



SPAN

Single Parent Action Network

SUBMISSION TO PAUL GREGG CONDITIONALITY REVIEW

October 2008

About Single Parent Action Network

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

Policies to make work pay and support lone parents into employment such as the New Deal (ND) have been successful in achieving a dramatic increase in lone parents in employment, reducing the risk of poverty for lone parents in general, and particularly for those who work but are low-paid. Much more needs to be done.

Given that lone parents are twice as likely to cycle back to welfare, in-work welfare is also paramount and we would welcome more focus on job retention and advancement measures. Most of all we are very concerned with the shift towards stronger conditionality and in particular the current proposals to move all lone parents including those with younger children onto the Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) regime, increasing requirements to either seek work or train, depending on the age of their youngest child. Despite the additional flexibilities introduced, which we welcome and have been part of devising in various discussions with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), we believe that the reform will not succeed. JSA is going to become too complex with pressured JobCentre Plus (JCP) staff and advisers having to administer different rules to different types of claimants, and to different group of lone parents. Too much is left to the discretion JCP staff, and too few resources are being invested in training and guidance.

We are particularly worried about the impact that this change will have on those lone parents that are least work ready and experience acute and/or multiple disadvantages such as debt, housing problems, parenting issues and domestic violence. The majority (66%) of lone parents with children over 11 are already in work. It is the employment rates of those with multiple barriers to work that need to increase. Many hard to reach lone parents are busy surviving on a day-to-day basis, and have no long-term plans. We believe that these are the lone parents that will either disappear from the system or suffer the effect of sanctioning without being able to do anything about it.

What is more we remain totally opposed to this policy and any further moves towards conditionality. We believe that what is missing from this reform is an understanding that many lone parents do not want to work because they want to care full time for their children. Lone parents notions about work and care are diverse, and it is not the age of the child that determines whether a lone parent feels that the right moment has come for her/him to prioritise paid work over the care of her/his children. Policies should focus in increasing support and targeting it to those that want to work, enabling them into intermediate steps to employment that will lead them to sustainable jobs. In what follows we express our concern over the conditionality approach.

Trust

- It is been hard enough to engage those least work ready in voluntary programs. The least work ready, including those that are not ready to work because they have young children, have been harder to engage into voluntary programs because they lack trust in JobCentre Plus and fear that they will be pushed into work¹.
- Perceived pressure ‘to work’ 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.

Language and stigma Increased conditionality increases the stigmatisation of lone parents as ‘inactive scroungers’. We are particularly concerned about the use of the language ‘activity/inactivity’: to define Rights and Responsibilities’- caring for children should be recognised as an active and vital contribution to society.

Impact of conditionality on lone parents Although conditionality might have a positive impact on traditional JSA clients as the background paper to this review has found², lone parents are a very different group.

- Synthesis of Work Focused Interviews (WFI) effectiveness found that it did not succeed in persuading those lone parents that did not want to work, 2/3 of these saying it made no difference at all³.
- Behavioural economics theory, as outlined in the background paper,⁴ is useful in explaining that people sometimes make choices that are not in their self-interest. What it fails to capture is that lone 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 full-time mother⁵. This diversity is patterned along class, race, and varies across neighbourhood and nations. Whilst in many European countries lone mothers have always been perceived as workers and mothers in England lone mothers have since the beginning of the welfare state been treated as mothers⁶, a notion held much stronger in certain areas and

¹ Cambridge Policy Consultants (1997) *Vulnerable Groups in Glasgow Works*, CPC: Cambridge; Social Exclusion Unit (2004b) *Jobs and Enterprise in Deprived Areas*, ODPM: London

² DWP (2008) *More support higher expectations: the role of conditionality in improving employment outcomes, a background research and discussion paper*, DWP

³ Thomas A (2007) *Lone Parent Work Focused Interviews: Synthesis of findings*, DWP Research Report 443

⁴ *ibid* 2

⁵ Duncan S and Edwards R (1999) *Lone Mothers, Paid Work and Gendered Moral Rationalities*, Macmillan

⁶ Kiernan, K., H Land and Lewis J (1998) *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain*, Clarendon Press, Oxford

neighbourhoods⁷. It is unfair if not impossible to ask lone mothers who hold a full-time motherhood ideals 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 that are at odds with what they believe to be right (Finch, 1989), even if they risk losing income.

- In our EU funded transnational research⁸ with children living in single parent families, children of secondary school age tell us that when their parents are working some of them end up caring for their younger siblings; others have no quality time with their parents. They strongly feel that this compounds their social exclusion from peer activities, which is paramount to them, and also prevents them from achieving their potential in education. Policies to eradicate child poverty need to be informed by a better understanding of the interplay between financial and time poverty that affects both children and parents in lone parent families. In this respect the recent Work and Family Act was disappointing as it mostly focused on a welcome extension of maternity leave and pay, and did not pay much attention to policies such as paid parental leave and paid time off for sick children, which are vital to enable lone parents to juggle paid work and parenting single-handedly.

International evidence and the UK Conditionality has been increased amongst many other countries, and the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has called for countries to increase conditionality. But:

- a) **The evidence is mixed.** With the US example showing that putting a limit on the time on which benefits can be relied resulted in an increase in child poverty rates⁹. As the DWP five-year strategy of 2005 recognised, the New Zealand case found that increasing pressure on lone parents doesn't necessary work if adequate childcare is not available. The work test approach was later replaced by a case management approach offering holistic support with the aim of engaging clients into sustainable employment¹⁰.
- b) **A different policy context** The cases of Denmark and the Netherlands show much more positive results. The latter has historical similarities in the UK in the way in which it had for long treated lone mothers as mothers¹¹. Still the road to reform has been difficult with a lot of resistance from lone parents¹². Moreover it's success is strongly linked to generous benefits and opportunities for flexible employment. Denmark on the other hand had since the 1970s treated mothers as mothers and workers; it has also always had a very well developed childcare provision and strong leave policies. Leave policies and childcare provision are still very limited in the UK.

⁷ Duncan S and Edwards note 7

⁸ Taylor, Cohen, Crawford, Giullari and Walker (2007) *Integrating Children Perspectives in Policy Making to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion Experienced by Single Parent families: England National Report*

⁹ US Census Bureau Data-under 18's poverty

¹⁰ DWP (2005) *Department for Work and Pensions Five Year Strategy*: DWP.

¹¹ Lewis J (1997) *Lone Mothers in European Welfare Regimes*, JKP, London

¹² Millar, J and M Evans (2003) *Lone Parents and employment: International comparison of what works*, CASP: University of Bath, Bath

- c) Increased conditionality cannot work if work-life balance policies and childcare are not sufficiently developed to enable lone parents to juggle work and parenting. According to the Institute of Public Policy Research, in 2006 there were only 1.2 million childcare places, 800 children centres reaching 650, 000 children, extended school programs in 5,000 schools and 12½ hours free early education for every 3 and 4 year old. The latter is staggered across a number of days prohibiting easy access to part-time work, especially given that single parents are only eligible for tax credits when working over 16 hours a week. Undoubtedly this is great progress but not enough to meet demand. Furthermore access is not equal, with children in ‘jobless households’, in lone parent families, and with special education needs, being less likely to benefit from this expansion¹³. Key issues are around quality and affordability of childcare. Despite the significant increase in government spending, from £1 billion in 1996/7 to 5.5 in 2007/8, the reliance on market provision has increased costs of childcare, which are amongst the highest in the developed world. Therefore even those lone parents that qualify for the childcare tax credit cannot afford to pay the remaining 20% of costs. Market expansion also raises important issues for quality of provision.

Hard to reach and multiply disadvantaged more likely to suffer sanctions or disappear from the system

- These lone parents are less likely to trust this new policy
- These are the lone parents that have been harder to engage in NDLP
- Long-term claimants and disadvantaged lone parents have low self-confidence issues, therefore more likely to fear this change
- Less likely to have the capability (information, confidence, skills, time) to question JSA staff discretionary decisions. The new regime with its complex safeguards does rest on discretion an awful lot.
- Those who experience a combination of disadvantages such as debt, housing instability, domestic violence, school truancy, stress and anxiety are likely to find it very hard to comply with mandatory job-seeking activities. We do see a lot of these lone parents at SPAN.
- Our participatory research with 68 lone parents across 5 UK cities¹⁴, found that holistic support was key to enabling those experiencing disadvantage to move forward. There is no provision for advisers to provide holistic support during interviews with lone parents on JSA. In fact the synthesis of findings on Lone Parent work focused interviews¹⁵ has found that advisers tend to focus mostly on work search, with very little attention to childcare or training, never mind being able to

¹³ K, Bellamy K and Graeme C (2006) *Equal Access? Appropriate and affordable childcare for every child* IPPR, London

¹⁴ Giullari S. (2007) *Proofed for Parents by Parents: Participatory One parent Proofing: Findings*, SPAN

¹⁵ Thomas A (2007) *Lone Parent Work Focused Interviews: Synthesis of findings*, DWP Research Report 443,

assess acute disadvantage and refer lone parents to the right agencies for support. The work-first target based approach does not provide incentives for adviser to provide holistic support.

- For all the reasons above we are concerned that these are the kind of lone parents who will disappear from the benefit system. The DWP¹⁶ estimates that 15% of lone parents currently on Income Support will disappear from the system. We do not think that they appreciate that it is likely to be those very lone parent families in most need that are likely to fall through the gap into absolute poverty.
- The impact of sanctions on this group is likely to be very detrimental. A Department for Work & Pensions study¹⁷ on sanctions found that many claimants did not comply with attending Work Focused Interviews for fear of work pressure. 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, thereby 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 need to be taken seriously.
- We are also concerned that these are the lone parents who may endure sanctions. Recent qualitative research¹⁸ 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 issue 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. It also found that they coped by borrowing money from local lenders and reducing basic expenditure. Most of all the research found that sanctions had no effect on labour market behaviour.

¹⁶ DWP Draft Social Security (Lone Parents and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2008 available at http://www.ssac.org.uk/pdf/draft_regs_140508.pdf.

¹⁷ Joyce L and Whiting K (2006) *Sanctions: qualitative summary report on lone parent customers*, DWP working paper 27 Stanley

¹⁸ Goodwin V (2008) *The effects of benefit sanctions on lone parents' employment decisions and moves into employment*, DWP Research Report 511

Cycling Lone parents are twice more likely than other comparable groups to cycle back to welfare¹⁹; they certainly do worse than partnered mothers²⁰. We are still not sure why this is but it is linked to issues of low-pay, insecure childcare and inflexible jobs. In our participatory research²¹, we found that insecurity of work hours is a key issue, with lone parents being asked only once started in a job to work evenings and weekends.

- Increase in conditionality with increase flexibility is complicated and still likely to increase the number of lone parents entering unsustainable jobs. We appreciate the safeguard being proposed such as those who allow lone parents to seek work that fits around school hours even if demand for this kind of work in their local area is low. But the reality is that these additional flexibilities are complex, difficult to challenge for lone parents, and difficult to administer for advisers and JSA staff already very pressed for time and working under a work-based target system.

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¹⁹ Evans, M., Harkness, S., and Arigoni Ortiz, R. (2004) *Lone Parents Cycling Between Work And Benefits*, DWP Research Report WAE 217: London

²⁰ Yeo, A (2007) *Experience of work and job retention among lone parents: an evidence review*, DWP WP 37: London

²¹ Giullari (2007) see note 14