

## Second annual stakeholder seminar Summary of content

### Background to the Seminar

The aim of the seminar was to build on the first seminar held in 2006 by examining the future agenda for social security and the work of SSAC. The event coincided with the publication of the SSAC 2006/2007 annual report. (<http://www.ssac.org.uk/pdf/reports/20threport.pdf>).

The seminar took place on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2007 at Sadler's Wells. The morning session comprised an introduction and welcome from the Chairman Sir Richard Tilt followed by presentations from Dr Roy Sainsbury from the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York and then Kate Green Chief Executive of the Child Poverty Acton Group. This was followed by a discussion which included two SSAC members Alison Garnham and Les Allamby.

This paper summarises the presentations, feed back from the morning's plenary discussion and the afternoon workshops.

### Welcome from Sir Richard Tilt

In welcoming stakeholders the Chairman of SSAC reported on the changes to working practices which have taken place since the first stakeholder seminar last year. SSAC now publishes its agendas, papers and minutes on its website ([www.ssac.org.uk](http://www.ssac.org.uk)) and has taken the opportunities to meet local stakeholders on visits to the Department's operational sites. SSAC has again timed the seminar to coincide with the publication of the Annual Report. SSAC's response to the Green Paper *In Work, Better off: next steps to full employment CM7130* has also been recently published on the web ([http://www.ssac.org.uk/pdf/gp\\_response\\_version\\_8.pdf](http://www.ssac.org.uk/pdf/gp_response_version_8.pdf)) and SSAC would like to take the opportunity of this seminar to engage in the current debate on the future direction of welfare reform.

### Section 1 – Keynote speakers (summary of key issues)

This section summarises the key points made by the keynote speakers during the morning session.

***Dr Roy Sainsbury, Assistant Director of the Social Policy Research Unit, University of York***  
***Do we need a single working age benefit?***

Roy Sainsbury presented the case for considering a Single Working Age Benefit. He argued that the benefits system needed reform because it is too complex and as the Freud Report suggested obstructs people from entering work. Currently there are some 30 to 40 benefits which interact, with different organisations administering them. As policy develops complexity increases. These complexities are well illustrated in the recent NAO Report ([http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao\\_reports/05-06/0506592.pdf](http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/05-06/0506592.pdf)) and in the Seventh Report of the Work and Pensions Select Committee

(<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmworpen/463/46302.htm>)

Dr Sainsbury suggested that there are two linked pressures – complexity and welfare to work objectives. There were three options to deal with complexity: do nothing; simplify incrementally; or have a radical reform. He outlined his approach to a proposed Single Working Age Benefit with a standard basic rate and a standard set of rules with the benefit remaining at the same level over time. The gateway to the benefit would consist of two basic questions ‘Do you think you will be able to work at any time in the future? And Do you want to work at some point in the future?’

He argued that amongst the advantages of a Single Working Age Benefit would be: reduced complexity; no more moving between benefits; no uncertainty about the effect of trying work and no perverse incentives.

However he recognised that there are still a number of big questions to be answered in moving towards a Single Working Age Benefit which need to be answered, but he argued that the status quo was not sustainable and that radical thinking was required.

***Kate Green, Chief Executive of the Child Poverty Action Group  
How to end Child Poverty by asserting rights***

Kate Green suggested that whilst discussion of welfare reform is very fashionable at the moment, it seems to be based upon the assumption that the welfare state is a problem. What is lost in the debate is the way in which the welfare system is becoming marginalized and residualised rather than being a universal system and that it is being applied in an increasingly discretionary and discriminatory manner. As a result it is failing in its fundamental role of preventing poverty and income inequality.

She argued that this was because the concept of rights as being at the heart of the welfare state has been lost. Whilst acknowledging what had been achieved, she also pointed out that achieving the child poverty target by 2010 was not on track.

She argued that there should be four principles at the heart of successful welfare state which are prerequisites for bringing about an end to poverty:

- That it should be universal and not just a system for people who are poor;
- It should be preventing poverty not alleviating it
- People should be treated fairly and transparently
- It should be based upon entitlement.

She outlined a number of ways in which the system is moving away from these principles and suggested a need to return to a language of entitlements and rights as is used in relation to the National Health Service, and concentrating upon a system of social protection that is focused on preventing poverty and with a right to an adequate income would begin to end child poverty for good.

**Plenary Discussion**

The two plenary speakers were joined by Alison Garnham and Les Allamby for a question, answer and discussion session. In answer to questions about how a Single

Working Age Benefit proposals would differ from Supplementary Benefit or Income Support and the relationship between a Single Working Age Benefit and the divide between contributory and Income related benefits, Roy Sainsbury emphasised that there is a case for radical reform but there was no one blueprint for a Single Working Age Benefit. He suggested the need for a ten-year perspective perhaps starting with a Welfare Commission similar to the recent Pensions Commission as the first step.

Discussion also focussed upon the complexity of the benefits system, the changes taking place in service delivery (particularly the role of the voluntary sector in both delivering services and ensuring it acted as an advocate for the rights of claimants) and the issue of adequacy of benefits and the nature of income inequality.

### **Discussion Groups**

The afternoon session consisted of discussion groups who were asked to consider three key issues:

- Rights and responsibilities – where should the balance lie?
- Service delivery – how to secure equality of access?
- A single working age benefit – the solution to complexity?

The discussions were wide ranging and not all discussion groups managed to explore all of the issues within the time allocated, whilst it was suggested that SSAC should engage in the debates about the ‘big issues’ such as these. The main points raised in relation to these issues were;

### **Rights and responsibilities**

The responsibilities of claimants are being increased without any accompanying emphasis upon their rights. Employers responsibilities should be increased for example the enforcement of the National Minimum Wage needs to be improved.. Concern was expressed in the light of the Green Paper about the responsibilities of lone parents for their children and their ability to choose to work without having to rely upon paid work as the source of their income. The government is concerned about anti-social behaviour and preventing this requires good parenting.

One group identified two levels of rights and responsibilities – the first in relation to work, WFIs and conditionality but the second at a more general level of ensuring that the welfare state delivered an appropriate balance of rights and responsibilities across a much wider level of housing, health, families, childcare and caring.

It was also pointed out that there is no discussion taking place about the adequacy of benefits.

### **Service Delivery**

DWP needs to talk more to claimants and hear their feedback about service delivery under the Change Programme. The first contact by telephone is important and should allow access to all services. More joint working is needed across DWP and HMRC on educating people about where welfare policies are going and how customers should

interact with the appropriate Department. Whilst there are jobs available (for example in London) people on JSA do not get intensive support to access these jobs early.

It was also pointed out that telephony may not be the best form of access for many customers particularly those with mental health problems and the issue of call-backs needs to be addressed.

With greater discretion being proposed for PAs there is a need to standardise how this discretion will be used. This is particularly the case for vulnerable claimants. How more WFIs will be delivered with cutbacks in the JC+ network and staff cuts is an issue of concern.

The issue of how the Standard Operating Model could deal with the diverse customer base of JC+ and how successful it was in delivering good quality customer service was discussed in one group.

### **Single Working Age Benefit**

It was pointed out that moving to a Single Working Age Benefit would take many years and it would not be possible to avoid having ‘add-ons’ which would generate its own complexity. The example of Jersey was discussed in one workshop where the Single Benefit has been implemented. In GB a Single Working Age Benefit would require to recognise the needs of those in work and those out of work as well as benefits for housing costs. A Single Working Age Benefit would need to consider whether it was targeted; how pensioners were dealt with and the implications for taxation. There was some concern expressed that such a simplification would either inevitably introduce additional elements or result in a form of rough justice where claimants would lose out.

### **Suggestions made for future action by SSAC**

- SSAC should encourage better education of citizens on their rights and responsibilities and ensure that the link between benefits and tax credits are communicated clearly.
- SSAC should pay attention to the role of the private and voluntary sector and the nature of the contract management control, payments and targets. In addition to consistency of service nationally is a potential issue.
- SSAC should be encouraging a debate on alternative benefit structures including a Single Working Age Benefit perhaps through a Welfare Commission with attention also being paid to the adequacy of benefits.

### **Feedback and evaluation**

Twenty five participants completed evaluation feedback sheets. All respondents felt the event was worthwhile and all said they would attend again. Only six respondents felt that the objectives were only partially met or didn't respond to this question, whilst only three suggested that the event had only partially or mostly met their expectations. The remainder felt it had.

Participants expressed the view that it was a useful occasion to have a high level discussion on welfare reform with useful meetings with other people on an informal basis.

Suggestions for the 2008 event were that the planning for it should start earlier and that as the networking opportunities of the event were important there should be a longer lunch break.