



**"There's
only
one
of me"**

Single parents,
welfare reform
and
the real world

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Executive summary

The Welfare Reform Bill proposes sanctions for single parents with children between three and seven who do not take part in “work related activity”. This report uses the voices of single parents to illustrate the problems with this proposal.

The experiences collated in our report show that:

- Single parents have been promised “personalised support”, but they are experiencing difficulties in an increasingly stretched benefits system.
- Jobcentre Plus advisers will have further powers to cut single parents’ benefits. This undermines the relationship of trust between single parents and advisers.
- Benefits cuts cause hardship and stress and they are ineffective. The Government’s own research shows that sanctions do not help people to get jobs.
- Work is not a route out of poverty for too many single parents. 32% of children with a single parent working part time are poor as well as 22% of children with a single parent working full time.
- For single parents in low paid jobs, every day costs, such as travel, school meals and childcare top-ups, can wipe out the financial advantages of working or even leave single parents out of pocket.
- Rather than encouraging the “higher expectations” as the Government promises, the current benefits system limits single parents’ abilities to access training beyond Level 2. Many single parents feel pushed towards the first job that comes long rather than the right job for them.
- Families who have experienced domestic violence, are often in no shape to deal with the pressures of moving onto JSA and seeking work. They need space to rebuild their lives.
- Despite improvements in childcare provision there are still gaps in provision. Single parents still find there are too few opportunities to take up flexible work that is a good fit with their responsibilities.
- Single parents feel caught in a trap where they are branded as “bad mothers” if they are not there for their children and derided as “benefits scroungers” if they stay at home.

Gingerbread's recommendations

Carrots and not sticks

The Government must drop plans to cut the benefits of single parents who do not take part in Work Related Activity that is determined by a Jobcentre Plus adviser

Single parents who take part in extra activities to find work, should receive an additional payment as an incentive to get back into work.

The Government must honour its commitment to deliver the Claimants Charter setting out parents' rights and put clear mechanisms in place to hold employment and benefit services to account.¹

¹ The Government has committed to introducing a Claimant's Charter – we want to ensure it really does protect rights for parents

Making work workable

Single Parents in low paid work need to see measures put in place to make work financially worthwhile.

Single parents should receive the full costs of childcare through Working Tax Credit.

Free school meals should be available to all single parents claiming Working Tax Credit.

The Government must extend financial support to parents who work less than 16 hours each week. The Government has said it will pilot a scheme to offer financial incentives to single parents working less than 16 hours per week: this pilot scheme should be rolled out nationally.

Better opportunities for the future

The Government must drop restrictions on training for single parents on Jobseeker's Allowance. Single parents without a Level 3 qualification should receive the support they need to up-skill.

The Government must fulfill its commitment to provide a childcare place for every working parent as part of the Childcare Strategy.

The Government must lead by example by ensuring that all Government jobs – and agencies it works with – offer flexible working, part-time and job share opportunities.

The Government must develop an action plan to consult with single parents over welfare reform and act on their concerns.

Introduction

² DWP (2008) Raising expectations and increasing support: reforming welfare for the future CM7506

“ These reforms will be based on giving people more power over their lives. ”

JAMES PURNELL, FORWARD TO THE WHITE PAPER ON WELFARE REFORM. ²

Welfare reforms are always presented by the Government as an empowering set of measures. Getting people into paid work, we are told, will liberate them from poverty and from “dependency” on the state. But successive welfare reforms have left many single parents feeling disempowered – by the welfare system itself, and by the continued obstacles placed in their way when they try to move into work.

The Government talks about empowerment but is planning to implement policies where single parents can see their benefits cut for failing to comply with a Jobcentre Plus decision about the steps they must take to prepare for paid work. In this climate, single parents have been quick to point out the difference between the Government’s rhetoric and their own lives.

This report uses the experiences of single parents to illustrate their problems with the proposed welfare reform bill. We asked our single parent members and website visitors to tell us what they thought about benefits, working life and the proposals set out in the Welfare Reform Bill. The comments presented here come from the 200 single parents who told their stories. They reveal the depth of their anxiety about the new reforms and the distance that they feel has sprung up, between the political debate and their real world experiences of single parenting.

Their comments show that an increasingly stretched benefits system has a long way to go before it can claim to offer the “personalised service” promised by government. What’s more, they indicate that giving Jobcentre Plus advisers the power to cut single parents’ benefits is neither fair nor realistic. Their stories reveal that paid work does not always make financial sense and though most single parents aspire to find work – many who are working part-time are still poor.

Most of all we see that single parents are struggling with the difficulty of balancing caring responsibilities with working life. And that even with an increase in childcare over the past ten years, they talk about the problems they are having in finding affordable and appropriate childcare places for their children – especially during the school summer holidays, and when they are trying to fit childcare in with shift-work, temp work and anti-social hours.

Single parents want their families to be better off when they return to employment. Over twenty percent of children with a single parent working full-time remain poor. Single parents want to know that childcare is out there when they need it – over two thirds of Family Information Services say that parents report a lack of available childcare in their area.³ And, most importantly, they want to be allowed to make the choice about when and how to work, so they can juggle working life with the responsibility of caring for their children by themselves.

³ Daycare Trust Childcare Costs Survey 2009

In short, this is a group that is as keen as any politician to see changes that will make work workable for them. But their needs and responsibilities as parents must be understood as part of the drive for them to find work.

⁴ Only one in three parents receive child maintenance from their child's other parent

As the Welfare Reform Bill moves through parliament in its current state, it fails to take into account the “real world” hurdles faced by so many single parents who must be everything to their child – carer, breadwinner and emotional support.⁴

Context: single parents, employment and the Welfare Reform Bill 2009

The welfare system has been in permanent revolution for the past five years with the Welfare Reform Bill 2009 following closely at the heels of the Welfare Reform Act 2007. Each reform has sought to tighten the conditions placed on benefit claimants, including single parents.

The Government says that it wants more single parents to be in paid work, to help tackle child poverty. Parents will only engage with the benefit system, it says, if support is backed by sanctions. But under the previous system, where single parents were given more support but not compelled to seek paid work, they moved into employment faster than any other group. Between 1997 and 2009, the single parent employment rate increased by twelve percentage points – a larger increase than for any other disadvantaged group.

Gingerbread believes that single parents still face substantial barriers when they attempt to take up paid jobs – not least during the current economic climate. Tackling the problems they face in the real world would do far more to reduce child poverty than the threat of additional benefit cuts.

How many single parents are already in work?

⁵ www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=409

There are 1.9 million single parents in the UK, caring for 3.1 million children. The single parent employment rate has risen from 44 per cent in 1997 to 56.3 per cent in June 2008.⁵

How does the current benefit system work for single parents?

Until November 2008, single parents with children aged 16 or younger could claim Income Support, and were not asked to look for work. They did have to attend compulsory “Work Focused Interviews” at the Jobcentre every six months to discuss returning to work.

In November 2008, the Government introduced a major change to the benefits system for single parents, moving those with children aged seven and over from Income Support onto Jobseeker’s Allowance. Claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) means that you must attend Jobcentre Plus every two weeks, and you must show that you are looking for paid work.

Claimants who fail to meet these conditions or who turn down a job without "good cause" can be sanctioned – that is have their benefits cut. Parents may lose up to 40 per cent of their benefits, if they are cut. This change is to be introduced incrementally:

- From November 2008, single parents whose youngest child is aged 12 or over had to claim Jobseeker's Allowance.
- From October 2009, single parents whose youngest child is aged 10 or over will have to claim Jobseeker's Allowance.
- From October 2010, single parents whose youngest child is aged 7 and over will have to claim Jobseeker's Allowance.

JSA is currently delivered by Jobcentre Plus. However, parents (or other claimants) who have been on JSA for more than 12 months are passed onto private and third sector providers as part of the "flexible new deal" being introduced by Government.

What does the Welfare Reform Bill say?

The Welfare Reform Bill 2009 is currently in committee stage of the House of Lords. If passed, it is likely to become law in November 2009. The Bill goes further than previous reforms by proposing two major changes that will impact on single parents who are claiming out of work benefits:

- Single parents with children aged between three and seven will be asked to take part in 'Work Related Activity'. 'Work Related Activity' is defined by the Government as: "any activity which makes it more likely that the person will obtain or remain in work or be able to do so".
- Single parents with children aged over seven who have been on benefits for over two years will have to take part in "work for your benefit" schemes, which involve taking part in unpaid work in return for financial support.

Single parent introduction

A call for support and not sanctions from a single parent

“One month, my benefits payments were very late and I had to walk over a mile to the phone box with my son who was less than one year old. I was in tears and begging them not to put me on hold as what little money I had was being eaten by phone charges. I was begging them please do something, make an emergency payment or something. I was sobbing and telling them I had no nappies left, no cash for my electric meter and I was obviously desperate. ‘Sorry I can’t help you. Nothing doing until next week.’ Eventually the phone line died on me when the money ran out and I screamed out loud with my son sat in his buggy outside.”

“We are totally alone and even though I worked every day since leaving school until a year after my son was born when I was 35-years-old and I do have that “work ethic”, I am torn between work and my son’s happiness. I would love to be able to earn enough to come off benefits and still be able to manage financially. However, even if that were possible, with whom or where does my son end up from early morning before school starts until late at night when I get home? How does that benefit him?

“I am not a single parent by choice, neither am I a young teenager. I have paid plenty of NI and tax in the past, so why can’t I decide when the time is right for me to leave my son, and why can’t I get more help to get into a job I already know I want to train for, so I can be self employed and self sufficient?”

Michelle Dougherty

Blunt instruments: sanctions and the benefits system

What's the problem?

“ We want to draw on the best of international welfare systems... where personalised support is matched by clear obligations on individuals to engage with support. ”

RAISING EXPECTATIONS AND INCREASING SUPPORT:
REFORMING WELFARE FOR THE FUTURE, DECEMBER 2008
(THE WHITE PAPER ON WELFARE REFORM)

The Government says it wants to offer a personalised system to help people into work. Single parents will have to agree an action plan with their advisers; if the adviser thinks a single parent is not doing enough, they can impose a benefit sanction, reducing their benefit by up to 40 per cent a week – enforcing the “obligation” to work or look for employment.

⁶ Goodwin V, DWP (2008)
The effects of benefit sanctions on lone parents' employment decisions and moves into employment carried DWP Research Report No 511

The Government's own research shows that sanctions do not help people to get jobs. A report published by the Department for Work and Pensions found that the “sanction regime has had negligible effects upon labour market behaviour”⁶ But sanctions are a stick that the Government is increasingly willing to wield. In 2003-4 31,720 people on Jobseeker's Allowance saw their benefits cut. By 2007-9 the number had climbed to 47,000.

Benefits cuts may not have a dramatic effect in helping single parents into jobs. But their impact on the poorest families can be severe. Half of all children living with a single parent are already poor. During the economic downturn, they are already cutting their food and fuel bills to make ends meet.

⁷ Joyce L and Whiting K (2006) Sanctions: Qualitative summary report on lone parent customers DWP Working Paper No. 27

Under a regime where benefits can be cut, the poorest families may become poorer. Research, again published by the DWP, found that single parents who had been sanctioned reported more hardship. They frequently had to resort to borrowing money from friends and family and were unable to pay for school trips.⁷

⁸ Claire McNeil, Now it's personal: personal advisers and the new public sector workforce IPPR

“Personalised support” should be the aim of all back-to-work services. But single parents are sceptical about whether this tailored service can be delivered. The Jobcentre Plus advisers, who will be making decisions about whether to impose cuts to single parents' benefits, are increasingly overstretched. A recent report by the IPPR found that since the recession took hold, advisers have gone from delivering 40 to 70 interviews a month.⁸

And while many single parents receive a decent service from Jobcentre Plus, too many report delays in receiving their benefits and mistakes in the amount they receive; as well as poor treatment from some staff. The Welfare Reform Bill clearly sets out plans for the sanctions regime but makes no guarantees about the level of positive support single parents will receive.

Sanctions are a blunt instrument and one that Gingerbread fears will be wielded clumsily.

What do single parents say?

Sanctions worry single parents who are already struggling to cope

The threat of sanctions can add stress to single parents already feeling under pressure to find employment:

Louise “I am massively worried that if I should not be able to find a job what benefits I am entitled to. Will I potentially lose my house that I have worked hard to maintain? These are all questions I have never had to ask before as I have worked since I was 16 years old and never claimed benefits.”

“The future is uncertain as it is without the added pressure of not knowing if I will get the support when I need help. I hope the past 17 years I have paid my taxes is taken into account and the government recognises that single parents who have struggled to go back to work should not be penalised.”

Such concerns can also change the nature of the relationship between the single parent and the personal adviser. While many single parents have a good relationship with their personal adviser, too many report that developing a “partnership” is impossible in a situation where they have no power and are often treated with little respect:

Lois “For a brief period of this year I had to live on benefits and in the application process was treated like some lazy, skiving, drug addicted good for nothing when I explained that I could not apply for jobs in the early morning or weekend because that is when my son needs me!”

Amanda “I have also had a run in with one of the Lone Parent Benefit Advisers in the past and I believe that in the future she could make my life difficult. The relationship is unequal and questionable. It concerns me that they have the power to apply benefit sanctions. I do not think lone parents should be penalised again and again for the position they hold in society. What sort of jobs are out there? I was no better off in work really. The most vulnerable will be pushed again into low paid jobs where the cycle of deprivation and social exclusion is unlikely to change.”

Single parents doubt the system's ability to deliver

For many single parents, the promise of a personalised system is one which they do not trust will be kept. Single parents frequently report errors and delays in receiving their benefits payments:

Jaynie “I lost a job because of the amount of time I was spending calling [the benefits office] when my benefit was stopped completely for four months. I couldn't get hold of people in the department because it was a call centre and I was working full time so I couldn't spend long and had to keep having to hang up.”

Gingerbread's calls to action

Gingerbread does not believe that sanctions are fair or effective:

- The Government must drop plans to cut the benefits of single parents who do not take part in Work Related Activity decided on by a Jobcentre Plus adviser.
- Instead, single parents who take part in extra activities to find work should receive an additional payment as an incentive to get back into employment.
- The Government must honour its commitment to deliver the Claimants Charter setting out parents' rights and put clear mechanisms in place to hold employment and benefit services to account.⁹

⁹ The Government has committed to introducing a Claimant's Charter – we want to ensure it really does protect rights for parents

Better off in work? Single parents, employment and aspirations

What's the problem?

“ These reforms are based on a simple deal: more support matched by higher expectations. Raising expectations and increasing support. ”

REFORMING WELFARE FOR THE FUTURE, DECEMBER 2008
(THE WHITE PAPER ON WELFARE REFORM)

The Government believes that “work is the best route out of poverty” and its welfare reforms are based around this principal. Single parents agree. When Gingerbread asked single parents to choose a statement that most reflected their beliefs about working life, the majority chose: “I feel that working sets a good example to my children.”

But single parents – experts at managing on their own on a low income – have done the maths. Many know that, in the real world, work does not always pay. Nearly a third (32 per cent) of children with a single parent working part-time are poor, and even with a parent working full time an escape from poverty isn't guaranteed: 22 per cent of children whose single parent works full-time live below the poverty line.

Working Tax Credit provides in-work financial support for single parents employed for more than 16 hours and helps with 80 per cent of the costs of childcare. But for those in part-time, low paid or minimum wage jobs, everyday costs can wipe out the financial advantages of working or even leave them out of pocket.

Paying for 20 per cent of childcare costs; meeting the costs of school meals – free to those on benefits but not to those in low paid work; and paying travel costs, can soon wipe out gains. Department for Work and Pensions research showed that around half of working single parents felt financially insecure.¹⁰

For those working over 16 hours a week, there is a good chance of being better off. But for those needing to work for less than 16 hours – jobs that are popular with single parents with young children – there is no financial support. As soon as you earn less than £20, your benefits get reduced pound for pound. Yet a third of current Jobcentre Plus vacancies are for these short-hours jobs.

Single parents want to access better jobs in order to escape the poverty trap and find long-term financial stability. But rather than setting “higher expectations” the current system limits their ability to access training beyond Level 2. Parents moved onto Jobseeker's Allowance can only study for less than 16 hours a week or commit to giving up their course if a job comes up.

¹⁰ Ridge T and Millar J (2008) Work and well being over time: lone mothers and their children DWP Research Report No 536

What do single parents say?

Worse off for working?

Single parents on benefits have to count every penny. But a move into work doesn't always mean an escape from the struggle of making ends meet.

Annie “Just before x-mas last year I went back to work part-time. Big mistake. Lost all my money including housing and council tax and even though I was not earning enough, I felt that the benefits agency passed the buck. In the end I quit as I could not afford to be in work.”

Chantelle “At my recent work focussed interview I was given a print out of how much better off I would be if I was to do 20 hours work a week. After taking child care into consideration I would be £30 a week better off and considering that I would lose free school meals for two of my children, (roughly £20 a week) and then take in travelling expenses, (as it would be highly unlikely that I would find a job close to home), I really don't think it is worth me going back to work!! I receive no child maintenance for my children so would not be seeing any money from that.”

Evie “There is still a great struggle to afford child care if you are a single parent on a low income, and if it weren't for my mother looking after my son, I probably couldn't work, as what I would spend on a child minder would be very nearly what I would earn for that time at work.”

Welfare reform leaves no room for long-term aspirations

Single parents tell Gingerbread that they want to re-train and up-skill to access more rewarding employment with long-term prospects and greater remuneration. But the system appears to curb their plans. Too many say they appear to be pushed towards taking the first job that comes along, rather than the right job.

Sara “At my last work focussed interview I was advised to train as a hairdresser because the local college offers free vocational training in this field and purely for this reason. This was in spite of the fact that I have no interest in hairdressing. I do have a degree and 15 years; experience as a Company Director though...”

Emma “I am taking an Open University degree in order to increase my opportunities in the job market when I feel I am ready. This is about 16 hours of study time each week when the children are at school. If I have to take some mind numbing low paid job it will seriously jeopardise my chances of completing my degree. I think it is disgraceful that the government are harassing and intimidating mothers who are already doing an important job in the most stressful of conditions.”

Cheryl “As I am likely to be laid off during the next few months I am very worried. I was hassled constantly by the job centre to take any job available and ended up taking a very low administrative job that is now at risk due to the current financial

position. It took me years to actually get a job as being an older mum no one seems to want to employ you. I dread going onto benefits again.”

Options for retraining are limited or not available

Lorraine “I found a job training programme of my own back but I wasn’t able to apply for assistance from the DWP because it wasn’t one of their mickey mouse basic skills non-courses. It has been a real struggle finding money for bus fares, lunch etcetera. I often had to leave early to fit in with school but I have done it! If I had had to prove I was actively seeking work I would not have been able to do this. One man on the course had his JSA stopped for being on it!”

Keira “In order to get back into the vocation I had before leaving my last job I need more training to update my skills, I cannot get funding for this, so now have to put behind me a career of 12 years and first class honours degree and take a job that won’t allow me to work to my full potential. This frustrates me immensely as all I needed was a couple of years off to support my children through a difficult time emotionally.”

Tracey “I was told by the adviser in the work focused interview, that I would have to stop studying for my degree and find work next year. The problem with that is even if I am able to find some suitable work, I then will have the added pressure of being lone parent, working and studying at the same time. This pressure with the lone parent back to work drive continues to cause me worry and stress.”

Gingerbread’s calls to action

Parents in low paid work need more support to make work financially worthwhile:

- Single parents should receive the full costs of childcare through Working Tax Credit.
- Free school meals should be available to all single parents claiming Working Tax Credit.
- The Government must extend financial support to parents who work less than 16 hours each week. It has promised to pilot a scheme offering financial incentives to single parents working less than 16 hours per week. This pilot scheme should be rolled out nationally.

Single parents must have better opportunities to re-train:

- The Government must drop restrictions on training for single parents on Jobseeker’s Allowance. Anyone without a Level 3 qualification should receive the support they need to up-skill.

"There's only one of me": working and caring

What's the problem?

“ Staying at home or returning to work must be a choice for parents, and our role is to make that a real choice – to make both staying at home and returning to work practical and realistic, so that parents can do what is best for them and their children.”

ED BALLS, SPEECH TO DAYCARE TRUST, 17TH JUNE 2007

Single parents often say they are frustrated that few of the services they rely on – employers, Jobcentre Plus and childcare services – understand that they are their child's only support and that this makes the work/life balance harder to manage. If they are not able to pick their child up from nursery, no one else will do it for them. If a single parent's child is ill, they may be the only adult who can look after them at short-notice. If parents have recently separated, and particularly after experiences of domestic violence, the juggling act can be even tougher.

The number of childcare places has risen substantially over the last ten years. But there is still a long way to go: 69 per cent of Family Information Services (FIS) in England and Wales said that parents had reported a lack of childcare in their area in the last 12 months. Single parents still cite the lack of childcare as a barrier to taking up work, particularly during children's school holidays.

Single parents tell us that finding a job with hours that is a good fit in with school and nursery hours is their biggest obstacle to finding work. Single parents moving into work have no right to ask for flexible working until they have been employed for six months.

Combining paid work with caring for your child is challenging for any parent. But single parents feel caught in a trap where they are branded as bad parents if they are not there for their child; and derided as benefit scroungers if they stay at home.

What do single parents say?

The right childcare is not always out there

All local authorities now have a duty to provide "sufficient childcare" for working parents. But single parents are still telling us that they have difficulty finding affordable, timely and appropriate childcare:

Yvonne “I’m worried as I don’t have any support to look after my children if the job I was to get was out of the hours of 9-5. There is no childcare.”

Laura “I am trying to go back to work at the moment... I tried to return to work 18 months ago. I had a successful interview at a call centre and was due to start when the government pulled the funding at the local after school facility, stating that they only got adequate numbers in the holidays. I live on quite a poor estate and that was the only out of school hours childcare.”

Flora “When there is no wrap around care, as in my village, I am very restricted in the hours that I am able to work.”

Lack of flexible working can be a deal breaker

Even with good childcare in place, parents still need to be able to fit their working hours around their caring responsibilities.

Zoe “Whilst I was in work I found it impossible... coping with inadequate childcare and employers who pretend to be family friendly but are not, was too much. I found it impossible and resigned from a job I loved.”

Yvette “I work mainly as a temp and therefore most jobs do not have flexi time. This means that if I have to take time off if my son is sick, I don’t get paid and lose out.”

Melanie “I have been unable to take a number of roles as they require employees to work various hours, which is not possible for single parents relying solely on childcare hours, and we miss opportunities because of this”

Surayi “Despite the fact that I am educated to degree level, the fact that I have two small children who cannot be left alone before and after school means that I am very restricted in the work that I can do...”

Paul “Employers tend to view flexible working as something that only applies to mothers”

Stigma and prejudice affect the way single parents feel and are treated

The stigma and stereotypes that so many single parents face in their lives, also adds pressure to their search for work and can affect their self-esteem – both as workers and as parents.

Annette “You are damned if you do work and you are damned if you don’t. If you work you are labelled as an uncaring parent with latchkey children who are in danger of becoming feral (!)... and if you don’t work so that you are around for your children you are labelled a scrounger.”

Alison “On the one hand we are demonised and blamed for all the problems in society but then you’re not allowed to make sure that you are there for your children...”

Debs “I feel prejudiced against by my colleagues simply because I am a Lone Parent. It is difficult to strike a balance between work and being there for your children. It is frustrating.”

These pressures are even tougher for parents who have experienced violence

Single parents are three times more likely than other women to have experienced domestic violence. These single parents are particularly worried about their ability to fulfil work search requirements.

Katie “When you’re in that [violent] situation you have no confidence left at all, everything’s completely sapped away from you. So for them [the Government] to start pushing somebody into a situation where you’ve got to take responsibility – you’ve got to take your own life back first... I don’t think you can think about putting someone who’s been through that back to work until they’re 100 per cent back on their feet.”¹¹

Zandra “They say to you when you leave your relationship it gets better, it doesn’t, it gets harder, because you’re still looking behind your back you’re still wondering, oh, that stranger, you know, why’s he looking at me, could he be somebody, could he be that person?... And that’s what it is from day to day, and that’s what it is when it comes to going out to work. How can you be at work when you’re still looking over your back?”¹²

¹¹ Bell K and Cober C (2008) The financial impact of domestic violence Gingerbread and Family Action

¹² Ibid

Gingerbread’s calls to action

- **The Government must fulfil its commitment to provide a childcare place for every working parent as part of the Childcare Strategy.**
- **The Government must lead by example by ensuring that all Government jobs – and agencies it works with – offer flexible working, part-time and job share opportunities.**
- **The Government must create an action plan to consult with single parents over welfare reform and act on their concerns.**

Conclusion

The message that emerges from the voices of single parents in this report, is their aspirations to work. The single parents Gingerbread has spoken to, recognise the value that work would bring to their own lives and those of their young children. And they acknowledge that having a job is about more than just earning money. It is crucial to their self-esteem and to garnering a sense of identity beyond their roles as parents – one that can only have a positive impact on family life.

Yet, they feel that their ambitions are too often thwarted by a lack of understanding of their needs in returning to the workplace after time out to have children; and their responsibilities as lone parents, who must often carry the burden of childcare alone and without the cushion of financial and emotional support from another adult. Only one in three single parents receive maintenance payments from an absent parent.

The Government says it is offering more support for single parents. But these promises remain vague and are couched within a benefits system that is becoming increasingly overstretched, and where errors and mistakes can already leave single parents in debt and hardship. The big stick of benefits sanctions can leave children in poverty. Understandably, these parents are worried and anxious. They feel that their voices are not being heard.

But there is still time for politicians to listen. The Welfare Reform Bill remains in Parliament and there remain opportunities for change. Single parents must be helped and not hindered as they try to give their children the best chance of a secure and happy life, free of poverty and hardship.

Now is the time to act.



Gingerbread

Single parents, equal families

Gingerbread is the national charity working with single parent families. Formed following a merger of the National Council for One Parent Families and Gingerbread, we now provide increased support and a stronger campaigning voice for single parents and their families.

Gingerbread Single Parent Helpline **0800 018 5026**

Open 9am to 5pm Mondays to Fridays
with extended opening to 8pm on Wednesdays
Expert telephone information and advice for single parents

Gingerbread Single Parent Information Online

www.gingerbread.org.uk/information
Dedicated online information and advice for single parents

Gingerbread Membership

www.gingerbread.org.uk/membership
Share experiences, hear about discounts and
get involved with Gingerbread's work

Gingerbread Development and Skills

www.gingerbread.org.uk/skills
Training, employability and confidence-building programmes
for single parents, advisers and practitioners

Gingerbread Policy and Campaigning

www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy
Building on over 90 years of campaigning expertise to deliver
change for single parent families