

Single parents and benefit sanctions

November 2014

1. Executive summary

Conditionality has been a key plank of Labour and Coalition government welfare to work policies, with single parents required to take steps to enter work or face benefit cuts. Sanctioning rates have increased sharply since 2010¹ with growing public concern that individuals are being wrongly sanctioned, and longer length sanctions are causing significant financial hardship for families.

This report examines the role of sanctions within work preparation and jobseeking regimes. It looks specifically at the use of sanctions in relation to single parents² seeking or preparing for work; exploring the sanctions' purpose, efficacy and impact on claimants.

Conditionality has long been a feature of working age benefits; its role is to ensure claimants behave in set ways to obtain employment. The use of conditionality has expanded over time, encompassing a growing number of activities and circumstances and extending work-related requirements to previously exempt groups, for example single parents on income support or people with disabilities.

Benefit recipients, including single parents, are expected to do more in order to receive benefit payments. With increased conditionality comes an increased risk of a sanction; a financial penalty for non-compliance in relation to jobseeking or work preparation activities.

Gingerbread's research has identified four key concerns around sanctions and single parents:

- Incorrect levels of conditionality placed on single parents, which can lead to sanctioning
- The detrimental impact of sanctioning on children
- The assumption that non-compliance is deliberate or wilful
- The lack of support to help single parents overcome the structural barriers to work.

Our analysis raises serious questions around the effectiveness of the sanctions regime. We are concerned that when it comes to single parents and the labour market, focusing on how individuals behave, rather than addressing the structural barriers they face in finding work, is ineffective.

In July 2014, the government published its response to Matthew Oakley's independent review of jobseeker's allowance (JSA) sanctions.³ This included a commitment to keep the sanctions regime under review. This paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue around the purpose, efficacy and delivery of sanctions. It argues that the current level of sanctioning is symptomatic of a system that is unresponsive to the needs of single parents, and proposes a series of steps towards a more collaborative, claimant-centred approach that builds on single parents' strong motivation to find work.

1 DWP (2014) *Government's response to the Independent review of the operation of Jobseeker's Allowance sanctions validated by the Jobseekers Act 2013*. London: DWP. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/332137/jsa-sanctions-independent-review-government-response.pdf. Jobseeker's allowance sanctions data relating to single parent claimants has only been available since October 2012. This data shows that monthly adverse decisions for single parents increased significantly from October 2012 to October 2013 from 1,600 to 5,400. The number of adverse single parent sanctions dropped to 3,100 in December 2013 and has fluctuated around this level in the months to June 2014.

2 Single parents receiving income support or jobseeker's allowance.

3 See DWP (2014) *Government's response to the Independent review of the operation of Jobseeker's Allowance sanctions validated by the Jobseekers Act 2013*. London: DWP. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/332137/jsa-sanctions-independent-review-government-response.pdf

2. Background

Conditionality – as it is experienced by single parents today – has been shaped by a succession of welfare reforms over the last decade. Both coalition and Labour governments have utilised conditionality in an attempt to increase the single parent employment rate; most notably the introduction of:

- Compulsory work-focused interviews for single parents on income support in 2001
- Full jobseeking conditionality - via the removal of entitlement to income support - for single parents according to the age of their youngest child; introduced incrementally from 2008 for single parents with youngest children aged between 12 and five
- Work preparation requirements for single parents on income support whose youngest child is aged three and four in 2014.

Conditionality was believed to be – and continues to be justified as – necessary to enforce jobseeking behaviours and drive up the single parent employment rate, with the overarching aim of reducing the risk of poverty and its associated problems compounded by long-term unemployment.

Work is an important route out of poverty, but the imposition of conditionality on benefit claimants doesn't necessarily equate to a straightforward transition into employment. The wider economic climate unsurprisingly plays a large part in driving up single parent employment, as reflected by the particularly limited growth in the single parent employment rate during 2007-2011, a time of economic recession and stagnation (despite the introduction of conditionality in 2008). Moreover, research shows that the effects of voluntary and tailored back-to-work support may be greater than programmes based on increasing conditionality. The benefit off-flow rate (the proportion moving off income support at nine months) was higher for those who participated in the voluntary New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP; 22-26 percentage points) than the increase for single parents subject to conditionality (13-16 percentage points).⁴

While conditionality obviously affected more single parents receiving income support due to the mandatory and wide-reaching nature of the reform, these figures suggest the programme-specific effects were greater for NDLP single parents. This was particularly the case for those who were furthest from the labour market (for example, young single parents and those with older children), for whom conditionality is less successful. Rules to monitor and modify jobseeking behaviours do not respond effectively to the labour market challenges faced by some claimants, and single parents are one such group. Instead, single parents appear to benefit more from the flexible and customised NDLP approach.

Evidence shows that single parents are highly motivated to work and welcome help to find employment. Eighty-five per cent of non-working single mothers would like to have a job, become self-employed or return to study.⁵ Yet single parents face a number of barriers to employment. High childcare costs, low pay or a lack of flexible working can all conspire to hinder the chances of single parents finding a job that is financially viable, and one that is manageable alongside their caring responsibilities. Conditionality aimed at the individual conduct of single parents is ineffective at tackling the structural barriers that put them at a disadvantage in the labour market.

⁴ DWP (2013) *Lone parent obligations: an impact assessment*. Research report no. 845. London: DWP. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/211688/rrep845.pdf

⁵ Park, A. et al (2010) *British Social Attitudes*.

3. The effectiveness of sanctions

In the government's response to the Oakley Review, sanctions are described as having a dual purpose: "to motivate claimants to take the necessary action to find work and to ensure the system is fair to the taxpayer".⁶ "Motivation" in this context refers to the threat or imposition of a financial penalty if a claimant does not adhere to the jobseeking conditions set out in their claimant commitment. The regime is based on the belief that claimants will respond in an economically rational manner to the risk of a sanction;⁷ that is, they will follow the rules to avoid a potential loss of benefit, and assumes that breaches of compliance are deliberate, unless a claimant is able to prove otherwise.

Engaging in jobseeking activities and moving into employment as quickly as possible⁸ are central to the government's vision of fairness to the taxpayer; a "something for something" culture that seeks to emphasise the responsibilities of claimants alongside their right to expect financial help from the state if they are without work. Sanctions are also extended to those who are not required to look for work because of caring responsibilities or health conditions; but who are deemed to be in a position to prepare for work. This applies to single parents claiming income support when their youngest child turns one.

But to what extent do sanctions achieve their stated aims of deterring non-compliance and restoring fairness to the taxpayer?

Evidence on short-term effectiveness

International evidence shows that sanctions can have a short-term positive effect by increasing benefit off-flows and job entry.⁹ This reduces the cost of out-of-work benefits; a proxy often used to demonstrate fairness for the taxpayer.

However, the Department for Work & Pensions's evaluation of the Jobcentre Plus offer finds no evidence that knowledge of JSA conditionality leads to actual movement into work. Whilst claimants who were aware of sanctions said they were more likely to look for work, they were no more likely to have moved into work when they left JSA than other claimants.¹⁰ Moreover, there was no variation in the occurrence of sanctions between claimants whose knowledge of sanctions made them more willing to look for work and those who said the knowledge made no difference to them.¹¹

Evidence on long-term effectiveness

Evidence on the longer-term employment outcomes and earning levels is more mixed. Some studies indicate that claimants who are severely sanctioned are less likely to move into work, and that sanctions can lead to poor quality employment – jobs with low wages or higher levels of insecurity.¹² This is particularly pertinent for single parents, who are twice as likely to enter low paid employment as other workers - 39 per cent compared to 21 per cent - and have the added complication of needing to fit working patterns around their caring responsibilities. Those taking jobs on temporary or zero hours contracts have a greater risk of cycling back into the benefits system at a later date. One in five single parents entering employment will churn out of work again within 12 months;¹³

6 DWP (2014) *Government's response to the Independent review of the operation of Jobseeker's Allowance sanctions validated by the Jobseekers Act 2013*. London: DWP. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/332137/jsa-sanctions-independent-review-government-response.pdf

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Griggs, J. & Evans, M. (2010) *Sanctions within conditional benefit systems. A review of evidence*. London: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. See: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/conditional-benefit-systems-full.pdf>

10 DWP (2013) *The Jobcentre Plus offer: final evaluation report*. London: DWP. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/261656/rrep852.pdf

11 Ibid.

12 Griggs, J. & Evans, M. (2010) *Sanctions within conditional benefit systems. A review of evidence*. London: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. See: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/conditional-benefit-systems-full.pdf>

13 Newis, P. (2012). *It's off to work we go? Moving from income support to jobseeker's allowance for single parents with a child aged five*. London: Gingerbread.

the imposition of sanctions fails to address the real reasons why single parents struggle to find and remain in work.

There is a strong consensus that more research is required to better understand the effect of sanctions. However, findings from DWP's recent evaluation suggest that while knowledge of sanctions among recipients leads to a greater willingness to comply with the rules, there is no discernible impact on either their transition into work or rates of sanctioning. When taken together with barriers that single parents face when moving into work, the efficacy of a tougher regime with harsher financial penalties is questionable. In Gingerbread's view, the evidence points to a deeper, more complex problem - a schism between the principles underlying the purpose of sanctions and the reality of claimants' lives.

4. The implementation of sanctions

The new sanctions regime began in October 2012. Under revised rules, JSA claimants lose 100 per cent of their benefit payment for a fixed period. The length of a sanction varies according to:

- The severity of the non-compliance categorised as low, intermediate or high
- Whether the claimant has been sanctioned before.

Single parents claiming income support lose 20 per cent of their benefit for an unspecified amount of time until they re-engage with the jobcentre.

Table 1: JSA sanctions - level and duration

Sanction level	Example ¹	Sanction duration		
		1 st failure	2 nd failure	3 rd failure ²
Low	- Failure to attend an adviser interview - Refusal to comply with a jobseeker's direction	4 weeks	13 weeks	
Intermediate	- Not actively seeking work - Not available for work	Disentitlement ³ and a 4 week sanction on reclaim	Disentitlement and a 13 week sanction on reclaim	
High	- Refusal to apply for or accept a job - Failure to participate in Mandatory Work Activity	13 weeks	26 weeks	156 weeks

¹ Not an exhaustive list, for illustrative purposes only.

² Or subsequent failure for low and intermediate sanctions.

³ A claimant may be disentitled to JSA if s/he fails to meet conditions of entitlement. This is not a sanction, but if a claimant reapplies for JSA within 13 weeks a sanction may be imposed.

There are different types of sanction decisions which can be applied to a claim:

- Adverse - a decision is found against the claimant and a financial penalty is applied to a claim
- Non-adverse - a decision is found in favour of the claimant and no financial penalty is applied
- Reserved - a financial penalty is deemed appropriate but the claimant does not have a current claim.

Sanction decisions

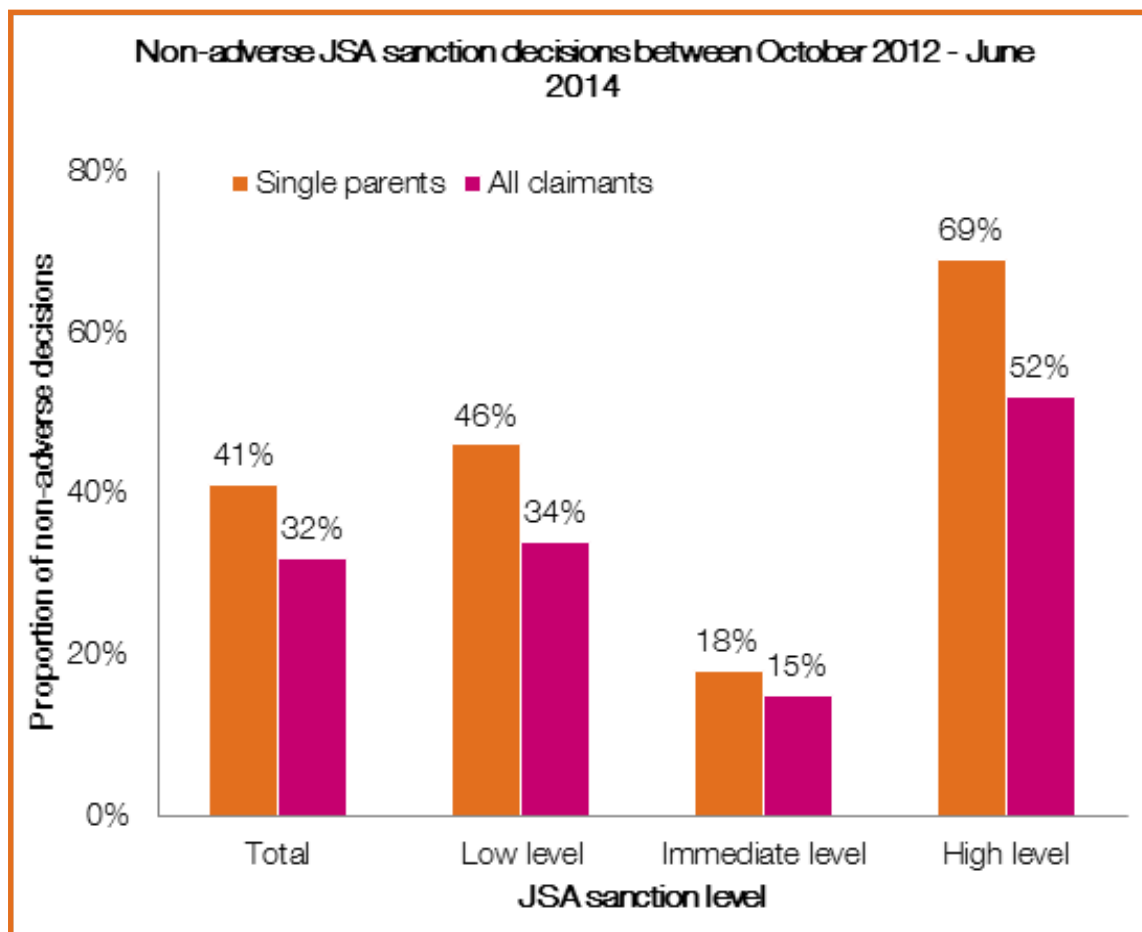
In the first 21 months of the new regime ending June 2014, 145,000 single parents claiming JSA have received a sanction decision; ; representing six per cent of all individual decisions.¹⁴

¹⁴ DWP (2014) *Jobseeker's allowance and employment support sanctions: decisions made to June 2014*. London: DWP

Single parents on JSA are more likely to receive a non-adverse sanction decision than other JSA claimants – 41 per cent compared with 32 per cent (see figure 1). At all sanction levels, a higher proportion of single parents receive a non-adverse sanction decision. This indicates that single parents are being inappropriately referred for a sanction in the first instance or wrongly sanctioned as a result of the decision making process. Worryingly, this is most pronounced with respect to high level sanctions: 69 per cent of single parents receive a non-adverse decision in comparison with 52 per cent of other claimants.

From May 2013 to June 2014, 39,100 single parents on income support have received a sanction, equating to six per cent of all income support claims.¹⁵

Figure 1



Source: DWP (2014) *Jobseeker's allowance and employment support sanctions: decisions made to June 2014*.

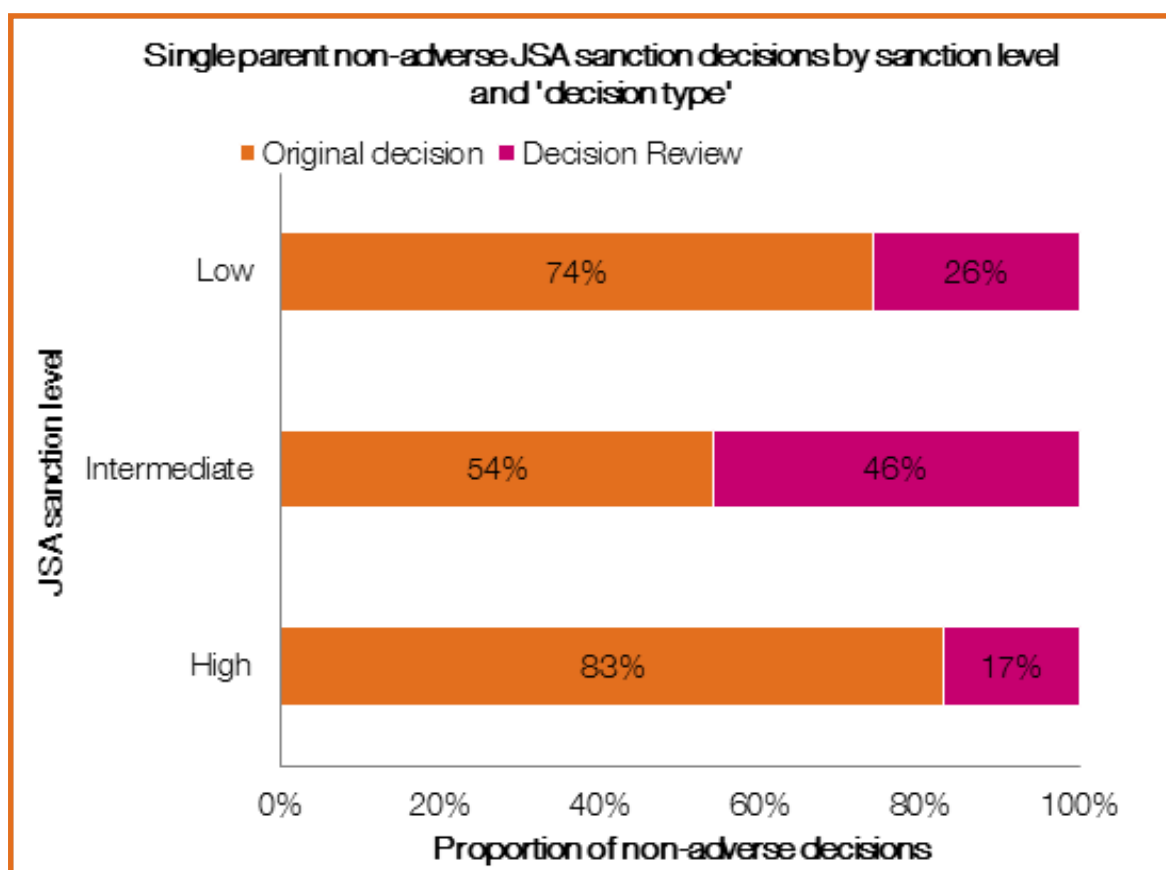
Non-adverse decisions can be made at different points in the sanction process (see figure 2). The majority of non-adverse decisions affecting single parents are made at original decision (the initial decision after a referral). In these instances a single parent has been able to demonstrate “good reason” for the alleged breach and no financial penalty is applied to their claim. However, a significant minority of non-adverse decisions are applied at decision review (a reconsideration of the original decision): a quarter (26 per cent) of low level decisions and almost half (46 per cent) of intermediate decisions. In these cases, a sanction¹⁶ has been applied to a claim but this has been subsequently overturned after further investigation, meaning that the original adverse decision was incorrect.¹⁷ Depending on when the decision review takes place, single parents could be without any JSA payments for several weeks or even months, leaving them in acute financial difficulty.

¹⁵ DWP (2014) *Income support lone parent regime: official statistics*. Quarterly official statistics bulletin. London: DWP.

¹⁶ Or disentitlement with respect to intermediate level sanctions (see table 1).

¹⁷ The current data indicates that no non-adverse decisions affecting single parents are made at appeal, though there may be a small number which are suppressed from published data for confidentiality purposes. Only a very small proportion (around one per cent) of all other JSA claimants' non-adverse decisions is made at appeal.

Figure 2



Source: DWP (2014) *Jobseeker's allowance and employment support sanctions: decisions made to June 2014*.

Inappropriate conditionality

In Gingerbread's view, a lack of appropriate support is a contributing factor to the sanction rates of single parents.

Gingerbread's national telephone helpline receives calls every month from single parents relating to the threat or imposition of sanctions. The vast majority of these calls are about the application – or lack thereof – of the “parent flexibilities”. These are a set of 12 regulatory safeguards which recognise that single parents are the sole carers of their children. The flexibilities are enabling; they help to shape conditionality ensuring that work search and work availability requirements reflect the caring responsibilities of single parents. For example, single parents with children under 13 can restrict their working hours to school hours, and all single parent claimants are protected from a sanction if they refuse a job offer because they are unable to find appropriate and affordable childcare.¹⁸

Only a third (35 per cent) of single parents are aware that conditionality can be tailored to reflect their circumstances.¹⁹ Many of our callers contact Gingerbread because they feel unable to meet the requirements stipulated in their claimant commitment and have been threatened with - or have received - a sanction, but are unaware of the flexibilities. The most common issue raised by single parents is being expected to look for full-time, shift work or weekend hours.

Since the introduction of greater levels of conditionality in April 2014 for single parents claiming income support, calls relating to sanctions have increased sharply. This is particularly worrying as these single parents have very young children and are being pressured to comply with jobseeking activities, which should not be applied to an income support claim.

¹⁸ For a full description of the parent flexibilities see: <http://www.gingerbread.org.uk/FactSheetsDetail.aspx?FactSheetid=32&ref>

¹⁹ Coleman, N. & Riley, T. (2012) *Lone parent obligations: following lone parents' journeys from benefits to work*. Research report no. 818. London: DWP. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/214373/rrep818.pdf

Below are examples of calls from our helpline that illustrate the persistent problem of inappropriate conditionality, putting single parents at greater risk of a sanction.

Helpline calls: Single parents in receipt of income support

Threatened with a sanction for not looking for work

Caller A has an 18 month-old child and is claiming income support. She is required to attend work-focused interviews every two weeks and has received a letter threatening a sanction if she does not do enough to find work. Her adviser has told her she must be prepared to travel long distances or work night shifts.

Threatened with a sanction for no childcare

Caller B is on income support and has an 18 month-old child. She was told by her Jobcentre Plus adviser that she would be sanctioned if she doesn't start looking for nursery care.

Told to answer her phone or her benefit will be stopped

Caller C has a two year-old baby and her Jobcentre Plus adviser is ringing her every few days and telling her she has to apply for jobs. She was told that if she doesn't answer the phone that her benefits will be stopped.

Told to sign up to Universal Jobmatch or her benefit will be sanctioned

Caller D has a one year-old child and is being pressured by her Jobcentre Plus adviser to find work. She has been threatened with a sanction if she doesn't sign up to Universal Jobmatch or go on a course.

Income support is an income replacement benefit and those receiving it are not required to look for work as a condition of entitlement. Single parents should not be threatened with a sanction for not seeking work or for failing to secure appropriate childcare. Advisers should not be pressuring single parents to apply for jobs, and single parents with children under three are not required to undertake work preparation.

Helpline calls: single parents in receipt of jobseeker's allowance

Threatened with a sanction for not attending work preparation courses during school holidays

Caller E is being threatened with a sanction by her work programme provider. She is unable to leave her two daughters alone - one of whom has health problems - to attend back to work courses in the summer holidays. No help with childcare costs has been offered.

Received a sanction for turning down work when no suitable childcare was available

Caller F has had her jobseeker's allowance stopped for three months because she turned down night-shift jobs as she couldn't find suitable childcare for her young daughter.

Threatened with a sanction for leaving a job when no suitable childcare is available

Newly single mother Caller G is struggling to balance her shift work job with caring for her two children. She doesn't feel that she can continue in her job as she can't leave her children on their own, particularly as the youngest has health problems. She called the jobcentre for advice and they told her if she left her job she may be sanctioned for three years.

Threatened with a sanction for not increasing job search

Caller H has a primary school-aged child and has been threatened with a sanction if she does not increase her job search in addition to what is stipulated in her claimant commitment. Caller H adheres to the agreement (to apply for three jobs a week at 16 hours), but her adviser is telling her she should look for work at more hours or risk a sanction.

The number of working hours stipulated in a claimant commitment should reflect a single parent's caring responsibilities. Single parents with children under 13 can restrict their work availability to school hours. Single parents cannot be sanctioned for failing to undertake a jobseeking direction, refusing a job offer or leaving a job if there is no appropriate childcare available.

Examples from Gingerbread's helpline suggest a common story of sanctions being applied because the conditionality attached to a single parent's claim is inappropriate given their caring responsibilities; or sanctions imposed for genuine mistakes – for example, missing a sign-on appointment. In these cases, single parents are not deliberately evading their work preparation or jobseeking requirements; rather they are faced with a set of requirements that are unrealistic given their circumstances.

Previous research²⁰ has shown that single parents who have been sanctioned are more likely to be in debt, suffer from ill-health or have children with health problems; issues that make it harder for them to fulfil their jobseeking requirements. Research into previous conditionality regimes suggests there is little active non-compliance among single parents,²¹ rather it is caring responsibilities or other vulnerabilities that impede the ability of single parents to adhere to conditionality. Other reviews of sanction literature to date have also found that claimants facing sanctions are often unable to comply with conditions – due to a lack of awareness or understanding of sanctions, as well as practical and personal barriers to compliance – rather than making a conscious choice not to meet benefit conditions.²²

Impact of sanctions

Receiving a sanction is a stressful experience; single parents report increased levels of anxiety about their ability to cope financially, and struggle emotionally because they feel unable to provide for their children.²³ Coping strategies vary; most commonly single parents reduce spending on basic provisions such as food, utility bills and children's activities to mitigate for lost income. For additional help, they also turn to:²⁴

- Family or friends for short-term financial support
- Hardship payments or local welfare assistance schemes
- Support in kind from foodbanks²⁵

Despite the best efforts of single parents to manage financially when sanctioned, prolonged periods without support from benefits can have negative consequences for children. With less money to pay for the essentials, children's health will be put at risk, their ability to concentrate at school will suffer and opportunities to take part in social and physical activities will be diminished.

Claimants are not routinely told about hardship payments - the primary means of emergency support - when they receive a sanction:

- Less than a fifth (18 per cent) of single parents,²⁶ compared with 23 per cent of JSA claimants,²⁷ were told about the possibility of a hardship payment
- Only five per cent of single parents received a hardship payment,²⁸ whereas 13 per cent of JSA claimants went on to make an application.²⁹

Lack of information about the availability of hardship payments and delays in the processing of payments were issues raised in the Oakley review, and the government has committed to improve communications and systems. However, the negative impact of a sanction doesn't end when the sanction is removed. A prolonged period of reduced income may mean that single parents have incurred debts during the sanction period or increased their level of existing debts. If they were in receipt of a hardship payment, this has to be paid back through a reduction in subsequent JSA payments.

20 Goodwin, V. (2008). *The effects of sanctions on lone parents' employment decisions and moves into employment*. Research report no. 511 London: DWP.

21 Ibid.

22 Scottish Government (2013) *The potential impacts of benefit sanctions on individuals and households*; Watts, B. et al (2014) *Welfare sanctions and conditionality in the UK*. York: JRF.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Cooper, N. et al (2014) *Below the breadline: The relentless rise of food poverty in Britain*.

26 Coleman, N. & Riley, T. (2012) *Lone parent obligations: following lone parents' journeys from benefits to work*. Research report no. 818. London: DWP. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/214373/rrep818.pdf

27 DWP (2013) *The Jobcentre Plus offer: final evaluation report*. London: DWP. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/261656/rrep852.pdf

28 Coleman, N. & Riley, T. (2012) *Lone parent obligations: following lone parents' journeys from benefits to work*. Research report no. 818. London: DWP. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/214373/rrep818.pdf

29 DWP (2013) *The Jobcentre Plus offer: final evaluation report*. London: DWP. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/261656/rrep852.pdf

5. Setting a new direction for conditionality:

what needs to change?

Despite important regulatory safeguards to ensure single parents are protected from inappropriate conditionality and sanctions, data shows they are more likely to be wrongly sanctioned than other JSA claimants. Outlined below are five issues that need to be addressed to minimise the risk of sanctions for single parents.

Greater visibility

The needs of single parents are becoming increasingly invisible in welfare to work provision. The flexibilities available to single parents in the current system will be significantly reduced under universal credit. Only one out of 12 flexibilities will be carried over in its entirety. Single parents will effectively be treated in the same way as jobseekers without caring responsibilities; it will be harder to guarantee that conditionality is tailored to reflect their circumstances. Gingerbread is concerned that single parents will be at greater risk of incurring sanctions and less likely to find work because vital safeguards have been removed.

Specialist support

From our perspective, a lack of specialist support coupled with the threat of sanctions is leading to some single parents agreeing to conditionality which is at odds with their caring responsibilities and out of step with regulations. Single parents on income support with pre-school-aged children are being treated as de-facto jobseekers, and those claiming jobseeker's allowance are facing an uphill struggle to get even the most basic support in place, such as sign-on appointments within school hours.

Specialist support and advice is key; the loss of lone parent advisers is a case in point. Repeated evaluations by DWP demonstrated the importance of lone parent advisers in helping single parents return to work. Single parents felt that lone parent advisers understood their circumstances and helped them to overcome the obstacles to employment. Lone parent advisers had the time and expertise to deliver personalised support, however there has been a reduction in the provision of lone parent advisers across Jobcentre Plus in recent years. Single parents are missing out on tailored advice as a result.

Recalibration of conditionality

The introduction of tougher conditionality and more stringent sanctions places an overemphasis on punitive measures to secure job outcomes. Research shows that this can be particularly detrimental to claimants with multiple barriers to employment, causing financial hardship and potentially impeding their progress towards employment. Their effectiveness, beyond hastening claimants' exit from out-of-work benefits, is mixed at best. Instead Gingerbread wants to see back to work provision recalibrated to build on single parents' aspirations and tap into their existing high levels of motivation to work. This should start from a basis of well-designed specialist support, rather than relying heavily on punitive measures to enforce adherence to a regime that is unresponsive to the needs of claimants and the wider labour market. The coalition government's reforms, which aim to provide a more tailored and personalised service, may offer a step in the right direction, and the introduction of claimant commitments signals an attempt to engage advisers and claimants in a more thorough conversation about appropriate levels of conditionality at the start of a claim. However, the key question is whether the current high rates of sanctioning diminish the potential benefits of these reforms, especially for vulnerable claimants who are further from the labour market and more likely to receive a sanction because they struggle to adhere to conditions of entitlement.

Preventative approach to non-compliance

A more preventative approach is needed in relation to sanctions. Gingerbread would like to see single parents participate in a thorough diagnostic interview with a specialist lone parent adviser at the start of a claim, to agree appropriate conditionality and provide information about sanctions. If referred to the work programme at a later date, an effective triage system needs to be in place. In a warm handover involving Jobcentre Plus, the claimant and the work programme provider, there should be an opportunity to look again at the existing claimant commitment and make any adjustments. All parties must be clear about expectations, and claimants should not be left to juggle competing demands from Jobcentre Plus and the work programme provider.

Improving transparency and accountability

Examples from our helpline suggests that job coaches are using the threat of punitive measures too readily. Reasons for this are clear; job coaches have heavy caseloads and they work with a diverse range of claimants. This contributes to a lack of understanding of the complex barriers single parents must overcome to find suitable employment. When information about sanctions is conveyed as a threat, this constitutes undue pressure and sets the wrong tone for a constructive on-going relationship between claimants and their job coaches. We would argue that working with a single parent to design a claimant commitment that is responsive to their circumstances should eliminate the need to issue a threat of a sanction. This is not to say that sanctions should not be discussed. It is very important that single parents understand the conditionality regime and the role of sanctions within a broader context of the support that is available and the flexibilities that can be applied to their claim.

Communications about sanctions should be constructive and comprehensive. Explaining the consequences of non-compliance should be part of a conversation which seeks to help claimants engage positively with jobseeking or work preparation and not be used as a threat to impose inappropriate conditionality. The latter can erode trust and prevent single parents from speaking up about concerns they have and support they require. In a similar vein, if claimants receive a sanction, they need better and timelier information about how to challenge a sanction decision. For those with caring responsibilities, there should be immediate access to hardship payments to mitigate the negative effect of a sanction as a result of a reduced household income.

As well as claimants being asked to show good reason for not adhering to a direction from their job coach or work programme provider, those delivering support or monitoring compliance should also have to show the steps they have taken to help claimants meet their obligations. This could be an important counterbalance to ensure that compliance doubts are based on sound judgment rather than performance-related pressures.

6. Conclusion

Sanctions are symptomatic of a system that is unresponsive to the needs of single parents. A culture change within welfare to work provision is needed to harness the motivation of single parents. Conditionality should be redesigned to:

- Constructively support single parents to address their barriers to employment
- Be flexible and responsive to their needs
- Operate on the basis of mutual trust
- Build on single parents' own aspirations.

The government's own statistics reveal that a significant proportion of single parents are being wrongly sanctioned. Prevention is key: evidence suggests that non-compliance with a conditionality regime is often a result of lack of understanding of what is required; a consequence of poor information rather than a deliberate attempt to evade their jobseeking responsibilities. Calls to Gingerbread's helpline reveal that inappropriate conditionality which fails to take into account a single parent's caring responsibilities can lead to a sanction.

The introduction of the claimant commitment and a focus on a more personalised and tailored service may offer a step in the right direction. It remains too early to tell whether these reforms will provide the culture change that is needed to effectively support single parents back into work.

Recasting a system that is heavily predisposed to punitive measures to "incentivise" job entry will take time, and change will be incremental. However, there are steps that can be taken now to foster a more collaborative, claimant-centred approach, and Gingerbread recommends the following:

- Reinstate specialist lone parent advisers across Jobcentre Plus
- Ensure that work preparation and jobseeking requirements adequately reflect the caring responsibilities of single parents and that the current set of parent flexibilities are fully reflected in universal credit regulations at the earliest opportunity
- Roll out a national re-training initiative for Jobcentre Plus work coaches on the parent flexibilities and sanctions prior to the roll out of universal credit
- Ensure that every single parent with a new jobseeker's or universal credit claim receives a clear, plain-English factsheet about the parent flexibilities
- Improve claimants' understanding of the sanctions regime including what action to take when a sanction is applied and how to challenge a decision
- Pilot an approach whereby job coaches and work programme providers demonstrate what action they have taken to help single parents meet work-related requirements in the event of a sanction referral, to ensure that claimants are not unfairly penalised for an absence of help and support
- Implement automatic entitlement to hardship payments for single parents who have been sanctioned, to mitigate the negative impacts on their children
- Pilot alternatives to financial sanctions; including an informal warning for a first compliance failure
- Examine the feasibility of introducing compensation payments for claimants if an adverse sanction decision is overturned at mandatory reconsideration or appeal stages.

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