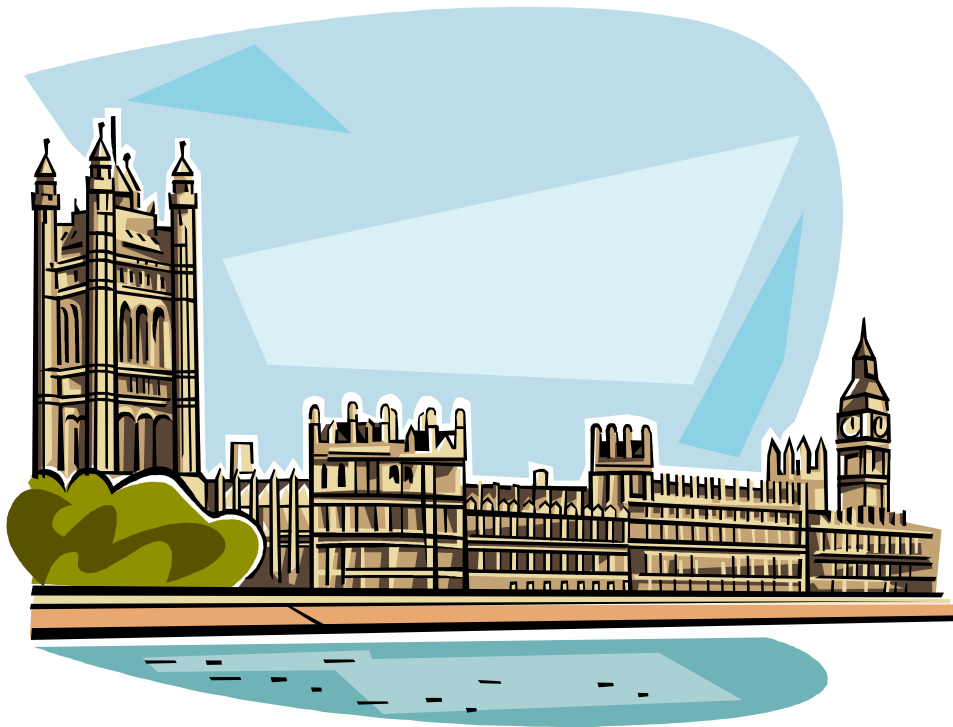




SPAN
Single Parent Action Network

Lone Parents Need More Incentives, Not Benefit Cuts



**SPAN's response to reports that benefits may be
conditional on work related activities**

13.2.2007

Recent media coverage reports that John Hutton is looking into stronger conditionality, including investigating the possibilities of cutting benefits for lone parents with children over 11. The debate on stricter work related requirements for lone parents on Income Support and Incapacity Benefit claimants has returned. The Institute of Public Policy Research argued that this would be in line, necessary and just. Ministers are sympathetic and see it as an important step to reinforce the 'rights and responsibilities' agenda. Even Will Hutton has argued in the Observer, a couple of months back that Blair should have followed much stricter welfare reform, as per the Clinton administration.

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 *all* children should be recognised as an active and vital contribution to society.

In practice this increased conditionality has so far been applied to: a) the increase of Work Focused Interviews for lone parents, b) in the introduction of Work Related Activity Premiums on an 'opt-out' basis for lone parents with children over 11, and there is also talk of extending this to parents of younger children; c) the current reform of Incapacity Benefit, soon to be Education and Support Allowance (ESA).

We believe that lone parents need more incentives and opportunities, not sanctions and this is why:

1.1. Voluntary participation works best. The case of the Netherlands has shown that lone mothers rebelled against strict sanctions¹. International evidence² tells us that incentives work much better than sanctions. Incentives send a clear message that engagement in soft-skills training or voluntary work is a worthwhile activity that does not entail a loss of benefits or financial insecurity. Incentives with no sanctions would counteract fears of compulsion to work, and help build trust in Pathways to Work and the New Deal for Lone Parents.

1.2. It is the employment rates of those with multiple barriers to work that need to increase if the employment and child poverty targets are to be met. Multiple barriers to work require a longer investment, not benefit cuts. Many hard to reach lone parents are busy surviving on a day-to-day basis, and have no long-term plans.

1.3. Perceived pressure 'to work' can put lone parents off. Many worry about going to Job Centre Plus and about being 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.

¹ Stanley K, Asta Lohde L and White S (2004) *Sanction and Sweeteners: Rights and Responsibilities in the Benefit System* IPPR London.

² Millar, J and M Evans (2003) *Lone Parents and employment: International comparison of what works*, CASP: University of Bath, Bath

1.4. Benefit sanctions, never mind benefit cuts, can carry very problematic consequences. US evidence³ indicates that those with multiple barriers are more likely to fail to comply with requirements and **thus suffer sanctions**, precisely because they're multiply disadvantaged. Given the high number of multiple disadvantaged amongst lone parents, the repercussion on child well-being are likely to be very high. A recent Department for Work & Pensions study³ on sanctions found that many claimants did not comply for fear of work pressure. Although advisers used it as a last resort, the impact of sanctions was: poverty of all family members increased, had to go without essentials, unable to provide trips for the children, pocket money, increased stress levels, compounding existing depression/anxieties.

1.5. The 11+ target is contradictory to the Government emphasis on active parenting. The Government understands the importance of parental involvement in teenagers' lives to avoid teenage pregnancy, truancy, or general anti-social behaviour. The ex-Minister for Children, Margaret Hodge, has stressed that parental involvement in teenagers' lives is vital, and yet difficult and time consuming. We are currently conducting EU funded transnational research with children living in single parent families. Children of secondary 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 in education.

1.6. Increased conditionality cannot work if childcare and work-life balance policies and practice are not sufficiently developed to enable lone parents to juggle work and parenting. The recent Work Family Act did not go far enough, and mostly extended maternity leave and pay and made it transferable to fathers. Childcare remains too expensive, even for those that can qualify for 80% rebate on Working Tax Credit.

1.7. Finally we are concerned about increased conditionality for those parents who have ill-health. We know that lone parents have a higher risk of physical and mental ill-health⁴. Ill-health changes over time and it is unlikely that the new 'limited capability to work' test is going to be flexible enough to capture this.

³ Joyce L and Whiting K (2006) *Sanctions: qualitative summary report on lone parent customers*, DWP working paper 27

⁴ Barnes, M et al (2004) *Families And Children In Britain: Findings From The 2002 Families And Children Study*, DWP Research Report No 206, DWP