

# Manifesto 2010-2015

Single Parent Action Network



**SPAN**

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# About Single Parent Action Network

Almost a quarter of children in the UK live in a family headed by a single parent. There are over 2 million people (90% of whom are women) bringing up 3 million children on their own, 52% of whom live in relative poverty.

At Single Parent Action Network (SPAN) we have a membership of over 2000, and many programmes of work supporting single parents living in poverty and deprived areas. These programmes include community empowerment projects, parenting courses, capacity building for family self-help groups, a social networking website supporting isolated single parents from across the country and the Single Parent Study Centre based in Bristol. We also carry out participatory research to enable single parents to voice their concerns and policy priorities to Government.

## Introduction

In November 2009 SPAN held a well attended Annual Meeting where we discussed the policies that would help single parents to thrive, with key note speakers Yvette Cooper, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and Andrew Selous MP, Conservative Shadow Work and Pensions Minister. Attendees included single parents, one parent family groups, Jobcentre Plus representatives, civil servants, family practitioners, anti-poverty organisations, researchers and grant-making bodies. Participants joined roundtables to share thinking, experience and expertise on key themes identified by single parents in our Participatory One Parent Proofing Project<sup>1</sup>. It is on the basis of our participatory evidence that we have set out our policy priorities in five major arenas. We would like the next Government to take them forward within the next five years.

## Empowering Single Parents and their Children Out of Poverty:

- 1. Financial Security for All Families;**
- 2. Aiming High through Education and Training;**
- 3. Promoting Children's and Single Parents' Well-being;**
- 4. Quality Childcare Addressing the Needs of Children and Paid Work**
- 5. Community Empowerment and Participation.**

SPAN have also produced a background paper on these issues with research detail as an appendices to complement our policy priorities. This is available to download from our website at [www.spanuk.org.uk](http://www.spanuk.org.uk)

# 1. Financial Security for Families

**Financial security for all families. Employment practices that allow families to combine paid employment with a good family life.**

## Policy Recommendations

### 1a Welfare benefits set at a level to support a family

Single parents with younger children are obliged to prepare for work and when their children are older to seek paid employment. Even with the aspiration that a greater number of single parents will seek paid employment, there will be a period where these parents and their children will need to rely on state benefits. **It is important that these benefits are at a level to prevent child and family poverty.**

“It’s like juggling balls. Do you buy the food, pay the gas or electric or buy them whatever they need – new shoes, a wee bit of bedding...”

### 1b Moving into work

**Ensure welfare reform entitlements are more transparent through the implementation of a well-advertised Government take-up campaign.** Given the complexity of the new welfare reform changes, Jobcentre Plus advisers need to be trained to provide a transparent menu of opportunities and entitlements to all single parents seeking support. This information should be set out in a clear guide with a menu of choices related to the age of the child and the rights single parents have to stay with their children.

In addition, for those starting employment or experiencing in-work poverty, we want any new Government to publicise an in-work take-up benefits campaign so parents can check whether they are getting the tax credits to which they are entitled.

“Personal advisors should look at the future; focus on a career rather than work.”

### 1c Balance employment with family life

Any new Government should introduce **statutory paid parental leave** for employees from the start of employment and paid parental leave of at least two weeks a year until children are older with extra paid parental leave of at least 5 days a year if children are sick. Agency or casual staff should be included in this provision.

More broadly, SPAN supports a new Government programme with similar principles to the energy efficiency scheme for businesses, **encouraging corporate responsibility for family friendly working** by incentivising and rewarding companies that participate. Single parents are also keen that the Government develop **work at home schemes**, including funding to set up enterprise schemes to fit around family life.

“I feel I don’t see my child because I work. I then come home and force-feed my child because I want them to go to bed so that I can go to bed.”

## **1d Promote the public sector as an exemplar employer**

**Uphold the Public Authority Duty to promote equality of opportunity by ensuring that all public sector jobs are advertised as part-time or as job-shares**, unless there is a clear business case for the post being only available full-time, reasons for which should be set out in writing.

SPAN wants a job share register set up in all Jobcentre Plus Offices to make a much broader range of part-time jobs available, and for local authorities to work with local employment partnerships to encourage part-time work opportunities.

“I had no energy left. The hoops I had to jump through and nobody once offered any support for anything. And I got a young child, she was a toddler then. If they’d said, okay you can have extra time to do this I wouldn’t have been staying up until five o’clock in the morning.”

## **1e Sustainable employment**

**Ensure welfare providers are judged on finding single parents jobs that make the most of their skills, and are sustainable for at least a year with on-going support during that period.** A new Government should also extend the right to request flexible working from the time that a job is advertised, with clear written business reasons set out to any applicants who are refused the request, extending this right to agency and casual staff in the process.

“They want single parents back into work to fill in all these jobs, you know, all the not so good jobs.”

## 2. Aiming High through Education and Training

**Single parents accessing high quality training and education that equips them with the skills needed to find long-term, sustainable employment.**

### Policy Recommendations

#### 2a Promote self confidence and assertiveness courses; challenge stigma and discrimination

Single parents on benefits, especially those that have experienced violence or have been out of paid work for a long period, may lack self-belief and confidence. It is vital that these parents have access to courses on self-confidence and assertiveness.

**Jobcentre Plus should commission community groups, children's centres and education providers to deliver this training.** Low self-esteem is exacerbated by stigma and discrimination in society. This should be challenged rather than exacerbated by politicians and the media.

"The Government penalises us for being single parents, but why should my kids see a violent relationship because I am with a bloke? Because I'm a single parent now, I think I should be given an award for what I've done."

#### 2b Enable single parents to study for a better life for themselves and their children

**Provide Jobcentre Plus advisers with the right to direct single parents into long-term education and formal training opportunities.** From our participatory 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. Long-term education should be an option for those with children under 7 preparing for employment, and for those with children over 7 on Job Seekers Allowance if studying for a recognised qualification that increases job prospects. Distance learning opportunities should also be extended with new schemes set up for single parents to study at home.

"People that have got a few qualifications from school, like GCSEs, they don't want to be repeating Level 1 and 2 again, they want to go up to Level 3. Why because we are single parents should we go for low paid jobs?"

#### 2c Development in the workplace

**Support existing in-work training initiatives. Develop the Train to Gain Programme by encouraging employers to support high quality in-work training for new employees who have been out of the labour market for some time.**

At SPAN we support programmes that allow parents to develop and train once they are in the workplace, both to equip them to do their job well and also to give them the skills and confidence to progress. We would want any new Government to provide sustained funding for these programmes.

"You need to top up with more qualifications to get a reasonable salary."

### 3. Promoting children and single parents' well-being

**Keeping children's well-being at the heart of family policy with holistic support and improved access to services for low income families.**

#### Policy Recommendations

##### 3a Continued Investment in Children's Centres and Extended Schools

SPAN supports continued investment in thriving Children's Centres and Extended Schools with multi-agency and community support for parents and children, including closer links between Children's Centres and schools.

At SPAN we know from our partnership work the positive impact that well run Children's Centres make to family life. **We do not think that the remit of Children's Centres should be too narrowly focused, but rather provide holistic community support.**

This includes referrals across a broad range of services provided by the public, voluntary, and private sectors. We also know the benefits for parents where Jobcentre Plus advisers have worked within Children's Centres.

##### 3b Local authority investment in combating child poverty

**Resource the implementation at a local authority level of the child poverty strategies embedded in the Child Poverty Act, with a particular focus on families and parenting.** At SPAN we support the principles of the Child Poverty Act and believe that its success will be dependent on its implementation and strategies particularly at a local level. We would like to see early intervention strategies embedded in long term grassroots initiatives supported by sustainable funding. We want parenting support work to continue whatever the age of the child and ensure that there is on-going high quality training for those delivering family services.

"I think the SPAN course helps people like me... If you want to change your life SPAN can help you."

##### 3c Implement and enforce the Public Sector Duty to address inequality experienced by marginalised groups

**We know the value of specialist services that address the needs of marginalised groups such as young mothers and new migrants.** Vulnerable families 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.

## 4. Quality Childcare Addressing the Needs of Children and Paid work

**Single parents informed about good quality affordable childcare, staffed by well motivated and skilled childcare professionals, enabling their children to develop and fitting in with their hours of work.**

### Policy Recommendations

#### 4a Better informed advisers with childcare tailored to the needs of the child

In order for single parents to feel confident about their children's well-being while they are at work it is important that they know about the childcare options open to them.

**Improved training for Jobcentre Plus Advisers** is needed so that they are better informed about local childcare and its availability. We want any new Government to create more choice in childcare services recognising that children thrive in different childcare settings. **We also want safeguards in place for parents on Job Seekers Allowance to allow for those parents with older children to be at home when the well-being of their children is in danger.** The circumstances in which this is appropriate should be set out transparently by Jobcentre Plus.

#### 4b Mainstream affordable, accessible childcare

Any new Government should **increase the childcare element of Working Tax Credit (which is currently up to 80%) to cover the full cost of childcare.** Parents also want wrap-around quality childcare for children of all ages embedded in childcare provision, including subsidised play scheme places in the school holidays and extended provision in the evenings and at weekends.

"Then another time she says, 'Oh there's somebody off sick, can you come in at half past 7?' I went, 'Well no, 'cos I've got my daughter – who's going to see to her?' And she turned around and said, 'Childcare is your problem and not ours.'"

#### 4c Quality childcare providers

**Well motivated and trained childcare professionals help children to thrive.** To this end, any new Government should support initiatives which **improve the professional status and pay for the sector, as well as opportunities for childcare workers to up-skill in the job.** We also know that some children thrive better in a home environment and want greater support for people to become childminders, through training opportunities and the streamlining of their administrative workload.

#### 4d Provision for older children

**Develop projects and activities for older children in the new local authority child poverty strategies, consulting with young people to establish their needs.** From our participatory research with single parents we know of the importance of continued support for children as they move onto secondary school and the shortage of provision for this age group.

"There is not childcare for them, before or after school. I don't want him on the streets."

## 5. Community Empowerment and Participation

**Support community empowerment including encouraging and valuing the voluntary work that single parents do to improve their communities and support their families.**

### Policy Recommendations

#### 5a Strengthening local communities through sustained funding

Grassroots community projects driven by those living in disadvantaged areas can deliver long term gains to communities and help lift people out of poverty. Successful well-evaluated projects should be rolled out in other areas such as the highly regarded Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities Parenting programme managed by the Race Equality Foundation.

“(Single parent organisations) give you the kind of skills that you need to stand up for yourself and help you identify the different kinds of support that you need. You feel that you can talk to them.”

#### 5b Build on the legacy of the EU Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010

Key strategies to combat poverty and social exclusion in this country are already being drawn out of the national programme of activities informed by people living in poverty. Any new Government should build on the legacy from this significant year and **ensure that the most effective strategies are taken forward into the next decade.**

#### 5c Ensure the Gender Equality Duty is applied in service provision and community development

SPAN values the Gender Equality Legislation which embeds a requirement for local authorities to consult in the community and help enable women shape the services that affect their lives. However, we are concerned that the duty is not consistently applied by local authorities. **Some authorities are not allowing women in disadvantaged communities to express their needs and influence how services are provided.** Government must ensure that legislation is more consistently applied by local authorities and set in place rewards for those that take it seriously and highlight those local authorities who do not.

#### 5d Value volunteering and its impact on local communities

**Introduce the tenets of the Community Allowance Campaign, providing a tiered approach to work through volunteering. Introduce legislation that requires much greater employer commitment to the role of volunteers in their communities.**

SPAN's research and service delivery has highlighted the value of volunteering, enabling single parents to gain confidence and skills, as a stepping stone into paid work. We also think it important that Government recognises the value of the voluntary work that many parents do to improve their communities. We support the Community Allowance Campaign that enables people on benefit to be paid for work in the community, through an income disregard.

For those in work, we know that the public sector have good initiatives that encourage and pay staff to volunteer. We would like any new Government to encourage such initiatives within the broader business community, with paid days off to volunteer.