

Dear X

DWP Reforms – distressing and discriminatory impact on Lone Parent Families.

I am a single parent and I home educate my child. Although I am currently able to work part time, this is only possible because a number of family members provide unpaid child care, and my situation regarding work is somewhat precarious. I have been lucky – so far. However most lone parent home educators that I know are simply not available for work, and I was therefore extremely worried to hear from a number of friends that “job advisors” in job centres are telling them that they have to send their children to school - or else have their benefits cut.

I responded to the "In work Better Off" consultation document last year and expressed exactly these concerns. I was somewhat reassured when I read the report which came out after the consultation that said that ***“There was a strong feeling that the system should not penalise those who have a genuine need to stay at home and care for their children, regardless of their age. ... It was strongly felt that increased conditionality was not appropriate for ... parents who choose to home educate.”*** Also, John Hutton said last year that:

“we have been very clear that we are not proposing to force lone parents into work, nor cut lone parent benefits - this would be wrong in principle and damaging to the health and well-being of children. It is a matter of individual choice for each lone parent as to whether they look to move into work or continue to claim benefits.”

It's becoming apparent that this message has not filtered through to front line staff, some of whom are not even aware of the legality of home education. I would therefore be very grateful if you would ask the relevant minister for reassurance that:

- lone parents who are educating their children at home and claiming income support will be regarded as “not available for work”, and therefore be protected from this potentially discriminatory benefit cut; and
- that this message will be **effectively** shared with staff in job centres.

Yours sincerely

I home educate my teenage son T. I am also a single parent on Income Support.

I am very worried about the Government's plans to move single parents off Income Support and on to Jobseeker's Allowance. On JSA I will have to be actively seeking work and will have to take a job if I am offered one. I will not be able to meet these conditions because I already have a full time job home educating T and so I anticipate that my benefits will be cut or stopped altogether.

I don't feel able to talk about this with T because he would become extremely anxious about the stark choice of being forced into school or living below the poverty line. T has many Asperger's Syndrome traits and would find it impossibly stressful to enter the school or college system at this time. Home education is working brilliantly for T and this is recognised by our Local Authority.

I don't understand what is happening now. I read the White Paper which was published just before Christmas and it said

"There was a strong feeling that the system should not penalise those who have a genuine need to stay at home and care for their children, regardless of their age. There was a strong sense that support was needed long before entitlement to Income Support ceased. Support should be flexible enough to deal with changes of circumstances and individual families' needs, and focused on progression and training as well as retention." It was strongly felt that increased conditionality was not appropriate for:

- * parents with disabled children or whose children had additional needs;
- * carers of both disabled children and adults;
- * mothers fleeing domestic violence; and
- * parents who choose to home educate"

The Work and Pensions Committee Report earlier this month also seemed to be recommending flexibility in implementing any changes in the regulations and yet I hear every day of home educators who are being told that come October, their benefit will be stopped and they will have to put their children in school and get a job.

I would be extremely grateful if you could establish whether home educating lone parents will in fact be treated with consideration as recommended in the White Paper or whether I will have to tell my son T that he is now going to be forced into school.

Many thanks for your help

I am writing to you about my concern over the changes being made as regards to lone parents on income support in the latest welfare reform.

I am currently home educating my son and it is concerning me that the job centre will be making me go on job seekers allowance from October next year when my son reaches 10. It states in a Government report last year after the consultation process on page 114 that being a home educator will be taken into account and that it is recognised that 'the system should not penalise those who have a genuine need to stay at home and care for their children, regardless of their age', but at my last 'work-focused interview' my lone parent advisor told me that I would basically have to go back to work and did not have an answer as to what would happen to my son. She stated that unless I was a full-time carer (I'm guessing a parent of a child with SEN), there was no other option for me. But I see myself as a full-time carer, I take my son's education very seriously and at the moment home education is the only viable option open to us.

My son has school phobia and I really don't want to force him into a situation that he will not be comfortable with. As a home educator, I am already doing a full-time job of great importance and this should be taken into consideration. The way I see it is that if I had to go back to work and put my son back into school, this would cost the Government £5000 (to the school for my son's education) plus childcare costs and working family tax credits. This compared to just over £3000 a year in income support and carrying on home educating my son as is my legal right, it doesn't make much sense really.

The Government childcare promised by 2010 relies heavily on the provision within extended schools. Home educated children will have very patchy access to the facilities of extended schools and this could only apply between 4 and 6pm. Maybe if there was childcare available for longer hours outside of school hours, then it would be more feasible for a home educating lone parent to go back to work part-time.

I think that my point is that not all families are the same and it is impossible to have a 'one size fits all' approach to these proposed reforms. I would like to see some respect and flexibility used by the Government and Job Centres as regards individual situations. The Former Secretary of State, Peter Hain, said in a speech on October 25th 2007 that "there will, of course, be lone parents for whom work is simply not an option and I will ensure that they will be protected." I hope that home educators are taken into consideration and the government and the Job Centre staff realise that work is not really an option for them whilst the child/ren are being educated at home.

Yours sincerely,"

Thank you for your reply to my letter dated 18th March 2008. I am writing to you again as I feel that Mr Timms reply was unsatisfactory and I would like him to clarify certain points that he made.

Firstly, his claim that home educating lone parents are 'capable of greater flexibility than those who send their children to school, because they are not restricted by times of attendance or term dates' is not very clear. While it is true that we are not restricted by school, I am faced with the quandry of where exactly my son is going to be whilst I am fulfilling the Government's wish that I go back to work.

Both of my parents work full-time, my grandparents are both in their 80's, and I do not have friends who would be able to take on the responsibility of looking after my son for 16+ hours a week, as they are either in full-time employment or have their own family responsibilities. Most childminders I see advertised only look after children up to the age of 8 and as I stated in my first letter, after school care will be prioritised for those children who attend school and is for a limited time after school only. Can I expect to be penalised for not being able to find appropriate childcare for my son and for suggestions to be made that my son go back to school, in order for me to be able to be available for work?

In the Work and Pensions Committee Report, March 2008, it states that:

'Sanctions should never apply when there is proven lack of affordable and suitable childcare or where the lone parent is engaged in work related education or training. We are concerned about the Government's plans to exempt only parents who are entitled to claim Carers' Allowance from the requirement for lone parents to work. The proposal does not reflect the reality for families with disabled children, particularly those with the most sick and vulnerable children.'

and

'DWP needs to review sanctions levels on Jobseeker's Allowance and develop a strategy on sanctions which takes account of the interests of children. Moving lone parents onto JSA will only be effective if appropriate childcare is in place for them to use. We received evidence that lone parents are currently struggling in many areas to find appropriate, affordable childcare. We agree with Jane Kennedy that "It would be a pretty draconian system" if child care was not available for lone parents and yet the level of income they received was predicated on them finding a job.'

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmworpen/42/42.pdf>

Could Mr Timms please clarify what the 'sufficient flexibilities' are within the Jobseekers Allowance regime and how these will relate specifically to home educating lone parents. Do these flexibilities take into account recommendations from various charities involved in the consultation process, including Gingerbread and the Citizens Advice Bureau and also the recommendation in the Department of Work and Pensions Consultation response Paper from December 2007 that

'increased conditionality was not appropriate for:

- parents with disabled children or whose children had additional needs;
- carers of both disabled children and adults;
- mothers fleeing domestic violence; and
- parents who choose to home educate.' (p. 117)

Could Mr Timms please expand on the 'additional flexible package of measures' that he says have been put in place to support lone parents and does this package include measures for those parents who home educate?

I would also like to put to Mr Timms that surely lone parents who home educate are not receiving Income Support 'solely on the grounds of being a lone parent' but on the grounds of being unavailable for work because of our full-time home educating responsibilities. Could I stress again that home educators are saving money that would otherwise be allocated for their child's education in school. I feel that I am being penalised for putting my child first and being a responsible parent, something which it seems the Government do not want us to do.

Finally, I would like to say that I have been employed in the past. Until I had my son, I was working full-time as a secretary and holding down a part-time position in a bar in the evenings. When my son was at nursery, I worked part-time and was on WFTC. I was at university for three years furthering my education and I am now taking full responsibility for my son's education as I feel that the school was not, not through any fault of the school, but simply because you cannot force a square peg into a round hole. Can the Government not recognise the importance of parents in a child's life? I made the decision when my son was born that he was my main priority and I would take the role of being a parent seriously. I would like to challenge the assumption that children benefit best from a schooled education and seeing their parents work. This is not the case for all children. Paula Rothermel of Durham University 2004 states that:

'Whilst the home-educated children outscored their school counterparts, those from lower socio-economic groups outperformed their middle class peers. It appeared that a flexible approach to education, and a high level of parental attention and commitment, regardless of their socio-economic group and level of education, seemed the most important factors in the children's development and progress.'

<http://www.dur.ac.uk/p.j.rothermel/Research/ESRC/PipsBaseline.htm>

My child benefits from being with his family and feeling secure that I am there for him whenever he needs me. He also benefits from having an education that is tailored to his needs, one that recognises his strengths and weaknesses and does not penalise him for them.

Will the child's views be taken into consideration when the Job Centre decides whether a lone parent is available for work or not?

Thank you for your time in this matter and I look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely,

Letter to MP from home educator April 2008

Many thanks for getting in touch with Stephen Timms. There are a number of points which I would be extremely grateful if you could raise with the Minister on my behalf.

I emailed your constituency office last week and am now waiting for details of an appointment with you.

What does the Minister mean when he says that home educating lone parents have greater flexibilities in the job market? How is this true when in reality day time child care with incorporated Home education is extremely difficult to find, timetables have to be tailored to fit in with the needs of other families and after school facilities?

Is the Minister aware that home educated children will not be able to access the facilities of wraparound childcare in extended schools? Consequently, many young children may be left 'home alone' owing to the inflexible approach taken regarding the implementation of rules carried out by lone parent advisors.

Does the Minister believe it is acceptable for children to be left at home alone while the home educating lone parent goes out to work, since this is practically what will happen if an inflexible approach to individual circumstances is taken? Has there been discussion with Social Services and Elective Home Education Consultants in Local Authority Children's Trusts about this?

I am seriously concerned about this matter.

Why is the Minister talking about "a life on benefits"? I am not opting for "a life on benefits". I am giving my children the best possible chance to meet the 5 outcomes of Every Child Matters. My children are safer, healthier, happier, more able to enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic wellbeing because they are home educated. Extensive research also bears out this finding in recent years and an acquaintance with history will prove the same point. Does Britain wish to lose some of its most creative & innovative young people?

Why is JSA now categorised as "financial assistance from the state" towards home education? The Welfare State was set up to help families in crisis. The Government is setting out to destroy this, hitting hardest at the most vulnerable; in my view a moral outrage!

Why are the circumstances of individual families to be effectively ignored? One of my main concerns comes from personal experience & is not solely related to Home education. There is a difference between a lone parent able but unwilling to work and a lone parent in crisis, for example.

One exception should be made, in my view, for Lone parents going through bereavement, or separation and divorce. A three year minimum recovery period should be applied for the welfare of the children involved. This gives time both for recovery from the trauma and to take practical steps towards retraining and work. I believe this should be a mandatory recovery time integrated into the legislation to help such families. For myself, had we not had this time & I had been forced straight into work, I believe we would have experienced serious nervous and family breakdown. For child and family welfare, an adjustment time is essential & is the kind of situation the welfare state was set up for!

On the ground, Lone Parent advisors are, in my experience, unsympathetic, even hostile in attitude, and therefore extremely unlikely to seriously consider any extenuating circumstances.

10/ If children are in trauma in school and there is no option to remove them, is this not discriminatory? How does effective removal of the option to Home Educate through financial

pressure help child welfare? Or, instead, is parental responsibility to be effectively removed to state control, whilst still leaving the legal liabilities of the consequences of leaving children in trauma with the parent?

Why are the views of children being ignored? My children want to be Home educated and would be traumatised by any sudden changes? How is this to do with child welfare?

Why has my suggestion of a grade approach to return to work been ignored? Rather than a sudden jump to 16 hours per week, why not have a graded approach, building up hours with the age of the youngest child, with appropriate incentives & child care assistance? Personally, I wish to work & for the last few years have maintained work that brings in just under the £20 per week allowed for Lone parents. This is to not only top up my income, but also to demonstrate the validity of the work ethic to my children. This approach works & I could possibly now do a few more hours, but asking for 16 hours per week would effectively mean putting me on a fifty hour week if I am to fulfil my legal obligation to give a full time education to a secondary aged child as well as a younger one? Additionally, the government needs to consider whether this appropriate for any family already dealing with the trauma of separation?

Once again, many thanks for your help. I look forward to hearing from you.”

Letter to MP from a home educator May 2008

I am writing about the proposals to take lone parents off of income support and onto job seekers allowance when their child becomes the age of 12 and eventually the age of 7.

While I applaud the fact that lone parents may need help *back to work* and good measures should be put in place to assist them, I find it very worrying that it should become compulsory. I feel that it may leave some children more vulnerable and prone to poverty.

I have 2 main points one relating to the policy as a whole and the other relating to lone parents who home educate their children.

Point 1:

As a person who was once a lone parent, I found it difficult at the best of times. I did work on and off through those years, but at times me NOT working was essential for my family. There are times in life when being at home for your children is top priority especially if they are encountering any difficulties with school or bullying or minor health issues. Wrap around childcare does not substitute for the loving security of your parent being there for you. Someone being there to wash the clothes, do the shopping, cook a good meal for family, pay the bills is essential for a family to tick over.

Children need to see their parents and spend time with them. The State divorcing children from their parents is not doing our society any favours. As a taxpayer, I have no objection to my taxes going towards helping lone parents be with their children. The benefits to society will outweigh any monetary cost to the taxpayer in my opinion.

And 12 year olds are still children and at a time when entering the difficult teen years they should have more parental support not less.

Possible consequences of this policy will be to have more latch key children, more truancy and more stressed out parents and total family break down. Taking choices away from people who are already confined by their status as "Lone Parent" will not benefit anyone especially children who need their parents more, not less.

And it should not be forgotten why some people are lone parents. A loss of a spouse or abandonment by one of the parents is obviously devastating for a family and most of all the children. What a horrible time to force the remaining parent out to work by means of threatening them with a cut in money (which would incidentally put them under the required amount of money that the Government says they should live on). I am certain many parents will choose the cut in money in order to be there for their children. How is that raising children out of poverty or indeed encouraging the Every Child Matters policy?

Point 2:

As a home educating parent, it has become increasingly apparent that there will be no exceptions for lone parents who home educate even though The Department of Work and Pensions stated in their report on the consultation In Work, Better Off.

"There was a strong feeling that the system should not penalise those who have a genuine need to stay at home and care for their children, regardless of their age. There was a strong sense that support was needed long before entitlement to Income Support ceased. Support should be flexible enough to deal with changes of circumstances and individual families' needs, and focused on progression and training as well as retention." It was strongly felt that increased conditionality was not appropriate for:

- a.. parents with disabled children or whose children had additional needs;
- b.. carers of both disabled children and adults;
- c.. mothers fleeing domestic violence; and
- d.. parents who choose to home educate"

(p114 ,

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/welfarereform/readyforwork/readyforwork.pdf>)

As one may imagine, children of home educators are extremely worried about the Government's proposals. There are a myriad of reasons why parents home educate. Their children may have been bullied severely or are not receiving a suitable education within the school system, or they may have special educational needs which they can't get a statement for, or indeed their educational philosophy does not embrace that of the national curriculum and a school environment. Home education has literally saved some children's lives. Obviously these children in particular are very worried that their parents might have to put them back in school.

The Minister, Stephen Timms, has been telling home educators that because they home educate they will have more flexible work hours. (<http://ahed.pbwiki.com/Letter%20to%20John%20Hutton>) This does

not make sense. When you are with your child 24 hours a day you have less free hours.

It is not the case that home educating single parents have greater flexibility in the job market. In fact, the reverse is often the case. We are not able to access childcare facilities at extended schools and local childminders will not take children during school hours or evenings. Home educators are not prepared to leave their children unattended.

Home education has equal legal footing to schooled education and the choice should not be stripped from children because the Government thinks it will be a money saving exercise. In fact Home educators already pay through their taxes towards schooled education which they do not access and they save the Government thousands of pounds a year (approx. £5000 per pupil, not even considering the extra costs and support the children with SEN would require). Recently a question was asked in the Commons by Michael Gove:

Michael Gove:

"To ask the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families what estimate he has made of the number of children under the age of 16 years who were home educated in each year since 1997."

Jim Knight, written answer 23rd April 2008:

"We have made no estimate of the numbers of children under the age of 16 who were home educated in each of the years since 1997."

Hansard reference [here](#).

If the Government does not know how many of us there are, and indeed home educators do not know, then is it not a bit risky to force home educators back to work? It could result in an increased call for school places. It seems the impact assessment is severely lacking in depth.

I have been told that new regulations are going to be introduced by the Social Security Advisory Committee in early May 2008 and that the policies will be introduced from November 2008 and that there may be a short-run consultation soon.

In light of these points could you please forward my letter to the Minister and ask the Minister, Stephen Timms,

a) Does the Government not see a value in having a parent at home for a child or the value in children spending quality time with their parents...or indeed any time with their parents? Does the government value work more than the family bond or security of the emotional well being of children? Does the government not see that taking the choice to stay at home away from lone parents, that in fact it takes away the choice from children to have at least one parent at home?

b) Why home educating lone parents are now being penalised in this way when they are doing such a vital job to put their children's

emotional well being first and saving the Government and taxpayer so much money? I believe it is a fallacy that the government would be financing home education, especially when weighing up the cost of a school place versus the cost to keep a lone parent on Income support. “

Letter to MP from home educator May 2008

I am writing to ask you about your position on the welfare reforms in which lone parents will be removed from income support and required to seek work based only on the age of their youngest child, including provisions for financial sanctions against lone parents who do not accept paid employment because of family responsibilities.

In view of this I would like to ask you the following questions:

Are lone parents the new "Undeserving Poor"?

Do you want to see benefits withdrawn and financial sanctions imposed on the poorest families?

Do you want to see lone parents penalised if they cannot combine paid employment and family responsibilities?

Do you support a forced labour regime under threat of extreme poverty?

The consultation launched by DWP on regulations is very complicated. However, this issue is simple. What are you prepared to inflict on the children of lone parents?

Before the summer recess, 2008, MPs will vote on Social Security regulations now being pushed through. Will you support attacks on lone parents?

The government is seriously mistaken in proposing to remove income support from lone parents based only on the age of their youngest child in an attempt to force them into paid employment. Last year, as the minister for DWP, John Hutton MP said that this would be "wrong in principle and damaging to the health and welfare of children." It must remain the responsibility of parents to decide if the need to be available for their children and the demand to take paid employment can be reconciled. In removing the responsibility for this decision from parents and putting it into the hands of advisors at job centre plus, who will follow regulations about what is acceptable, the government will be dividing the poor from whom they consider the undeserving. The undeserving will face financial sanctions plunging them below the poverty line.

We have seen this attitude before...

In the workhouse!

Soon, it is going to be up to the nation's Members of Parliament voting on the regulations. When it is your turn to vote, what will you do for some of the poorest and most disadvantaged of our people?

Will you vote against regulations that remove the right to make parental decisions from parents and impose financial penalty on the poor through loss of benefits?

Yours sincerely,

