

Work and pensions secretary faces backlash over reforms ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ian Duncan Smith, the work and pensions secretary, has been criticised by poverty campaigners over plans to impose severe welfare penalties on people who are out of work and refuse to take up jobs.

Leading anti-poverty charities accused the coalition government of creating a "climate of fear" and exposing families and children to the "risk of destitution" as Duncan Smith outlined tough sanctions as part of a radical shake-up of out-of-work benefits which he said represented a "fair deal" for both the jobless and the taxpayer.

Under the changes outlined in this week's white paper, a work programme will be introduced to help people return to the workforce - with some long-term jobless required to do unpaid community work.

But unemployed people who persistently fail to turn up or turned down and refused to apply for jobs will lose their 65-a-week jobseekers' allowance for up to three years.

Those without jobs will lose benefits for three months if they fail to take up one of the options for the first time, six months if they refuse an offer twice, and three years if they refuse an offer three times.

Duncan Smith, who said earlier today that it was a "sin" that people fail to take up work, said his welfare reforms would create a system "fit for the 21st century, where work always pays".

Out-of-work parents of young children will be penalised if they fail to keep in touch with their local jobcentre.

Duncan Smith told MPs in a brief statement to the Commons yesterday that the contract was a "fair deal for taxpayers and a fair deal for those who need our help".

He promised a "comprehensive system of support" to help people back into employment, and a regime of sanctions for those who refuse to "play by the rules".

He said that his welfare reforms could lift up to 850,000 people - including 350,000 children - out of poverty under a scheme that ensured that people would be "consistently and transparently better off" for each hour they worked and every pound they earned.

But anti-poverty campaigners warned that the penalties could expose people "to the risk of destitution".

Oxfam's director of UK poverty, Kate Wareing, said: "Removing benefits and leaving people with no income will result in extreme hardship for them and their families. This sanction, and the proposals to force people to do unpaid work are based on stigma. Most people receiving benefits do want to work, and punishing them as if they are criminals repaying a debt to society is not a fair way to treat someone entitled to support."

Sally Copley, head of UK policy at Save the Children, said: "It is hard to see how Britain's poorest children are going to be helped using sanctions creating a climate of fear. It is children who will suffer when a single mum is told to take a job, but there is not suitable childcare available. It is the children who will suffer when the safety net is withdrawn for three months, living in homes where mums and dads already struggle to put a hot meal on the table or buy a winter coat. Breaking the cycle of poverty is important. Simplifying the benefits system is long overdue. But paying for this by welfare cuts for the poorest families is in no-one's interest."

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