

# Final findings: Lone parents

May 2018

**SARAH JOHNSEN and JANICE BLENKINSOPP**

**Lone parents' entitlements to UK welfare benefits have become increasingly tied to their participation in the labour market in recent years, most notably via the expanded application of Lone Parent Obligations to all families with school-age children and introduction of Universal Credit (UC) requirements affecting those with pre-school children. This briefing presents key findings from a longitudinal study which assessed the effectiveness and ethical legitimacy of welfare conditionality as it affects lone parents.**



## Key findings

- As currently implemented, welfare conditionality has had little tangible influence on lone parent interviewees' motivation to seek or increase their participation in paid employment. Almost all were already highly motivated to work, but prevented from doing so by a range of structural and/or personal barriers.
- The balance between sanctions and support is at present heavily weighted toward the former and this undermines the work activation agenda. Few of the families involved gained and sustained paid work for longer than a short period during the study. The majority were no closer to the labour market, and some had shifted further away given the effects of conditional welfare and/or personal crises.
- There is a mismatch between the mandatory support currently provided and the needs of most lone parents. For many interviewees, it was not intensive, personally tailored, or flexible enough; for some, it was too basic, generic and/or irrelevant. Access to affordable childcare remained a significant barrier for most.
- Insufficient account is taken of most lone parents' caring responsibilities when claimant commitments are devised. Some lone parent interviewees were sanctioned as a result of unreasonable expectations, DWP administrative errors, or failures of comprehension rather than deliberate non-compliance.
- Sanctions caused severe financial and psychological distress. The persistent threat of sanctions caused extreme anxiety, even when not enacted. Lone parent interviewees described doing all they could to protect their children from the effects of sanctions, but concerns about impacts on children (as innocent third parties) remain.
- Sympathy for the principles underpinning the promotion of paid work is widespread. The ethical legitimacy of the current system is however called into question by its ineffectiveness in helping lone parents gain and maintain work that provides income sufficient to improve their material wellbeing, and the profoundly negative impacts of sanctions on families already living in poverty.

[www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk](http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk)

## Introduction

Until relatively recently, lone parents claiming social security benefits in the UK were not required to look for paid employment until their youngest child reached school leaving age. Recent years have witnessed increased expectations, however, such that active attempts to seek or prepare for paid work have become mandatory for most lone parents' continued eligibility for social security.

[Key changes](#) have included the introduction of mandatory Work Focused Interviews (WFIs), Lone Parent Obligations (LPOs), and the Work Programme (WP). 'Age of youngest child' thresholds applying to LPOs reduced incrementally from 12 years in 2008 to five years in 2012, after which time lone parents with a youngest child aged five or older were treated in broadly similar terms to other jobseekers. From April 2017, Universal Credit (UC) requirements meant that parents of pre-school children aged three or four must look for work or risk being [sanctioned](#).

Lone parent '[flexibilities](#)' were introduced to Jobseeker's Allowance in 2008. When used, these allow lone parents to legitimately restrict their hours of work, depending on the age of their child and other circumstances. These flexibilities are not replicated in their entirety under UC, with many being relegated to guidance and others having been qualified so as to narrow their application.

Lone parents have also been affected by other recent reforms. Key amongst these have been: payment restrictions under the [Overall Benefit Cap](#) ('benefit cap'), restrictions to [Child Tax Credit](#), limits to the standard allowance [payable under UC](#) for lone parents under the age of 25, and removal of the [Spare Room Subsidy](#) for social housing tenants (that is, introduction of the so-called 'bedroom tax').

## Findings

### Influence on behaviour

As currently implemented, welfare conditionality has had little tangible influence on lone parent interviewees' motivation to seek or increase their participation in paid employment. Almost all were already highly motivated to work, but their ability to do so was impeded by structural obstacles (such as high child care costs and limited job availability) and/or personal factors (such as ill health, lack of qualifications, limited work experience, poor self-esteem and/or lack of confidence):

**“ [The sanctioning system] made no difference to me whatsoever ... I definitely agree that it's better that I'm in work than not in work...”**

(LONE PARENT, MALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE C)

**“ I was going to [seek paid work] anyway... I'm an early bed, I'm up at half five in the morning and my house is immaculate by seven o'clock... My kids are ready for school, breakfast club, and it's like what else do you do all day?... I think it's better for your kids as well... it shows your kids work ethic, doesn't it? ”**

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Study findings suggest that the current regime has been largely ineffective as regards the goal of assisting lone parent interviewees to gain and sustain paid work. Very few of the lone parents involved in the study succeeded in acquiring jobs and/or maintaining them (for more than a short period) over the two years that their experiences were tracked. All emphasised the role of intrinsic motivation in prompting uptake of work. A small number noted that increased financial pressure associated with introduction of the 'benefit cap' had been the primary catalyst for their increased participation rather than increased conditionality under LPOs.

All the lone parent interviewees who acquired paid work found their jobs rewarding, albeit that a few felt that full-time work compromised the amount of time they were able to spend with their child(ren). Impacts on financial wellbeing were variable. Most of the jobs obtained were poorly paid, insecure and/or offered little prospect of promotion. A small number were on zero hour contracts. Some reported being better off working, but others described experiencing little if any improvement or even deterioration in financial wellbeing once reductions in benefit entitlements and/or childcare costs were taken into account.

**“ I'm so much better off [working]... I have got more money.”**

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

**“ Hand on heart, I wish I'd never ever returned to work because I am in more debt now than I was then... ”**

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE A)

The majority of the families involved in the study were no closer to the labour market at the point of final interview, and some were actually further away given the effects of conditional welfare and/or personal crises. The capacity of many to move toward work was restricted by factors such as their limited competitiveness in the labour market, poor availability of jobs offering sufficient flexibility to accommodate caring responsibilities, difficulties accessing high quality and affordable childcare, illness or disability (of themselves or their children), housing problems, and/or legal proceedings relating to child custody, amongst others. A number of interviewees were transferred onto Carers' Allowance given recognition of a child's illness or disability. Some were themselves transferred onto incapacity-related benefits as a direct result of stresses associated with conditional welfare (see below).

## Experience of support and sanctions

The study highlighted a mismatch between the support needs of most lone parents and the mandatory support provided by Jobcentres and the WP. Positive experiences of support were reported by some interviewees, but for most such provisions were not intensive, personally tailored or flexible enough to help them overcome the barriers they faced when trying to (re)engage with paid employment. This was a particular problem for lone parents who were furthest from the labour market, such as those who had been out of work for a long time or who had few or no qualifications:

**“ There was never anyone who sat and looked at my qualifications or who gave me any advice. I thought it should be a place that’s supposed to help you to find work and I never received any help to find work... People are very much on their own to find work.”**

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

For lone parent interviewees with established employment histories, mandatory training courses were typically too generic, basic and/or irrelevant:

**“ I’d rather... be left alone than made to jump through inappropriate hoops that are actually going to be detrimental to my mental health and to my job prospects... Making you go to do job clubs and do CV workshops and word processor workshops and those things... [You] just have to go because if you don’t go to them, then you get sanctioned.”**

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Further to this, insufficient account is taken of many lone parents’ caring responsibilities by Jobcentre advisers when claimant commitments are developed. The flexibilities applicable to lone parents are, in the views of service providers, poorly understood and too rarely implemented. Many lone parent interviewees were unaware of their existence and were sanctioned for failing to meet expectations that were unreasonable:

**“ They had an appointment for me at 3 o’clock and it was for an hour. I said ‘I can’t fulfil it; I’ve got a child.’ Oh, well, if you don’t come you won’t have your benefit’... ”**

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

**“ We get a constant stream of, ‘I’m being put under pressure to do shift work, to work weekends’. ‘I’m being put under pressure to work longer hours than I can.’ ... You know, just endless documented examples of people trying to juggle family responsibilities with jobseeking, and Jobcentre Plus just not implementing them well.”**

(SENIOR REPRESENTATIVE, LONE PARENT CHARITY)

Some lone parent interviewees were penalised for failures of comprehension rather than deliberate non-compliance:

**“ [My adviser] said, ‘You agreed... this and you agreed that’, but to be honest with you, when your benefits change... you’re naive to what’s expected of you... I just kept saying, ‘So what is it you want me to do? Because I’m trying my hardest to achieve where I want to go’. ‘Well, you signed, you signed, you signed’, and you really don’t know what you’re signing for.”**

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

Sanctions resulting from administrative errors or poor communication on the part of the DWP continue to be a source of extreme criticism:

**“ [For] work-focused [interview] letters, for some reason, they still had me down as [address], even though I told them from the start I’d been evicted from there, I’ve now got a c/o address. So, they sanctioned me for not going to work-focused interviews [because I did not receive notification about them]. ”**

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE A)

The attitudes and expectations of individual Jobcentre and WP staff members were reported to be widely variable. Some lone parent interviewees described their advisers or job coaches as understanding, caring and respectful; others as unsympathetic, judgemental and/or patronising. Reports of inconsistencies in the advice from and/or expectations of staff were numerous:

**“ I will say that it’s down to the individual who they assign to be your [WP] coach. I’m lucky enough that the person who is currently my coach is a brilliant person. He is really accommodating in the sense that he respects the fact I’m a lone parent. ”**

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE A)

**“ They just look through you like you’re not even there and you get told one thing off one person. Then you get passed to another person and they’re telling you a totally different thing ... It’s like they talk down to you and they think they are above you... ”**

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Sanctions led to severe financial hardship, and indeed destitution, for a number of lone parent interviewees. Strategies employed by those who had been sanctioned included: using food banks, applying for hardship payments, borrowing money (from family, friends or doorstep lenders), restricting heating and lighting in their home, and/or restricting their food intake:

**“ [My gas and electric] fell into that much arrears... I was without heating for ages... I pawned everything I had... You’re literally going, ‘Do I eat or do I have light?’ ”**

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

**“ I can’t afford to eat at the moment ... So, if I can’t afford my food, he [my son] has that, like he’ll eat my food, I don’t care. He even says, ‘Why aren’t you eating?’ ‘I ate earlier’. ”**

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE A)

Experience of sanctions caused extreme psychological distress. Further to this, the persistent threat of sanctions caused extreme anxiety for many, even if they were not enacted. Some lone parent interviewees became ill and were transferred onto incapacity-related benefits as a direct result of stresses associated with the conditional welfare system:

**“ The night before obviously you’re waiting to see if you have done enough; you don’t know if you’ve done enough... So you have a sicky feeling the night before going ‘oh no’, you dread going in to sign on because you don’t know if you’re going to have your money next week. ”**

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

**“ I had to have a friend come and take over everything because the stress that I was getting from there [Jobcentre] had made me not be able to cope with any other parts of my life. I just completely went into a hole and just spent all my days crying; not pulling the curtains; not getting out of bed.”**

(LONE PARENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE B)

For some, these stresses were compounded by other aspects of welfare reform, such as the ‘bedroom tax’ and/or ‘benefit cap’.

One lone parent withdrew entirely from the welfare system so as to avoid conditionality. She subsequently relied on poorly paid insecure work offering income that was rarely sufficient to meet her family’s essential living needs; this had to be ‘topped up’ intermittently by family members who could ill afford such additional financial burden.

Lone parent interviewees reported doing all they could to minimise the impacts of sanctions on their children, but concerns about the short- and long-term effects on child wellbeing remain acute:

**“ The lack of money coming into a household is bound to impact on children and we know that parents will seek to protect their children from the adverse effects of not having sufficient money. So parents aren’t eating properly in order to give their children food... If the parent is stressed that’s going to have an effect on how they care for their children, their ability to parent... And whereas most parents will do their level best to protect their children, there are some things you just cannot protect your children from.”**

(SENIOR REPRESENTATIVE, LONE PARENT CHARITY)

Dealing with the ‘fallout’ from sanctions absorbs significant amounts of third sector support workers’ time, diverting their attention from their intended roles (assisting with employability, housing, parenting, etc) to ensuring that their clients’ basic subsistence needs are met:

**“ I go home thinking, ‘How am I going to get his family some food?’... and thinking ‘Is that foodbank open today? Can I get there in the morning? Have they had three food vouchers?’... We have to wait and then they get the money and then they’re sanctioned again, and it’s just constant really.”**

(FRONTLINE PRACTITIONER)

## Ethical legitimacy

The majority of lone parents, frontline practitioners and policy stakeholder interviewees expressed sympathy for the principles underpinning the government’s increased promotion of paid employment. In this regard, they emphasised the benefits of paid work (which pays a living wage), particularly the potential to improve household income, enhance parental self-esteem and offer positive role models for children.

Interviewees nevertheless highlighted three key areas which they argued calls into question the ethical legitimacy of welfare conditionality as it currently affects lone parents. First, they emphasised its ineffectiveness in helping lone parents gain and maintain work providing income sufficient to improve their material wellbeing:

**“ If you’re reducing the income of an already impoverished family, then you certainly are not... intervening in the lives of the children in that family to... take them out of poverty and improve their wellbeing, so to me [sanctioning lone parents is] never justified, never.”**

(SENIOR REPRESENTATIVE, LONE PARENT CAMPAIGNING ORGANISATION)

## Conclusions

Second, they emphasised that current practices can have seriously damaging consequences, including triggering destitution and/or compromising lone parents' mental health. Third party impacts on children especially, many argued, are indefensible:

**“ [Sanctions are fair] where somebody who has no interest in getting a job and doesn't make any effort to get a job ... But I must say that they should never ever, ever, sanction a parent, because who are they hurting when they do that? It's not the person that they want to get a job; it's the children.”**

(LONE PARENT, MALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE C)

Third, some participants, and frontline practitioners in particular, argued that the negative effects of conditional welfare are felt disproportionately by the 'wrong' groups, including vulnerable lone parents:

**“ We can see on the frontline that it's not working... It's not getting or targeting the people that they think that they were targeting. People that had been on Jobseekers a long time, who just couldn't be bothered, or didn't want to work... It's actually affecting people who are already vulnerable and struggling.”**

(FRONTLINE PRACTITIONER)

In light of these issues, widespread concern was expressed by lone parents and support providers alike regarding the recent reduction of the age of youngest child threshold at which lone parents are subject to full work-related conditionality from five to three under UC.

As currently implemented, the balance between sanctions and support is heavily weighted toward the former and this seriously undermines the work activation agenda as it affects lone parents. It also compromises attempts to end child poverty. At best, current practice fails to support lone parents in the way proposed; at worst, it compounds the disadvantage they already face. The ethical legitimacy of the present system is highly questionable as a consequence. A fundamental shift in the balance of weight between sanctions and support and adoption of a much more individually tailored and flexible approach is needed if the conditional welfare regime is to genuinely facilitate lone parents' engagement with the paid labour market.

### NOTE ON METHODS

This paper draws upon data from interviews with five policy stakeholders (including representatives of national support organisations), six participants in a focus group with frontline practitioners (including family and housing support workers, social workers and welfare rights advisers), and 53 lone parents in England and Scotland who had experience of welfare conditionality. Of the 53 lone parent interviewees, 43 were re-interviewed approximately one year after the first interview, and 36 again approximately two years later. Of the original lone parent sample, 45 were women and eight men. A total of 6% were 18–24 years of age, 81% aged 25–49, and 13% aged 50 or older.

## Key policy recommendations

- Lone parent flexibilities should be applied much more extensively than they currently are. Safeguards might be devised to ensure that lone parents' caring responsibilities are genuinely and consistently taken into account when claimant commitments are developed. The reinstatement of specialist lone parent job coaches across Jobcentres would support this agenda. Care should be taken to ensure that all lone parents fully understand their claimant commitments.
- The support provided by Jobcentres and Work Programme providers to lone parents should be much more intensive, individually tailored, and flexibly implemented than it currently is. This should capitalise on lone parents' existing motivations, skills, experience and interests, and focus on addressing the specific barriers to work they face on a case by case basis. Assistance with accessing high quality affordable childcare should be integral to all such support plans.
- As has [previously been suggested](#) by campaigning organisations, a duty could potentially be imposed on work coaches to ensure they have considered the impacts of every claimant commitment requirement on the children in lone parent families. A similar duty might be imposed on DWP Decision Makers to show they have considered the potential impact of a sanction on the household's child(ren).
- Heed should also be paid to [existing calls](#) for reform of the sanctions system. In particular, a stepped approach with early warnings should be adopted and the severity of financial penalties reduced such that no lone parent family (or indeed other household type) is left destitute as a consequence. Consideration might also be given to granting lone parents automatic entitlement to hardship payments.

This briefing was written by Professor Sarah Johnsen and Dr Janice Blenkinsopp, Heriot-Watt University.



Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change is a major five-year programme of research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The project is creating an international and interdisciplinary focal point for social science research on welfare conditionality and brings together teams of researchers working in six English and Scottish Universities.

Other briefings in this series and full list of references can be found at [www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/publications](http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/publications). Data from the study will be available from 2019 at [www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk).