

parents New job rules 'threaten lone parents'

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/nov/02/children-welfare> The government's own advisers warn that its radical welfare reform plans for parents of under-12s will harm family life and cause poverty. Gordon Brown is facing a chorus of demands to scrap key parts of his flagship welfare reforms after his own advisers said they risked landing single parents in 'in-work' poverty and could seriously harm children's upbringing. A report by the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC), which is appointed by ministers, suggests the plans to force lone parents with children as young as seven to seek work or suffer benefit cuts of up to 40 per cent could increase hardship and be detrimental to family life. The reforms - modelled on tough US welfare policies aimed at halving child poverty by 2010 - could also damage lone parents' health by causing worry and stress and have negative 'wider social impacts' including on children, it says. The findings are a severe embarrassment to ministers, who see their welfare strategy as a highlight of Labour's third-term agenda. The report says the changes, to be introduced fully by 2010, may have the reverse effect to that intended, particularly in an economic downturn when jobs are scarce. 'Lone parents who are sanctioned face financial penalties that will increase child poverty - an outcome at odds with the primary rationale that the Department of Work and Pensions has put forward,' it says. The SSAC suggests that ministers are advancing prematurely, before proper 'wraparound child-care' is in place. Last night Terry Rooney, Labour chairman of the House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee, said ministers should not press ahead with the next phase - forcing parents with children under 12 to look for work - until nationwide childcare arrangements were in place. 'I would certainly not go any further,' he said. 'We need irrefutable evidence that there is full, affordable childcare provision before we do more. There is lots of evidence that it is very patchy, and in London it is inordinately expensive' Rooney said he supported moves to encourage lone parents into work in principle, backed by sanctions if they refused to take suitable jobs, but only when conditions were right. There was a contradiction, however, between the government's commitment to the family and its welfare plans, he said. 'On the one hand the government is saying it wants parents to stop their children becoming vandals, on the other it is saying to lone parents go out to work. It has got to resolve that,' Rooney said. A growing number of Labour MPs and pressure groups representing lone parents believe the plans, due to be rubber-stamped in the Parliament in the next few weeks, should be put off or dropped entirely. Until this month, single parents with a youngest child under 16 in their household have been able to claim income support and have been under no obligation to show they have been seeking work. But as part of the government's plans to halve child poverty by 2010, ministers want to move progressively to a conditions-based system under which, by 2010, most lone parents with a youngest child aged seven or over will be moved onto Jobseekers Allowance (JSA). Those claiming JSA will have to attend a Jobcentre regularly and prove they are actively seeking work. If they fail to do so or refuse to take a job offered to them they could lose up to 40 per cent of their benefit. From 24 October, all lone parents with a youngest child of 12 or over who apply for benefit - except those with a disability or health condition - will be placed on JSA. The age will then drop to 10 in October next year and to seven in October 2010. SSAC chairman Sir Richard Tilt, a former director-general of the Prison Service, told The Observer: 'Given the state of the labour market, it is going to be very difficult to force people into work when there are not the jobs out there. The government conceived these reforms before it knew what the economic situation was.' The committee said ministers had also failed to take into account that many single parents are alone because of bereavement, divorce or in order to escape domestic violence. 'In these cases the lone parent should be enabled to focus on the children and ensure family stability,' it says. James Purnell, the Work and Pensions minister, has seen the recommendations but is determined to go ahead with the policy. Fiona Weir, chief executive of One Parent Families/Gingerbread said: 'The government is piling the pressure on lone parents at a time when the labour market and Jobcentre Plus are already creaking under the strain of extra unemployment. This is the wrong policy at the wrong time and it is lone parents and their children who will lose out. Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union, said the reforms went further than even Margaret Thatcher would have dared. Kate Green of the Child Poverty Action Group said: 'Jobseekers Allowance is not the appropriate benefit for lone parents; it is designed as a benefit for people who are available for work. Parents with caring responsibilities may not be available because of their parenting responsibilities.' Toby Helm, Whitehall editor

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