

UK National Action Plan 2008 Launch

19 September 2008, Liverpool

Report

Introduction

This event marked the launching of the UK's National Action Plan on Social Inclusion (NAP) 2008-10. The NAP forms part of the UK's contribution to the European Union's long-term goal that there should be a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty across Europe by 2010.

As the event fell within the consultation period for the Government's Welfare Reform proposals outlined in the Green Paper "No-one written off"¹ it was also used as an opportunity to discuss the Government's welfare reform proposals. Participants were encouraged to both give their views at the event and submit written responses to the consultation.

The conference was organised by the Department for Work and Pensions, in conjunction with the Social Policy Task Force². The 94 participants came from a variety of backgrounds, including the DWP, the European Commission, the EHRC, NGOs and trade unions.

This report was prepared by an independent consultant and has been commented on by the Social Policy Task Force. It represents a wide range of opinions and unless explicitly stated, it should not be taken as the Government position on these issues.

Keynote speech Peter Lelie, European Commission

Peter Lelie congratulated the DWP on organising this event, which reflected the importance of stakeholder involvement in policy making and implementation around social inclusion.

The launch of the UK's NAP marks a new cycle of social inclusion work at European level. This cycle now sees synchronised strategies on both 'growth and jobs' and 'social inclusion and social protection', which should help deliver more integrated policies.

¹ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/welfarereform/noonewrittenoff/>

² Group of NGO stakeholder working with the Government in conjunction with the National Action Plan. Groups represented on the Task Force include the British Black Anti-Poverty Network; the European Anti-Poverty Networks (EAPN: Anti-Poverty network Cymru, EAPN England, Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network, Poverty Alliance); the Migrants' Resource Centre (MRC); the Single Parent Action Network (SPAN); the UK Coalition Against Poverty (UKCAP) and the UK Race and Europe Network (UKREN). The organisations which contributed are: Age Concern; ATD Fourth World; Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG); the Fawcett Society; Irish Travellers in Britain; Leonard Cheshire Disability, National Group on Homeworking (NGH); Off the Streets and into Work (OSW); Oxfam UK Poverty Programme; Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) and the Runnymede Trust.

The previous cycle of reports (2006-8) saw child poverty and active inclusion emerge as major issues across Europe. Active inclusion seeks to develop integrated policies to facilitate access to work, particularly for people furthest from the labour market.

The Commission will be analysing the latest plans from the different EU countries, evaluating the success of existing policies and identifying new measures and new challenges. On chosen key themes and challenges, the Commission will produce thematic reports comparing national responses.

This round of NAPs is also important because the end of this cycle is 2010, which is the target year of the Lisbon objectives on tackling poverty and has been named as the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, so will be a key year of assessment and stock-taking.

Overall in Europe, results have been rather modest, so the Commission has launched proposals to strengthen the process of exchanging policy information and ideas at European level - the Open Method of Coordination. The proposals aim to deliver a more targeted approach, with increased analytical capacity, more focused objectives and recommendations, and greater integration with other policy areas.

Keynote speech Anne McGuire, DWP Minister

Anne McGuire started by reiterating the importance of meaningful engagement with stakeholders, since government does not have all the answers by itself.

The issues in the NAP and the green paper on welfare reform go right to the heart of what the government wants to achieve: ending child poverty; enabling everyone to contribute to and share in national prosperity; and supporting people who cannot work.

The difficulties disabled people have in accessing work is damaging to individuals, in terms of the development of their skills and their self-esteem. It is also damaging to society as they are not able to contribute fully. Employment can be an important element in achieving equality and independence.

The UK now has a comprehensive disability rights framework (the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act was amended in 2005) and the challenge is to fully implement it to achieve real equality. The government has set itself a target of equality by 2025. There has been progress for disabled people over the years (such as measures to help with transport, sign language, etc.), but there is still a great deal of discrimination often based on misconceptions or a nervousness about how to go about recruiting a disabled person.

The 'no one written off' approach set out in the Green Paper aims to deliver an even more active welfare state, built on a more individualised approach. The idea is that rather than simply letting

people fall into a life on benefits - which has been a particular risk for people on incapacity benefit - the system will offer more targeted support, but also ask for more individual responsibility.

It aims to provide people with more control over their lives, particularly by tackling inequalities and increasing support. At the same time, there will be an expectation that people will make use of the support available to look for work. It is about both government and individuals recognising and accepting their rights and responsibilities.

There have already been improvements based on a more active welfare state, notably around the New Deal, Job Seekers Allowance and the development of Job Centre Plus. Further reform intends to simplify the benefit system, ensuring quick, effective delivery and helping people to understand their rights.

Thus, only two working-age benefits will replace the existing complex system: Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA) for those who are fit to work; and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) for those who have a medical condition which prevents them from working.

Ending child poverty remains a key aim and the government is seeking to strengthen parental responsibility, whilst increasing the support available. Those who cannot take up work yet but are expected to do so at a later date should be helped to keep in touch with the labour market. There has been a policy shift to allow parents on benefits to keep all their child maintenance payments.

Summary of questions and comments from the floor

Floor - Fuel allowance has not risen with inflation. Poor people are being ripped off with card meters and even have to pay if they lose their card. More people die in the UK because of cold than in Scandinavia. Other measures should be introduced to tackle the poverty that will occur this winter.

Anne McGuire – The winter fuel allowance will increase by 25-33% for people aged 60+ and 80+ and will make a difference to many households. We also need to look at the longer-term situation and towards sustainable solutions such as better insulation in homes. For example there are lessons that we can learn from Sweden in terms of how they build and insulate their homes to save on energy costs.

Floor - The government is talking about the responsibility of jobseekers, but what about the responsibilities of employers? Unemployment is rising and it has nothing to do with people not looking for work. There is discrimination by employers and a lack of work opportunities, particularly for people with mental health problems.

Anne McGuire - we need to look at how we support people with mental health problems and tackle the misconceptions about them and work with employers to break down what they see as barriers. Employers do have a responsibility and need to tackle their lack of

confidence in employing people with disabilities including mental health problems, looking at their abilities and not their disabilities.

Floor - Why does the government not allow the thousands of able and skilled asylum seekers living in the country to work and support themselves instead of forcing them into situations of exclusion and absolute poverty?

Anne McGuire - this is always a difficult issue and we have to recognise that those coming in through the asylum route are coming in via a different route to migrants. We have, however, improved turnaround time in dealing with applications.

Floor - Refugees are written off and not treated as human beings in Job Centre Plus. Language problems are the biggest barrier preventing people accessing jobs that reflect their skills.

Anne McGuire - we take the language issue seriously and try to offer translation services, but the recognition of qualifications is not simple and we have to look at what can be done to enable read across into the UK system.

Floor - The government is talking about delivering more personalised support, but peoples' experiences are that staff at the Job Centre Plus are not always very helpful or understanding of people's specific situation. There have been cases of people with no lack of commitment to finding work or accessing training losing benefits on a technicality.

Anne McGuire - bad experiences are unacceptable, but the system is getting better. We are working to ensure that women returners and carers are able to access the services of Job Centre Plus and recognise that there are different reasons why people have not engaged with training or support in the past.

Floor - Privatising employment services will reduce quality for the most vulnerable; private companies will be motivated to prevent people accessing their benefits as they will earn part of the money saved.

Anne McGuire - We want to move to a contract model with agents managing subcontracts with specialist providers looking at local needs; the reality is that the DWP cannot manage all the contracts centrally.

Floor - will abolishing income support not worsen the position of those receiving housing benefit and the most vulnerable?

Anne McGuire – The Green Paper proposal for abolishing Income Support would mean that people would move onto Jobseeker's Allowance. Their weekly benefit payments would not change and they would not be expected to look for work as a result of this change. If this change happens, it will make no difference to the Housing and Council Tax Benefits that people receive. This means that it would not worsen the position of anyone.

Floor - the proposed system fails to address structural causes of poverty, such as the high cost of housing. People cannot live in low paid work and pay up to £500/600 a month in rent.

Anne McGuire - we have reformed local housing allowances, which may deal with some of the issues. The government is trying to make sure work pays. There was a time when there was not a minimum wage, child benefit, or extra incentives to move into work. Job Centre Plus calculate what it will mean for someone financially to move into employment to help them ensure that it is worth their while.

A summary of the workshop discussions which followed are attached at Annex A. These views have been submitted to the Department of Work and Pensions in response to it's consultation on proposals outlines in the Welfare Reform Green Paper "No-one written off".

Panel discussion

Chaired by Katherine Duffy, European Anti Poverty Network

- John England, Eurocities
- Richard Exell, TUC
- Paul Dornan, Child Poverty Action Group
- Chris Burston, DWP Welfare Reform Team

Benefit sanctions

Are people being serious when they refer to benefit sanctions when they talk about social inclusion?

There are always sanctions in a system - there have to be for it to be able to function at all and to prevent unacceptable behaviour.

It is not that people are not willing to work, but they are facing serious barriers - the Green Paper seems to imply a misdiagnosis of this problem, putting all responsibility at the foot of the individual.

There is a very real risk that sanctions will hit the poorest.

There are also real differences in the quality of job centre staff. Some are really good at supporting people and understand poverty issues (sometimes through personal experience); others have been told for years that they must not overpay benefit claimants and so they err on not paying, to the detriment of the individual.

By emphasising the need to have greater sanctions, the government is creating a message that there are a lot of people on benefits that should not be. Although James Purnell says that these measures are

necessary to defend the welfare state, it actually sends out a message that rather undermines it.

There is a lot of emphasis on what claimants should be doing, but not on what employers should be doing.

Mental health issues

The government is keen to get people off incapacity benefit and into employment, but how do we deal with the fact that there is still a two-year waiting list for cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)?

It is also crucial to recognise that CBT does not work for everyone - it has been well sold to the government, but if it thinks that people with mental health problems can be cheaply brought to the point where they are on the same level as other jobseekers, then the system will fail to take adequate account of the reality of mental health problems.

The government has talked about putting money into therapies, but there are still crucial issues around the way that GPs deal with mental health issues.

Much more needs to be done on tackling the barriers to employment for people with mental health problems, rather than just thinking about incentivising people.

The Green Paper does talk about putting resources into treating mental health problems. Furthermore, it is clearly stated that the government is aiming to support people into looking for work, rather than forcing people into work.

In-work poverty

Talk about getting more people into work will not disguise the fact that many people are in work but still experiencing poverty.

Does the minimum wage contribute to or prevent in-work poverty and what about minimum benefits?

The minimum wage has increased above the rate of inflation consistently - this plus tax credits means that most people are better off in a job. A big problem in child poverty is still the number of children living in workless households.

But still, 57% of children experiencing poverty live in families where someone does have a job - wages are the best way to address that.

Even if it cannot be made the minimum wage, the living wage concept can be used to make those employers that can, pay a decent wage to staff.

Structural barriers to successful employment

There needs to be more support in moving from benefits into a job.

To aid the transition into work, the government has introduced in-work credits, although these are still discretionary funds and not consistently available to everyone.

The lack of affordable housing is a big barrier to employment as there are examples of people losing out on jobs because they do not have a permanent home.

Furthermore, if someone is homeless and finds work, the shelter must either throw that person out or lose their funding for that person.

In rural areas, there are significant barriers to accessing support services, particularly around travel costs and time. How will these be addressed to offer the same level of support as in urban areas?

Employment service delivery model

Politicians assume the superiority of the private sector, but where the public sector has competed with the private sector, it has outperformed it.

The UK is a staunch supporter of private sector engagement in the delivery of key services - best value legislation has pushed us down that route.

We are not far from exposing organisations to market forces that should not have to face those pressures. Time and again, we see that providers already facing these pressures do not have the same availability to speak about service delivery issues or deliver a bit extra because time is money.

The output-focused, primary-contractor model raises real concerns about the quality of service delivery on the ground.

In such a model, commissioners will have an essential role in ensuring services deliver what they say they are going to.

There is some interpretation possible of the EU rules on national subsidisation when it comes to key services, such as employment services.

There are worries about the independence of voluntary organisations who have been contracted to run services. CEOs have admitted there is a conflict of interest as they cannot criticise the government.

Also in terms of the delivery framework, there is much potential to tackle child poverty at local level, through local authorities - some of which are seeking to take leadership in this - but the mechanisms are not in place to provide the necessary powers at local level.

Conclusions

Positives

The main positives to come out of the discussions with participants at this event were:

1. the commitment to tackle child poverty and the separation of child maintenance payments from other benefits
2. the commitment to improve support for disabled people looking to enter employment
3. there have been improvements in the services offered by job centres for many jobseekers
4. people also welcomed the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the government on these issues

Concerns

However, there were real concerns amongst the participants about the balance of the approach taken in the Green Paper and its focus on conditionalities and sanctions.

Whilst the Minister and the representatives of the DWP assured participants that the Green paper also fully recognised the government's responsibilities and those of employers, there was a groundswell of opinion that the proposals seem to want to shift a disproportionate amount of responsibility for poverty and exclusion onto individuals experiencing unemployment.

Comments made generally focused on the following issues:

1. The approach is too simplistic
 - a. lack of a long-term approach; risk of pushing people into unsuitable jobs to achieve short-term targets
 - b. conditionality and sanctions blame individual jobseekers for unemployment and fail to see the role of other causes of joblessness such as cyclical economic downturns and discrimination.
 - c. failure to deal with structural causes of poverty:
 - poverty traps
 - rising costs of living
 - people being in work, but still experiencing poverty
 - discrimination - both direct and indirect
 - the simple lack of jobs

2. The proposals provide little detail on the support to be provided
 - a. what does more support mean?
 - b. what support for people beyond support to access employment?
3. What about the people who cannot work?
 - a. people whose personal situation does not allow it
 - people with disabilities, particularly mental health problems
 - people with caring responsibilities
 - b. people who simply cannot find jobs
 - people facing discrimination
 - the low skilled
 - people who have been outside the labour market for a long time - eg refugees, returning mothers
 - people for whom the current economic climate means that there is simply a lack of jobs
4. Are the proposed delivery mechanisms adequate?
 - a. job centre staff are not always as helpful as they should be - particularly when under time and cost restraints
 - b. how will the primary contractors ensure quality service delivery at the local level?
 - c. what place for smaller niche services?
 - d. will output focused private services not lead to inappropriate short-term solutions?

After raising issues, participants were clearly cynical of the DWP representatives' attempts to negate these concerns. Whilst on occasion this seemed to stem from a lack of trust in the government's real motives, it also stemmed from a failure to share the government's optimism about the likely results of the proposed policies.

If the government is truly committed to a balanced approach to welfare reform, it seems clear from this consultation that it needs to do more to demonstrate that it understands the structural causes of unemployment and poverty, that some people are unable to work or find work through no fault of their own and that services are needed in a wealth of areas outside of employment to tackle the causes of poverty and social exclusion. It then needs to demonstrate how this understanding has translated into policy-making.

People, ultimately, need to be reassured that the proposed reforms will not mean that the most vulnerable people find themselves losing out on benefits because of the very barriers they already face when trying to access employment or goods and services.

ANNEX A

Summary of discussion group findings which have been submitted to the Department for Work and Pensions in response to the Government's Welfare Reform proposals outlined in the Green Paper "No-one written off"

1. Eliminating Child Poverty

The government's inspiration and pledge to eradicate child poverty is good. So is the emphasis on a person-centred approach and support. It is essential that cycles of intergenerational poverty and worklessness within families are broken.

The separation of child maintenance from other forms of benefit - such that it is not included in income calculations for the determination of other benefits - is good.

Employment of parents

Support measures need to be much more flexible to enable parents to return to work without becoming worse off. Ensuring that work pays is about more than ensuring it offsets any benefits lost. It must offset other costs including childcare and transport. The situation of people who, once in employment, lose money due to sick leave must also be considered.

Job Centre Plus need to become better at finding out whether they are dealing with parents and what their needs are. There is a value to society of people being parents and bringing up children and this must be taken into account when deciding how able the person is to take on employment. The real barriers to work for parents need to be addressed. There are practical issues around finding available childcare, maintaining skills and finding jobs with appropriate working hours.

Volunteering can be a useful step for parents looking to (re-)enter the employment market. It can give people valuable experience and help build confidence in a framework that is easier to balance with raising children. Unfortunately, there are examples of volunteering activity being thwarted by the attitude of employment services that if somebody can volunteer then they can work.

Child support

You cannot tackle child poverty without tackling women's poverty and social issues around violence against women and neglect by absent fathers. The Child Support Agency is being replaced by the child maintenance and enforcement commission with more powers to tackle parents (usually fathers) who do not meet their responsibilities.

There needs to be the right support available for families where there is conflict over child maintenance payments. Care is needed however. The state should not forcibly chase up child maintenance payments where families have come to their own arrangements or where this might prevent an absent parent from coming back into contact with the child.

Finally, and crucially - regarding all the reforms taking place - more efforts need to be made to ensure that parents and service providers/advisers understand the changes in the child maintenance system. This will be essential in ensuring that the right support reaches the right people.

2. Increasing labour market participation

Several participants reiterated the general point that poverty and social exclusion are not just about employment. There are many issues at play in this multifaceted phenomenon. Furthermore many people in employment are so poorly paid that they still experience very real poverty and social exclusion.

Individual responsibility

When looking to increase labour market participation it is important that the system takes effective account of the local labour market conditions and the ability of the individual to work, particularly before laying responsibility for not having a job at the feet of the unemployed person.

There might be a number of reasons why somebody is unable to take on employment and these must be fully taken into account before any benefits are cut. Issues here will include physical disabilities and mental health problems, but also caring responsibilities, discrimination suffered when applying for jobs and the lack of available jobs appropriate to someone's skills.

There was recognition that job centre services were sometimes very good. However, it is important that the system is based on providing incentives and opportunities for employment rather than on punishing people through sanctions.

There are major issues which need to be recognised about the simple lack of job opportunities, particularly for vulnerable groups, such as women in rural areas, younger and older people, refugees and migrants and people with mental health issues. There are also issues with jobs being so poorly paid that taking them does not improve somebody's financial situation.

With regard to employment services, there appears to be a real threat of placing too much emphasis on producing immediate outputs rather than looking at longer term and more sustainable solutions which

benefit jobseekers. For example, people do not necessarily want short-term work, they want a career. How will taking short-term work in an unrelated field affect their ability to get into their chosen career? People also commented that it can be almost impossible for many people to move on from part-time low-skilled jobs if they are forced to continue down this route.

A fully public employment service should be better placed to take on the longer term approaches necessary to provide real pathways into employment than the more competitive, market-based approach being suggested in the green paper. Private operators are more likely to be motivated to look for (unsatisfactory) short-term solutions to meet the targets they have been set. Furthermore, private contractors risk squeezing out important voluntary sector and smaller local organisations with knowledge of the clients.

However, even in a public system, job centre staff need to be enabled to provide the appropriate kind of support. There are inherent dangers with using targets in this context as the staff member may be motivated by the target rather than by the particular individual they are dealing with. Similarly, they need to have enough time available to deal with each individual in sufficient detail.

On the basic philosophy being proposed by the government ('no one written off'), some people thought that the reforms will mean that people who have their benefits stopped will be being written off. This is particularly dangerous when they are being written off on the basis of an arbitrary decision about whether they have made an adequate job search.

Employment of disabled people

Many disabled people who are currently on incapacity benefit are able to work given the right conditions or support. There are significant barriers to be overcome in terms of the attitudes and practices of employers in hiring disabled people. The government must raise awareness of existing support programmes such as Access to Work.

However, evidence shows that disabled people suffer from discrimination not only in the field of employment, but also in other areas such as public transport, education and access to goods and services, all of which directly affect their employment potential.

Measures to tackle the barriers to employment facing disabled people are therefore welcomed, but must address this diversity of issues. Accessibility improvements in, for example, employment are not offset by the inaccessibility of other crucial services such as education, training and transport.

However, other disabled people cannot be expected to work. In these cases benefits should be fully available to lift the individuals and their families out of poverty. There are significant fears that the new system will fail to recognise the severity of peoples' disabilities meaning that

people who are unable to work may lose out on the benefits to which they should be entitled.

Mental health issues are a particular concern in this context. Being impossible to quantify, there will be specific challenges in determining whether a person is able to work or not. Again there are serious concerns that people who are unable to work because of mental health issues will be deemed to be not trying and may therefore lose out on the benefits to which they are entitled. In this respect, the sanctions-based approach of the welfare reform may be counter-productive and deter people from engaging with the benefits system at all.

Older workers

Flexibility is seen as a key issue in enabling older workers to access employment. For example, there should be as much flexibility and choice as possible in when to retire, which means the statutory retirement age should be abolished.

Older workers need good quality work appropriate to their skills. Equally, it is important to remember that the ability of workers to remain in certain types of employment as they age will also depend to some extent on their sector of work – this is particularly relevant for manual workers who have a heavy physical workload.

It is crucial that Job Centre Plus provides appropriate, tailored support services, is aware of the particular barriers to employment facing older workers and is flexible enough to meet older people's diverse needs. More needs to be done to tackle discrimination against older workers in the workplace and it is important that this starts with the attitudes of the employment services.

Finally, private pension schemes need to be protected and state pension provisions linked to earnings to reduce the likelihood of older people experiencing poverty in later life.

Rural issues

People in rural areas face specific barriers to accessing both employment and employment services, in part because of the simple distances involved. People with mobility issues in rural areas, such as disabled people, those who cannot afford a car or those who have caring responsibilities at home, face even greater challenges. For some people, just getting to the job centre and back can take most of a day and involve complicated or infrequent public transport routes.

Training

The Government is trialling the introduction of an Integrated Employment and Skills service (IES). This aims to bring employment and skills' strategies and services, such as advice on employment and skills, closer together. It is asking whether people should be required to take up training.

Participants did not feel that it was possible to force people to learn. Once again the issue is not about creating obligations, but about creating opportunities. There are barriers to people taking up training which need to be addressed, including the costs of transport and care of dependent relatives.

Furthermore, whilst the government is talking about the importance of training, the whole focus of jobseekers allowance has been to get people into work as quickly as possible. Examples were mentioned of women in college being told to leave because they were not making themselves available for work.

Too many training courses lead nowhere. More efforts are needed to ensure that the training made available matches the skills that employers need.

3. Improving access to quality services

The service delivery framework

Concerns were raised about the contracting approach and a number of questions asked. Will it not be more expensive than other approaches, for example based on small-scale partnerships? Will the motivation of prime contractors lead to best service and reflect the best intentions of the government's desired approach? How can third and public sector organisations compete with private providers? Will there still be room for smaller niche providers?

It will be important that any system put in place addresses these concerns. It might be necessary to include specific contract requirements that reflect the need to guarantee and protect The best local services. The establishment of delivery partnerships with third sector organisations could be another possibility. Government must ensure that at no stage does one service provider pass on undue risk to subcontractors.

To provide improved access to quality services, service users need to be better involved in service design and not just consulted. The third sector compact can be an effective tool in this context, but it is also important to feedback to stakeholders what has been taken on board so that they know that they are being listened to. Also, this involvement should not be limited to specific issues or consultations, but used as the fundamental approach to service development and delivery.

Services for older people

Eight pilot LinkAge Plus projects – providing fully integrated access to services for older people – indicate that such an approach can be helpful in improving the delivery of services to older people and ultimately tackling exclusion. The older person is able to access support through one point of call and face-to-face contact, which

makes it much easier and simpler to find information and for the most effective support provision to be identified. The scheme also enables older people themselves to contribute through volunteering.

The pilot projects have been successful to varying degrees. There are also issues about how these integrated services can be established in other areas beyond the eight pilot localities and whether they can even be sustained there once the current funding comes to an end. This is particularly likely to be a problem where projects have set up new services rather than linking the existing services. A final concern with the pilots is that they did not always manage to reach the most disadvantaged older people.

The implications of personalised budgets need to be further thought about so that they can work even better. Ultimately, they are not likely to have a big direct impact on poverty, but they can make a contribution to improving choice and independence. They tend to be more useful for people with significant care needs.

Issues, however, need to be dealt with around the status of carers and the cared-for person. For example, is the cared-for person an employer and does the carer have annual holiday entitlements?

4. Tackling discrimination

Women

Issues around female poverty are strongly linked to issues around child poverty - in fact, one cannot be successfully tackled without the other. More value needs to be placed on the role of mothers and more attention paid to the impact of motherhood on the risk of poverty.

Women are more likely to face structural barriers to employment and these need to be addressed. There are cases of direct discrimination and also indirect discrimination through the lack of available flexible working opportunities or childcare services. 30,000 women lose their jobs each year as a result of being pregnant. Staff at Job Centre Plus need to be informed and aware of the impact of gender stereotyping and its affect on poverty.

There are also issues around needing to take time off work when a child is sick. Good quality and affordable child care as well as paid time off to care for children that are ill - as is the case in other European countries - should be introduced.

More broadly, women still face a significant gender pay - and pensions - gap and are also more vulnerable to domestic violence, which can impact on their ability to work. Women from ethnic minorities, disabled women and older women are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, exclusion and poverty. Support Services for women that experience domestic violence need to be properly resourced and available in the local area. The requirement on public sector bodies to promote gender

and race equality should be properly audited and enforced and this should include the involvement of local women.

There needs to be still more gender analysis to uncover the structural causes of gender inequality and discrimination. Discrimination is a process and not an incident. This must include:

- a full audit of the gender pay gap
- gender training for public sector workers and particularly those in Job Centre Plus
- full consultation of female service users on what their needs and expectations are from support services
- proper representation of women in decision-making processes
- use of legal case law to combat institutionalised discrimination against women
- look at specialist services for BME women
- Overall, more opportunities and choice need to be provided for women in the take-up of employment and/or support services, without recourse to stereotypes.

Refugees/migrants/ethnic minorities

There are many issues that impact on the ability of refugees and migrants to lift themselves out of a situation of experiencing poverty. Key issues include:

- discrimination by employers (what will happen with the “60/76 - The Business Commission on Race Equality in the Workplace” report by the National Employment Panel?)
- the lack of recognition of qualifications and therefore people's ability to work in their area of skill and expertise
- the lack of language training, which impacts on the ability of refugees and migrants to work in many professions
- barriers to employment created by the lack of access to adequate housing
- the lack of availability of better quality and better paid jobs for refugees and migrants, which means that many who do access work are still living in poverty
- the negative media portrayal of refugees and migrants
- the lack of political will to tackle issues around refugees and also gypsies and travellers, for example around the adequate education of their children
- the lack of representation of these groups in decision-making levels

- multiple discrimination facing women, disabled people and older people from these groups

A particular problem for refugees is that they are not allowed to work for months or years while their application is dealt with and then suddenly, when they are accepted, they can be required to look for work. Their employment prospects are bleak because employers see that their skills are out of date.

The awareness of job centre staff of the needs and potential of refugees needs to be improved. Links to language training could be crucial here in enabling people to access jobs that could really improve their lives. Decisions on refugees' rights to work also need to be quicker, to prevent loss of skills, confidence and dignity.

Politicians have a responsibility to improve the public image of refugees and migrants. There should also be more journalists employed from such backgrounds to give a more balanced portrayal of realities and provide positive role models.

More needs to be done to encourage employers to take on migrant workers and also to support these groups in the creation of their own businesses - including through financial support, training, advice and networking. In general, there is a need for more education and training services for ethnic minority groups. At the same time, there should be more focus on enabling access to other crucial services, including health and housing.