



“The impact of disability on child poverty levels in the UK is shocking: around a quarter of all children living in poverty have a disabled parent.”

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Gabrielle Preston, Policy and Research Officer at the UK's Child Poverty Action Group, discusses the government's proposals on welfare reform and asks whether these really address the needs of disabled people with parenting responsibilities.

Research

The reform of the welfare system – particularly of incapacity benefits – has, over the years, generated a great deal of debate. It is a highly charged issue that has taken its toll on a number of Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions. It has been left to John Hutton MP to introduce the Green Paper on Welfare Reform, which outlines the government's strategy to move one million people of working age off incapacity benefits and guide the Bill through parliament.

One in three disabled adults of working age is a parent (Stickland 2003). But do the proposals on welfare reform address the needs of disabled people with parenting responsibilities?

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The government is right to focus on the financial needs of disabled people. Despite progress in many areas, the link between poverty and disability remains intractable. The impact of disability on child poverty levels in the UK is shocking: around a quarter of all children living in poverty have a disabled parent (DWP 2006b) and research indicates that around 55% of disabled children live on or near the margins of poverty (Gordon

2000). For families with both a disabled parent and a disabled child, the situation is much worse. If the government removed all children affected by disability from poverty, it would move some way towards attaining its 2010 target of reducing child poverty by half. It remains to be seen whether the government's programme on welfare reform will complement or detract from its wider commitments on the reduction of child poverty.

So what is being proposed? The Green Paper outlines the government's plans to roll out the Pathways to Work programme, and replace incapacity benefits with a new benefit, currently called the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). A new assessment process and revised Personal Capability Assessment will distinguish between disabled people who are capable of working and those who cannot. Although additional health and support services will be put in place, people deemed capable of working will have to engage in work-focused activities as a condition of receiving benefit. Failure to do so will result in their benefit being reduced in slices until they are on Jobseeker's Allowance – a benefit that fails to safeguard non-disabled people from poverty.

The government has long argued that paid employment is liberating, socially inclusive and likely to draw people out of poverty. However, rhetoric that extols the virtues of employment sometimes sounds like an implicit criticism of those for whom work may not be available or

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possible. Furthermore, while an increase in the employment rate has helped to lift 700,000 children out of relative poverty since 1999, 54% of children living in poverty have a parent who works.

Encouraging people to access badly paid jobs – which may be all that is on offer – is not the solution to child poverty.

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) has been discussing the government's proposals with the people best placed to assess their merits – disabled parents. Our findings – *A route out of poverty? Disabled people, work and welfare reform* – were published on 26 June (Preston 2006). Disabled parents highlight the government's failure to communicate its message on welfare reform effectively. They report that caring for their children – and often other family members as well – makes juggling work and family life difficult.

Although many parents would welcome the opportunity to undertake paid employment, they question the government's motivations: "All they're interested in is targets. They don't care about what sort of a dead-end job they put you into ..." They express concern at the government's failure to address the particular needs of disabled people with parenting responsibilities, and are sceptical about the promise of additional services.

Families feel resentful at the implication that incapacity benefits are generous and constitute an incentive to stay out of work. A lone parent who recently gave up work comments "I was on £20,000 a year and then I was on

£3,500 a year ..." Although living on benefits is a constant struggle, families emphasise that low quality and poorly paid jobs, coupled with extra costs imposed by the need for additional support services, transport and childcare, meant many were little better off in work. On-going discrimination in society as a whole is reflected among employers.

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Disabled parents don't feel that they should be compelled to look for jobs, or threatened with benefit sanctions: "It's not the incentives. People like me are trying hard and not getting anywhere ..."

The government has recently published its summary of responses to its consultation on welfare reform (DWP 2006a), but many questions remain. Will the new system be efficient, equitable or operable? Is it right to compel disabled people to engage in work-focused activities and seek employment? Should the government do more to address discrimination in the workplace and encourage employers to provide better jobs? Will imposing benefit sanctions on some of the UK's most vulnerable people – including parents with learning

disabilities and mental health problems – plunge more parents and children into poverty? Will benefit levels within the new system safeguard disabled people and their families from poverty? CPAG will be monitoring the new system closely, as will disabled parents.

References

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