more and does not cover agency or casual staff. Within welfare reform, the expectation is that single parents whose children are older should work (currently when their youngest child is 10 but this will lower to 7 from October 2010). Parental leave could be especially valuable to single parents, who as sole carers will need to be relied upon by their child or children in emergencies. However, parental leave will not be open to the group of single parents of older children moving into employment, as they are a new employee and it will only then be open to them if they have a permanent contract or have a child with a disability. As a sole carer they may not have the funds to take unpaid leave, nor have another parent to rely on. SPAN supports the principle of paid parental leave for all parents.

¹⁰ Support for All: the Families and Relationships Green Paper January 2010 Department for Children Schools and Families.

¹¹ Can Work Eradicate child poverty? November 2008 Dave Simmond et al

2. Education and Training

Young Mothers Discouraged Out of Education

A recent report by Barnardos has also highlighted that pregnant teenagers are being forced out of school education by a lack of support¹². There are barriers which mean that nearly 70% of young mothers are not in education, employment or training. The report states that teenage mothers have “given up on career ambitions and resigned themselves to a life of low income.” Many of the young mothers interviewed for the report said that they had experienced “pressure on them to leave because of unfounded health and safety fears”, whilst others dropped out because of lack of support and flexibility in schools. In conclusion the Co-author of the report states “Helping and supporting young mothers back into education will afford them greater independence and secure a better start in life for their children.”

Lack of Self-Esteem

Single parents come from all walks of life and have different levels of qualifications or experience in the workplace. Therefore the level of training or support that they need will vary broadly. Through the experience of grassroots projects around the country including the SPAN Study Centre, many single parents struggle with issues of self-confidence especially those that have been out of the workforce for a long period or have experience of domestic violence. It is important that issues of self-esteem are addressed before many single parents can be in a position to seek employment.

Further and Higher Education

Other single parents have a clear idea of what they want to do, have confidence and just need to have the opportunity to go forward. Our research has shown that single parents identified opportunities for good training and higher education as the best way to move into sustainable jobs¹³.

Up until November 2008, single parents with insufficient income were entitled to Income Support whatever the age of their child. However, since this time single parents are being moved over to Job Seeker's Allowance, staggered according to the age of their child. Welfare reform means that single parents with children between the ages of 3-6 will need to undertake work related activity and once their child reaches 7 (from October 2010) they will need to be actively seeking work. If they have not found work within two years they can be put on a work for your benefit scheme.

Single Parent Action Network is concerned that these changes limit the ability of single parents to undertake further or higher education as they are much less flexible than the rules that exist under Income Support. For instance from October 2010 if you enrol on a full-time higher education course (such as a degree or post graduate qualification such as teacher training) you will be subject to job seeking conditions when your youngest child reaches 7. We think that this is counterproductive to improving the employability of single parents and will impede their chances to compete for better paid sustainable employment.

¹² Not the End of the Story: Supporting Teenage Mothers back into Education March 2010 Barnardos

¹³ Proofed for Parents by Parents November 2007 Single Parent Action Network.

For single parents with children aged 3-6 work related activity needs to address the wide variety of needs of single parents, including support for long term career planning that will enable parents to consider further and higher education as part of their employment route. Single parents need to have information to plan for the future so they can make decisions about training and education at the time when they are not expected to look for paid employment.

3. Promoting Children's and Parents' Well-being

Children's Centres

At SPAN we know firsthand the positive impact for parents of well run Children's Centres and the difference that they can make to people's well-being. We know through the voiced experience of single parents that these services work best when they provide holistic support in the community, including support for newly developing self-help groups. At our Annual Meeting in November 2009, single parents also emphasised the need for joined up services and better signposting to other services available in the public, private and voluntary sectors. A number of schemes have meant that Jobcentre Plus workers are based in Children's Centres for a short period of time each week. Single parents were supportive of such schemes and would like them to be expanded. Jobcentre services in Children's Centres can also offer onsite childcare provision and so allow single parents greater focus with their adviser.

Child Poverty Act 2010

SPAN is positive about the new law which provides a statutory basis to the commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2020. In particular we are pleased by the new duty on local authorities and other delivery partners to work together to tackle child poverty. We hope that the aspirations will live up to delivery in tackling child poverty in a broad and holistic way and that the principles from the End Child Poverty Report are progressed.

"Tackling child poverty in local communities requires looking far beyond the child and addressing all the factors which influence family wellbeing, opportunities and outcomes. Making a sustained improvement at a local level means bringing together children's services with schools, health, transport, housing and economic regeneration to address the causes and consequences of child poverty."¹⁴

Public Sector Duty to Address Inequality Experienced by Marginalised Groups

SPAN knows of the value of specialist services that address the needs of marginalised groups such as young single mothers and new migrants. The Public Sector Duties to promote equality of opportunity and to be proactive in eliminating discrimination in relation to gender and to race give a statutory duty to local authorities to address the needs of these groups. Priority groups who experience clear inequality should be a priority to comply with local authority equality duties. There should be objectives within local authority equality schemes detailing the services provided and tailored to these marginalised groups. There

14 Ending Child Poverty: Making it Happen 2009 DWP

are specific duties on local authorities to be accountable for what they do and through their actions, demonstrate their commitment to gender and to race equality.

Time Poverty

SPAN's research has identified that the relationship that a child has with his/her single parent is very close and significantly important for that child. These children may be at risk because of time poverty as a result of a parent having to manage employment and childcare on their own. These parents find they don't have enough time to dedicate to their children's education, and not enough quality time¹⁵. Parents' time poverty can impact negatively on their children, including social exclusion as children can end up taking on domestic and childcare responsibilities, leading some children to question the value of increased income as the result of their parents' employment¹⁶. SPAN agree that paid employment can have positive advantages to single parent families in terms of extra money and a potential to increase self esteem, but that this needs to be balanced with some of the negative impacts for single parents and their children that we have identified in our research.

From Our Online Forums

"Unfortunately my ex doesn't have any contact with our son now so I think it's really important to spend as much time with him as I can and build up his confidence. I am dreading the day he asks me why he doesn't see his dad. I just hope I'll still have the time to support him it worries me that I might have to be rushing off to work when he needs me."

People can become single parents when their children are any age and their child may be going through a substantial amount of upheaval and upset at a time when their single parent is required to work. For the well-being of their children some single parents think that they are best placed to care for their children during this difficult time. We know through our online forum the value of single parents spending time with their children.

"My oldest boy needed me more than he ever has before when he hit a crisis. He was 15."

"being a parent is a job in my opinion and in most cases being a single parent is not a career choice most cases are victims of circumstances... my children are growing up well rounded happy kids and are very distressed that I won't be at home full time".

15 Integrating children's perspectives in policy making to combat poverty and social exclusion experiences by single parents May 2007 S Cohen England National Report.

16 The State and Single Parent Families Dr Susy Guillari Research Paper May 2009 Single Parent Action Network.

4. Lack of Good Quality Childcare

The cost and lack of availability of good quality childcare can be a barrier for all parents in the labour market. However, there are also additional issues for single parents to contend with who have sole responsibility for managing care while they are at work. A single parent may be the only person to take and collect their child from a childcare provider and have no-one else to rely on if childcare breaks down or when their child is unwell. Childcare may also need to come from one wage and as cited in the section on financial security, this wage is more likely to be lower than in a coupled relationship. Often, single parents working part-time and qualifying for the Child Tax Credit at 80% cannot afford to pay the remaining 20%, especially when costs increase for single parents of school age children during the long summer break.

Childcare in the UK is amongst the most expensive in the world. There has been a rise in costs above the rate of inflation for all types of childcare. In England the cost of a nursery place for children aged 2 and over has risen by 5.1%, almost double inflation. In terms of availability, 58% of Family Information Services across Britain revealed parents have reported a lack of childcare, with half of all local authorities reporting insufficient childcare for older children and disabled children¹⁷. There are also key gaps in provision for evenings and weekends. From our online forums it is clear that single parents struggle to find childcare over the summer holidays. Single parents through welfare reform are obliged to look for work when their children are older. At our Annual Meeting there were concerns from single parents about the difficulty of finding childcare for secondary school children and an underlying assumption from welfare advisers that older school children can fend for themselves.

Promoting a Child's Development Through Childcare

For those single parents that do take employment or training, it is important that childcare is not only available for the hours that they need but also that it is of the quality required to promote a child's development and well-being. In addition it needs to be recognised that children thrive in different childcare settings; some doing better in a home environment such as with a childminder. Through our Annual Meeting single parents reported a real shortage of local childminders. They said that childminders may be leaving the profession because of the bureaucracy that surrounds their role. For those whose children attended nurseries there was some concern that not all nursery employees were sufficiently qualified. Those who felt that their children thrived did so where there were well motivated and skilled workers.

5. Community Empowerment and Participation

Valuing Local Services

At SPAN we see the success of grassroots community projects in helping to deliver long term gains to communities and in lifting people out of poverty. In particular we have seen the positive results of the Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities parenting education programme delivered by the Race Equality Foundation¹⁸ in partnership with community organisations including SPAN.

As an example, in 2004 we supported a young single mother's project as part of this programme. The target group were young mothers (aged 15-22) living in inner city Bristol. Some of the women were particularly vulnerable because they were living in temporary accommodation. The course was delivered by volunteer single parents empowered and trained to deliver the course.

The course resulted in:

- 1) Two individual young mothers living in temporary accommodation were trained and empowered to provide peer group training in impoverished communities;
- 2) In the next two years these two young mothers moved on into higher education and into employment. One got a first at Bristol University and is now doing a doctorate as well as working at the Young Mother's School Girl Project. One is working for a housing association and continues to deliver similar courses in the inner city to young mothers; and
- 3) Two self help groups were set up targeting young single mothers.

More broadly it increased the ambition, education and determination of young mothers to create a better life for themselves and their children. For many of them, this was a first step towards paid employment and a route out of poverty.

This is why we recommend that similar projects are rolled out in other disadvantaged regions.

2010 European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion

This year has been designated the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. The UK's objectives for the year include:

- Raising awareness of the causes, prevalence and consequences of poverty and social exclusion and looking at the UK and European strategies and policies that aim to tackle these issues; and
- Promote and facilitate engagement and participation of people who have developed and are delivering solutions to tackle poverty and social inclusion.

The year should give a lasting legacy including the identification and sharing of good practice.

¹⁸ Race Equality Foundation (www.raceequalityfoundation.org.uk) for details of the Programme.

Gender Equality Duty

The Statutory Code of Practice from the Gender Equality Duty states:

“The Duty requires public authorities to identify and tackle discrimination, to prevent harassment and to ensure that their work promotes equality of opportunity between men and women. It is a form of legally enforceable ‘gender mainstreaming’, building gender equality into the core business thinking and processes of an organisation. It is different from previous sex equality legislation because... Public Authorities have to be proactive in promoting equality of opportunity and not just avoiding discrimination.”

From April 2007, public authorities including local authorities must draw up and publish a gender equality scheme which should identify gender equality objectives and show the steps that they will take to implement them. They must also ensure that they assess the impact of new policies and service delivery changes in relation to their duty to promote gender equality and publish these assessments.

The legislation should be a valuable tool in making sure that local services are tailored to the needs of women. However, we are concerned about the enforcement of the duty and the need for it to be more consistently applied across local authorities.

Valuing Volunteering and its Impact on the Local Community

SPAN’s research and our own experience of service delivery have shown the positive benefits to individuals and communities of volunteering. For single parents we have seen it as a way to improve self-confidence and as a stepping stone into employment but also as a way for these parents to engage with their local community. We are therefore supportive of the Community Allowance campaign¹⁹ to enable community organisations to pay local unemployed people to do part-time, sessional or short-term work that strengthens their community. The unemployed person would be able to keep their earnings on top of benefits but this would be capped. Alongside these volunteering jobs they would also integrate wraparound training and support.

¹⁹ For further details see website www.communityallowance.org