

No one written off: reforming welfare to reward responsibility

Education Otherwise responded at length to a previous consultation from DWP (In Work, Better Off October 2007) but we found that there appeared to be no communication between the consultation unit and the policy leads (Alison Durbin/Dave Keir/Johanna Blythin) who were unaware that home education was any kind of policy issue. We (home educators and home education support groups) are STAKEHOLDERS and we need to be involved at the pre-consultation stage. If there are consultation events we need a lot of NOTICE so we can attempt to arrange appropriate childcare.

The Education Otherwise Disability Group would like to be involved in any further consultation for the migration of parents caring for disabled and special needs children from IS to JSA or ESA and any other consultations related to changes in the benefit system.

Our contact details are: Jennifer Skillen, Disability Group Chair
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General Comments

“We recognise, however, that not everyone can work. So we have made sure that the right support is available to people out of work to allow them as much control as possible over their lives, whatever their circumstances. We have introduced a stronger framework of rights and responsibilities. **Benefit claimants are now no longer treated as passive recipients, but expected to take active steps to return to work.** This includes training where lack of skills is a barrier to obtaining and retaining work.”

The two statements in bold seem to directly contradict each other. There is no evidence that the government recognises that some people will not be able to work regardless as to the amount of support offered and the severity of sanctions.

A stronger sanctions regime

The statement **without good cause** is used quite often with regards to sanctions. However, there is a worry that the staff that are making the judgement of what is a good cause will not have the training and understanding of home educating parents, and parents caring for disabled or special needs children. It is quite possible that these parents, no matter how ready for work they are, will not be able to work because of their responsibilities toward their children with regard to education and care.

“Instead, we want to send out a clear message that people capable of work, but who have not found a job by this stage, will be required to work full-time or undertake full-time, work-related activity in return for their benefits.” It is entirely possible that if people have not found a job by this time, despite all the help and support in the world, that there just are not the jobs available that would be suitable for their family situation.

Sanctioning this sector of society will only bring further hardship upon these families.

Most disabled people or people with a long-term health condition either have a job or would like one. Saying that one would like a job, is not the same as saying that one is capable of working. Many parents who home educate their children, in particular those with special needs or disabilities, might like to work, but they cannot due to their caring and educational responsibilities.

“I would like to work one day but will never be able get a job while caring for my disabled son. For me, my son comes first, before earning money, education, or working full time outside the home. I am already doing a full time job caring for and educating my son.”

There needs to be a point at which the staff at Jobcentre Plus are able to say that a person is not capable of working, no matter what support, training or sanctions are applied.

Some of our member families have a multitude of challenges. Disability often runs in the family, as does marriage breakdown. There are many lone parents caring for difficult children on behalf of their equally difficult partners. (Dr Christopher Green). To sanction these people further would serve no purpose but to further reduce their health, self-esteem, independence and well-being.

Ending Child poverty

“Our welfare reform measures aim to accelerate progress towards this goal by providing additional support, while strengthening parents’ responsibilities to contribute financially and emotionally to their children’s upbringing.”

Contributing financially and emotionally at the same time to their children's upbringing may not be possible. They can be mutually exclusive. It is not reasonable to expect a parent, disabled or not, lone or not, to care for and educate their children while at the same time working outside the home. The emotional damage that would occur to children particularly those who are disabled or on the autistic spectrum, by forcing parents to work, and send their children to school, or by sanctioning their benefits, would far outweigh any benefit to the financial or emotional well-being of the parent or the child. It is likely that the parent and therefore the child would be pushed further into poverty, both financially and emotionally.

“We will also introduce measures to promote the joint registration of births and shared parental responsibility.” This may not be a sensible move for all people. Whilst it is acceptable that parents be encouraged to take responsibility for their children, there are instances where this is not to be recommended such as in cases of violence, severe mental health problems or criminal activity. Just putting someone's name on a birth certificate does not mean that they will be able to share parental responsibility. This could result in families becoming more vulnerable rather than less.

Supporting more partners into employment

“While many partners in these cases are capable of work, only the person who makes the claim has been generally required to undertake any significant steps towards work.”

In the case of families who home educate, often the partner who is not looking for work is actually busy educating the children. It is not reasonable to expect the main home educator to seek employment which would disrupt the child's education, just because their partner is out of work.

When my husband was made redundant from a job he had held for many years, we already had a well established home education routine, following a curriculum. We were able to live on the redundancy money for nearly two years, during which time my husband worked very hard looking for work. During this time he had very little opportunity to spend time with the children and their education as sometimes he had to travel around the country to look for work in his field. When the money started to run out, he decided to retrain and returned to university. During this time we had to start claiming benefits, as I was unable to work and care for the children, and he was away most of the week studying and attending lectures at the university, and spent weekends writing his thesis, as it was a post graduate degree. As the children both have special needs, they would not have been able to switch from being educated by me, to being educated by their father, even if the opportunity for me to work came about and he wasn't too busy looking for work.

Abolishment of IS

“We think there is a strong case for abolishing IS altogether as it is a largely passive benefit that expects very little from its recipients and does nothing to prepare them for a life after benefits. In fact, its very name implies financial dependence and inactivity.”

There are times in people's lives where they have to be financially dependant upon someone else or if there

isn't another person, then the government. But that doesn't mean they are inactive. Home educators are busy educating their children. As the outcome for home educated children is often better on average than schooled children (see research from P. Rothermel) and that education will prepare them for a more successful outcome in life, both financially and emotionally.

Children with disabilities or special educational needs often respond much better to home education because of the unique way that the children can develop in a one to one supportive atmosphere. Therefore parents on IS are actually contributing actively to the future prosperity of the country by home educating and should not be penalised by this.

Carers

“With the proposals to move lone parents to a modified JSA and disabled people and people with long-term health conditions claiming IS to ESA, IS would be a benefit mainly for carers plus an assortment of much smaller groups. We want to consult widely on how the best interest of these groups and in particular carers, can be best served within the benefits system.”

The Education Otherwise Disability Group would like to be involved in any further consultation for the migration of parents caring for disabled and special needs children from IS to JSA or ESA.

It is important to recognise that home educators, whether or not they are also lone parents, should be included in the “assortment of much smaller groups still able to claim IS”.

It is also important to recognise that not all carers of disabled children will actually be in receipt of Carer's Allowance because many people find it almost impossible to secure DLA at middle rate or higher for their children. They may have more than one child at lower rate, and so be continuously busy caring for children but not qualify for Carer's Allowance.

There must be an exemption for all home educators of disabled or special needs children.

Response to Question 23

Question 23: Would moving carers currently on IS onto JSA be a suitable way of helping them to access the support available to help combine caring with paid work or preparing for paid work?

Caring for a disabled child can be a full time job already. If the parent feels that they can work as well, they would already be doing that. Caring for a child is something that may go on for many years, especially if they need care as an adult too, so there is no point in training them for the job market, as their chances of working will be so far in the future that the market will have changed. The stress of signing on to JSA will create a lot of strain on the family, with the same sort of things that we have been saying for the lone parents, taking children to the JCP, children being afraid that their parent will have to put them in school/daycentre/childcare, resulting in anxiety for both parent and child.

Although there is no doubt that some home educating parents will be able to take advantage of the support offered from either ESA or JSA, anything like this should be voluntary only.

The Education Otherwise Disability Group would like to be involved in any further consultation for the migration of parents caring for disabled and special needs children from IS to JSA or ESA.

Comments on the individual sections of the No one written off: reforming welfare to reward responsibility document

Carers on Income Support

6.12 As we move towards abolishing IS, when resources allow, we need to consider how we support carers. Carers are one of the primary groups on IS and are not currently subject to any work-focused activity, as we recognise the importance of their caring responsibilities.

This group of people need to include those who are caring for home educated disabled children who do not qualify for DLA, or who only qualify for DLA at the low rate, therefore not triggering Carers Allowance. Parents of these children find that their caring responsibilities along side their educational responsibilities take up their full time, leaving no time for working outside the home or family.

6.13 But for many, their caring is a temporary role. Over 50 per cent of working-age carers not in employment say they would like to work either now or in the future.

Parents who are caring for and educating disabled children may well have to carry on caring for them into adult hood, until they themselves are no longer able to care for them due to age and ill health. It may not be a temporary situation, or it maybe that it is temporary, but will continue until the child is in their 20's which means that the parent would be out of the job market for 20 to 30 years. Therefore, if the parent is caring for a young child that is likely to need care and home education for a number of years, there is no point in wasting money on training and preparing for work as by the time the parent is able to work the work force and jobs available will be very different.

I studied neuroscience at university 20 years ago, and I had thought of working again in that field when my son was a baby, but found that my degree was now so old that I would have to start again as an undergraduate. Then as my son became older I realised that he was on the autistic spectrum, and that I would have to care for him full time as well as home educating him as we couldn't find a suitable school. I then worked out that by the time he was either in a situation where he could care for himself, or was able to move to a care home or sheltered housing, I would be of retirement age and no longer required to have a job, even if I was capable of still working. I have therefore changed my strategy and have accepted that I will probably never be able to work in the workforce outside my home. Even if I wait until he is caring for himself to go back to university, by the time I had finished a degree or training, I would be in my 70's. We then had another blow as I found out that my husband has an eye condition which is likely to mean that he will be blind in the next 10-15 years, so I will then have to become his carer as well.

6.14 As we committed to in the recent Carers Strategy²⁹ we need to work towards creating a benefit system that cannot only adapt to the specific needs of carers, but also helps prepare them for their future. We will continue to do this, using the principles outlined in the Carers Strategy. We believe that it is only right that carers are able to gain from the same opportunities as others within the benefit system.

It is right that carers benefit from the same opportunities that those on JSA and ESA will benefit from, but it has to be recognised that in some cases it won't work for some Carers, particularly those that also have educational responsibilities for home educated children and therefore there should be no conditionality attached to opportunities. This may be offered to carers but there should be no expectation that they will be able to take it up.

6.15 It may make sense to move those carers currently on Income Support onto a modified form of JSA. This would not require them to undertake work-focused activity to keep their benefit, but would be consistent with the strategy's focus on helping those who would like to combine caring with paid work, or prepare for work later. Those carers who do not feel able to combine paid work with caring would not be required to do anything more than they do at present and there would be no change to their benefit income.

It is really important that there is a **modified** form of JSA to support carers. As outlined already, there will be many carers who also home educate that would not necessarily be able to combine paid work with caring and educating. It would be very important that included in this group of those who are caring for disabled children who are on low level of DLA, or who have not secured DLA at all. Many parents who home educate find that they are not able to secure DLA for their children as there are less opportunities for professionals involved with them who can sign the forms. Often home educated disabled or special needs children have become so traumatised by the system that they find that it is better to do without the additional money that DLA brings and withdraw from the system.

In the case of these parents, to expect them to fulfil the conditions of JSA, and not be put on a modified version of JSA will serve only to push the family further into poverty, and emotional ill health.

6.16 Carers who wanted to undertake paid work alongside their caring or prepare for work at some point in the future, would still be able to volunteer for increased support from Jobcentre Plus. This includes working with a personal adviser to build a plan for returning to work or undertaking training to learn a new skill. This increased interaction would help some carers to combine caring with work immediately and make it easier for others to rejoin the labour market when their caring responsibilities changed.

Carers Allowance is a means tested benefit, and there is a restriction on how many hours and how much money you can earn while on Carers Allowance. Any effort to get carers into work, must take into consideration that working may preclude them from receiving Carers Allowance and may actually leave them worse off.

Receiving Carers Allowance is often a trigger for other benefits, not necessarily just money. Registered carers often get discounts or help and benefits in other ways from the voluntary and commercial sector. This should be taken into consideration when looking at carers doing paid work along side their caring responsibilities which might put them in a position to not qualify for Carer's Allowance any more.

As my son's carer, I get in free to many museums, theme parks, theatres, cinemas and other events and even holidays. There is a centre locally that has special relaxation sessions and trips out for carers. Although there isn't a direct financial benefit from these further opportunities of being on Carers Allowance, it never the less makes our lives more bearable. For example, we were able to afford go to Legoland and partake in an Educational Workshop, because I got in free as my son's Carer. I also get in free to our local museum as a registered carer. All these things help with home educating my son. If I wasn't able to claim Carer's Allowance because I had to work part time, I am worried that I would lose all the other non material benefits that come from being recognised as a carer.

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