

# Held back

## Single parents and in-work progression in London



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# About Gingerbread

Gingerbread is the leading national charity working with single parent families. Our mission is to champion and enable single parent families to live secure, happy and fulfilling lives. Since 1918, we've been supporting, advising and campaigning with single parents to help them meet the needs of their families and achieve their goals. We want to create a world in which diverse families can thrive. We won't stop working until we achieve this vision. Whatever success means for a single parent – a healthy family, a flexible job, stable finances or a chance to study – we work with them to make it happen.

## Acknowledgments

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# Summary and recommendations

## Summary

With the rollout of Universal Credit (UC) and its associated aim for recipients to increase their pay, in-work progression is set to become increasingly important for many single parents in London.

Currently, single parents in the capital are substantially more likely than other parents and the rest of the working-age population to be in low pay and, among those on low pay, are less likely to progress at work. Five interconnected barriers limit the ability of single parents to progress: working part-time; a lack of flexibility; the availability and affordability of childcare; the relationship between education and job roles; and time out of the labour market. While these barriers are not unique to single parents in London, they are disproportionately experienced by – and have a greater impact on – this group. Single parents themselves view in-work progression within a wider set of financial and non-financial concerns and considerations, among which its potential impact on their children’s well-being is paramount.

A range of interventions and circumstances encourage and enable single parents to progress. While there is limited evidence of long-term positive impacts for interventions aimed at improving progression rates for single parents in London, individual parents are positive about schemes they have participated in, pointing to sustained long-term impacts. Beyond specific interventions, the removal of structural barriers (in terms of increasing the availability of flexible working along with the provision and affordability of childcare) has the potential to facilitate single parents’ progression. Life-stage is a key factor, with children’s progression through school stages linked to increasing opportunities for progression for their parents. The positive attitudes and actions of employers are viewed as crucial for facilitating and encouraging progression.

While the Government has designed UC with the specific aim of facilitating in-work progression, the five interconnected barriers identified by this research show that this is particularly challenging for single parents to achieve. In addition, the single parents who were interviewed for our research and had already transferred to UC felt the current design of the benefit did not always promote or facilitate progression.



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# Recommendations

To remove or reduce the barriers to in-work progression facing single parents, a range of solutions is needed which requires action and collaboration nationally and in London:

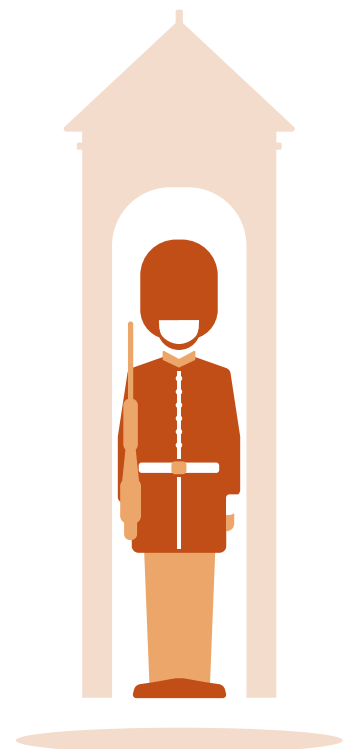
## National recommendations

- The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should be cautious in the development of in-work progression requirements for single parents, developing a better evidence base for what works for this group and moving away from a punitive approach including sanctions that are unfair and counterproductive in promoting progression.
- The Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) should legislate to introduce a day one right for employees to request part-time or flexible working. It is positive that BEIS is consulting on a duty for employers to consider if a job can be done flexibly and to make that clear when advertising a role; however, this needs to go further.
- The Department for Education (DfE) should urgently review the childcare cap, which limits the total amount that parents can receive and was set back in April 2003. This level has not kept up with rising childcare costs and prevents the promised 85% support for childcare under UC.
- DfE should reconsider the current operation of the 30 hour childcare offer to make it more compatible with the realities of working life, including offering this provision throughout the year.
- DWP should target career support and advice to single parents at key stages of their children's lives – in particular, when their youngest child begins primary or secondary school.
- DWP should offer better training for work coaches in skills needed to help single parents progress in work.
- Employers should use their appraisal system to encourage single parents within their workforce to consider progression and offer coaching to build their confidence to progress.



## London recommendations

- DWP should pilot a London-wide Childcare Deposit Scheme for pre-school childcare, including deposits and the first month's advance payment for those parents on UC who are entering or increasing their hours of work. This should be universally available and paid for from a specific fund rather than being drawn on a discretionary basis from the Flexible Support Fund, as is currently the case. This could be based on the successful scheme devised by Gingerbread and developed by the Greater London Authority (GLA).
- JobCentre Plus District Managers should better co-ordinate tailored support for single parents from specialist providers across the capital, and ensure this support is publicised so that parents can more consistently benefit from the positive difference these schemes make to their job outcomes and future.
- GLA's Good Work Standard 'skills and progression' pillar should target single parents, including through their Our Time Initiative, which supports the progression of women and other disadvantaged groups.
- The Better Work Initiative, the London Progression Collaboration and the GLA's Parents in work progression projects should build on their existing positive work to target single parents and assess the impact of these initiatives for this specific group.
- Voluntary sector organisations including Gingerbread and advice bodies within London Councils should provide better support and information for single parents in the capital requesting to work flexibly and challenging discrimination, including those who are returning to work after maternity leave.



# Introduction

Drawing on a review of the existing evidence as well as new quantitative and qualitative research, this report summarises what is known about in-work progression for single parents in London.

It outlines why in-work progression is a pertinent issue for single parents in the capital and explores their attitudes, aspirations, experiences and outcomes in relation to progression. Further, it examines what can be done in terms of workplace and policy interventions to improve single parents' outcomes in this area. Drawing on a UK-wide project examining similar issues (Clery et al, forthcoming 2019), it seeks to identify where the experiences of single parents in the capital are distinct and where they reflect the national picture. It concludes by setting out a series of recommendations for government, Jobcentre Plus District Managers in London, the GLA and employers, to improve progression outcomes and support for single parents. These organisations could play a valuable role in supporting single parents to move into better work in the capital.



## Methodology

The research synthesised in this report involved three elements:

- A review of recent UK academic and policy literature on progression. We primarily examined studies exploring the trajectories of different groups within the workforce and evaluations of interventions designed to improve in-work progression, concentrating on those studies with a focus on single parents and/or London.
- An analysis of quantitative data from the government's Labour Force Survey (LFS). This involved cross-sectional analysis (to explore the characteristics and circumstances of single parents) and longitudinal analysis (to ascertain how far single parents progressed at work over a one-year period).
- The collection and analysis of qualitative data. This involved **interviews with 15 single parents<sup>1</sup>**, from a diverse range of backgrounds, around

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<sup>1</sup> Information about the characteristics and circumstances of the single parents are presented in the **Appendix**. The names of single parents have been changed to ensure their confidentiality.

their attitudes to and experiences of in-work progression. In addition, we met with a number of key players within the field of progression in London – including representatives of the GLA, the London Progression Collaboration and the DWP representatives responsible for the in-work progression pilots – to explore their organisations’ approaches to addressing progression for single parents in the capital.

## **Policy context**

While interventions in employment traditionally focus on job entry, there is a growing policy focus in the UK on low pay as a problem and in-work progression as a potential solution. The government policy plan within UC is to encourage people in work to increase their pay. In-work progression will become increasingly relevant, as receipt of UC could be linked to a conditionality earnings threshold – determining not just the number of hours, but the hourly rate of pay which single parents (and others) must seek to achieve. Under the conditionality earnings threshold, a single parent would be expected to work a specified number of hours, dependent on the age of their youngest child, multiplied by the National Minimum Wage.

As of May 2019, a high number of single parents – over 552,000 nationally and almost 84,000 in London<sup>2</sup> – had moved to UC under natural migration; it is estimated that, under continued natural migration and managed migration, 90% of single parents will move onto UC by December 2023.

While low pay and limited in-work progression are UK-wide issues, patterns in London are somewhat different to those observed nationally. Research by the Social Mobility Commission indicates that the proportion of people in London escaping low pay is lower than the British average, while London’s share of ‘cyclers’ – those who have moved out of low pay at some point, but who have not consistently stayed above the low pay threshold – is nearly eight percentage points higher (Social Mobility Commission, 2017). Polarisation of jobs has been at its most extreme in London, with workers facing additional challenges with housing, transport, childcare and under-employment (Wilson et al, 2013).

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2 Analysis of DWP’s Stat-Xplore data on households in receipt of Universal Credit as of May 2019.



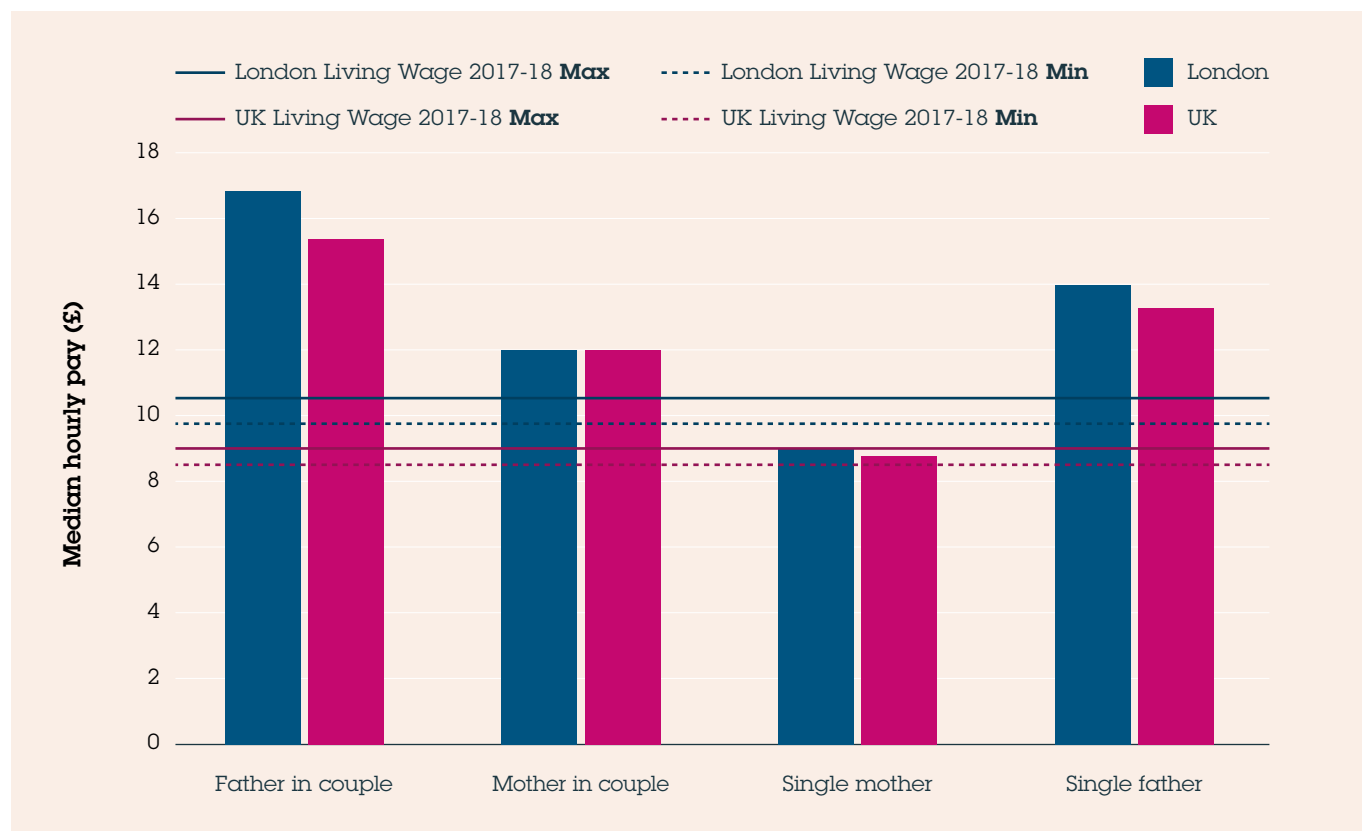
# Key questions

## How far do single parents progress at work?

While a range of definitions of 'progression' have been employed by academics and policy-makers, there is consistent evidence that single parents in the UK are less likely to progress in work than the working-age population as a whole. In their analysis of those who 'escaped' low pay between 2001 and 2011, the Resolution Foundation found the number of years spent being a single parent was negatively associated with escaping (Resolution Foundation, 2014). Similarly, an analysis of those who were 'stuck in low pay' between 2012 and 2013 found this was more likely to be the case for single parents – 41 per cent were 'stuck' nationally, compared with 33 per cent of the UK working-age population as a whole. The same study found single parents to be 19 per cent more likely than the general population to be 'cycling' in and out of low pay (Wilson et al, 2013).

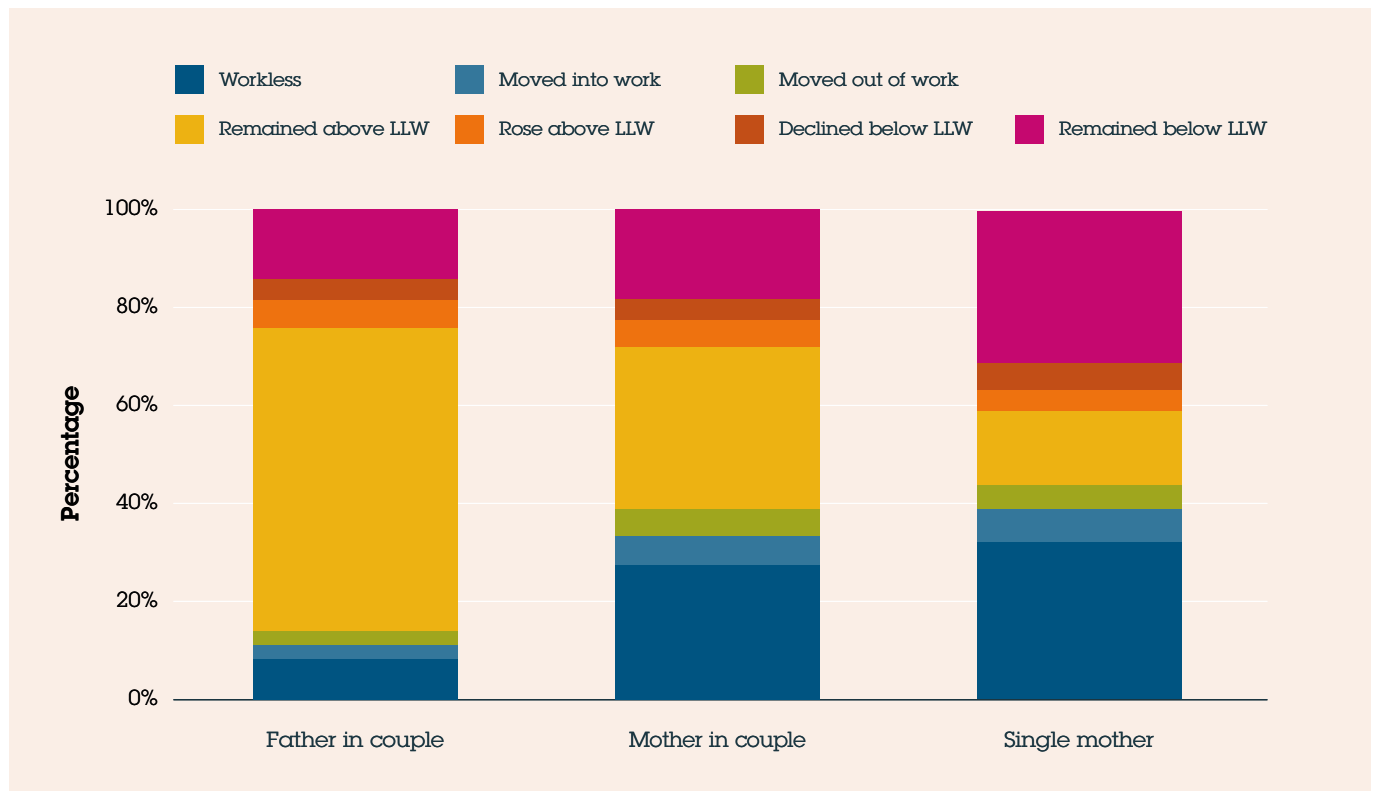
Our analysis of LFS data confirms these trends for single parents in London. Data recording the median hourly pay of single parents in London is presented in blue in Figure 1. While the median hourly pay of fathers and

**Figure 1** Median hourly pay of parents in the UK and London plotted against the UK and London Living Wages (2017-2018)



Source: Labour Force Survey, 8 quarterly data-sets combined for 2017-18

**Figure 2 Labour market outcomes and hourly pay (in relation to London Living Wage) for parents in London over one-year period (2015-2019)**



Source: Labour Force Survey, 10 longitudinal data-sets combined covering quarter 4 2015 to quarter 1 2019

mothers in couples, as well as single fathers, is well above the threshold of the London Living Wage, for single parents, it falls below the range of this threshold for the period in which data was collected. This represents a comparable pattern to that observed for the UK as a whole (presented in pink) although, in that instance, the median hourly pay of single parents lies within, rather than below, the range of the National Living Wage threshold.

Analysis of labour market outcomes across a year-long period shows that single mothers<sup>3</sup> in London are no more likely than fathers or mothers in couples to progress to earning above the London Living Wage (LLW), despite being much more likely to be earning below this threshold initially. In other words, single mothers on low pay in London are substantially less likely to progress than other parents in this position, reflecting a situation observed nationally (Clery et al, forthcoming 2019).

These patterns are reflected in single parents' perceptions of progression, and the impact of single parenthood in particular, on their potential to realise this. As Olivia<sup>4</sup> summed it up, "I am clear on how I could progress: before I had a child, I was progressing on a good path. My friends who are single

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3 There are insufficient numbers of single fathers in London to enable separate analysis.  
 4 Information about Olivia, and the other single parents interviewed, is set out in Appendix A. Names of single parents have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

## What are single parents' attitudes, aspirations and experiences of progression?

and who don't have children have progressed incredibly far in their careers. I'd say parenting and parenting on your own are the factors [that hamper progression]".

Most of the single parents we interviewed viewed progression in financial terms: being able to provide for their families. However, other factors and aspirations were seen to constitute progression, with individual parents identifying multiple definitions. Some single parents saw progression in terms of job security and other work benefits, including work patterns that would allow them to care for their children. This included working regular hours or weekdays rather than weekends or late shifts, and securing permanent/fixed-term contracts or a salary rather than hourly pay. Reflecting these different aspects, Amina defined progression as, "Maybe a salary job rather than a paid hourly job. Something with a managerial title...maybe a bit more of a benefits package as well ...a pension and all that."

Other single parents associated progression with status, viewing it in terms of job title or management responsibilities. However, there was a recognition that, while non-monetary elements of progression were important, progression had to be primarily viewed financially.

As Rachel emphasised, "Progression is not just purely financial, but I am a single parent. I need to pay bills and put food on the table."

Single parents discussed progression within a broader context of balancing their work and family lives and managing their financial circumstances. These considerations largely focused on the potential impacts of progression on their children's well-being, especially when this would mean they would have less time available for their children. Those who had progressed, especially those who had increased their hours, spoke of feeling guilty about the impact on their children. As Sarah stated, "You kind of feel guilty all the time because the more you're at work, the more you live to work which you have to do if you want to progress, and the less you have to give to your children." This was echoed by Victoria who had recently moved into a full-time role: "So it is a bit stressful, especially when you have children and you are the only parent...I do find it hard them coming home to an empty place every single day, I do feel guilty for that."

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## What barriers limit the potential of single parents progress?

Our research identified five inter-connected barriers to progression that are not unique to single parents but which disproportionately impact on them, often to a greater degree than they impact on other workers.

### **α) Working part-time**

Working part-time is associated with lower rates of pay and of progression out of low pay.

The proportion of low-paid, part-time employee jobs is more than three times as large as that of full-time employee jobs – although there are proportionately fewer low-paid jobs in London compared with other regions of the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2018). The Resolution Foundation found the number of years spent working part-time to be negatively associated with ‘escaping’, concluding that “perhaps the most pervasive issue was the ingrained idea that ‘part-timers don’t progress’”. This view was underpinned by a variety of assumptions – including the fact that managing part-time workers was seen to be more work for supervisors and a feeling among part-time workers of being removed from some processes and elements of the job (Resolution Foundation, 2014). Research by Timewise in the retail sector found that workers on the shop floor encountered difficulties in progressing to management roles – crucially because many of these jobs were designed with a full-time worker in mind and tasks could not be carried out in fewer than full-time hours (Timewise, 2016a).

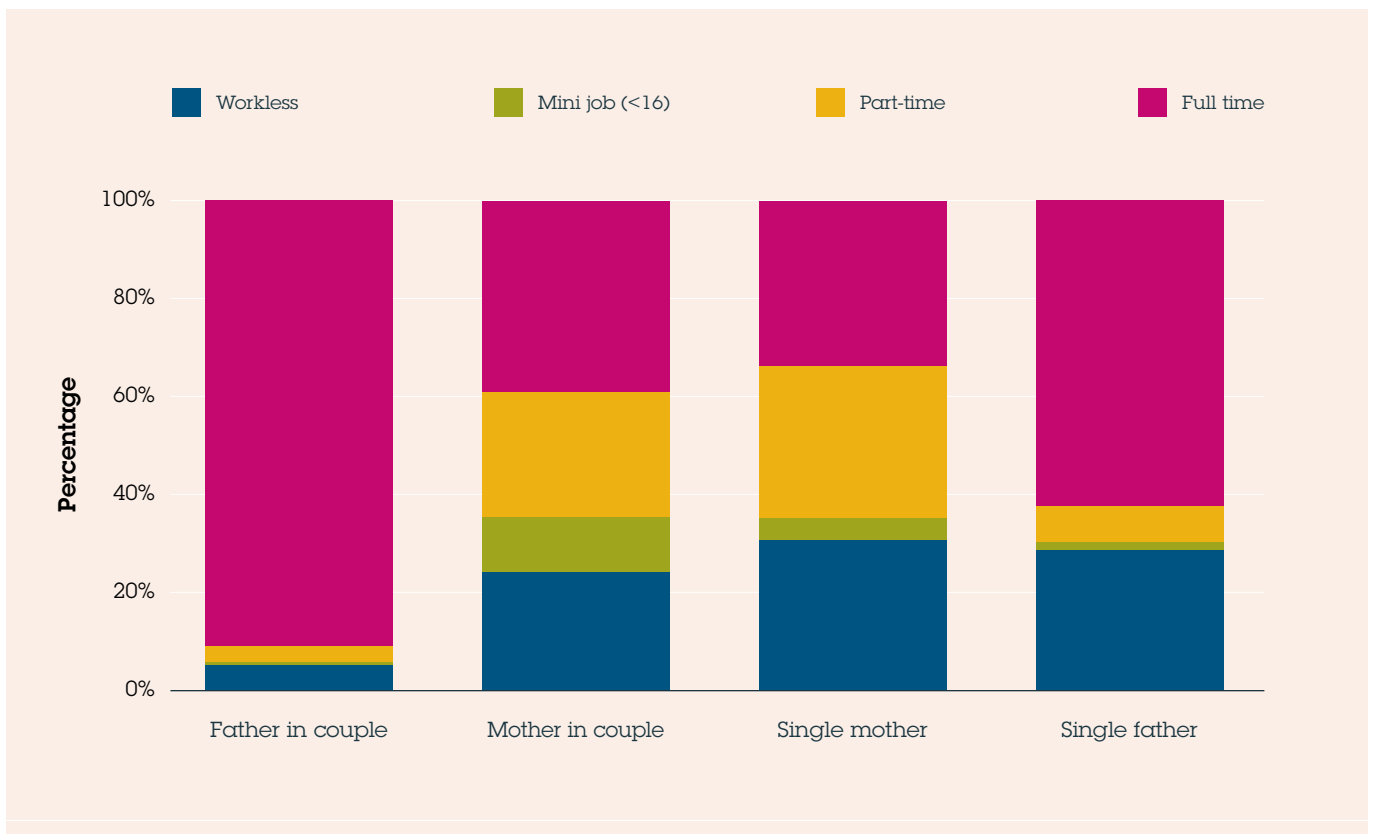
Part-time working is also a barrier to progression because it inhibits a worker’s ability to move to a job in another organisation. Research shows that progression in general and in London specifically is more likely to be achieved, and to a significant degree, by moving between (rather than within) organisations (Colechin et al, 2017; Wilson et al 2013; LondonPlus, 2019). The ‘right to request flexible work’ entitles all employees to request a change to their working hours once they have been employed with the same employer for at least 26 weeks. This constitutes a barrier to part-time workers wishing to move to different organisations (because of a lack of certainty around gaining the same flexibility with a new employer and the need to wait for six months to secure this). Those looking for new or alternative part-time work must rely on advertised vacancies and the demand for these roles outstrips supply. Research shows, nationally 11 per cent of FTE jobs earning

£20,000 or more are advertised with flexibility, this situation is worst in London, where the proportion is 9 per cent (Timewise, 2018).

Working part-time also limits workers' ability to participate in training – an activity known to increase progression rates (Wilson et al, 2013). Gingerbread's recent research on apprenticeships highlights that single parents are largely locked out of these opportunities, partly due to very few part-time opportunities being available (Dewar and Clery, 2019).

Part-time working is a barrier which disproportionately affects single parents. Figure 3 shows that single mothers and fathers in London are less likely than mothers and fathers in couples respectively to work full-time, although gender has a greater role in mediating the number of hours worked, reflecting UK-wide trends (Clery et al, forthcoming 2019). Data for the UK also shows that single parents, along with mothers in couples, are even less likely to work full-time when their children are young<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, under the conditionality easements, single parents with younger children are not expected to work full-time, meaning they will need to achieve 'progression' within the constraints of part-time working (DWP, 2019).

**Figure 3 Working patterns of couple and single parents in London (2017-2018)**



Source: Labour Force Survey, 8 quarterly data-sets combined for 2017–18

5 This was the case for 17% of those whose youngest child was aged five or less, compared with 46% of those whose youngest child was aged 12 or over. Analysis by children's ages was not possible for this project given the smaller number of single parents in London.

Many of the single parents we interviewed, particularly those with younger children, had chosen or were keen to work part-time. This was the case for Barbara, who moved into part-time work in a school. She stated, “I went into a school because it would be useful when there are school holidays and that sort of stuff.” Her previous job, before she had her child, was managerial; her job in a school pays less money. Reflecting the broader literature, in many instances, single parents had felt the need to trade job seniority for flexibility because their employers thought (or their experience suggested) that more senior roles could only be undertaken within full-time hours. Describing the long-term impact of this perceived relationship between hours and seniority, Amina described how, “I took a job just in retail. That was the only thing I could do that I could come [to] once I’d drop him off at nursery and be finished before he had finished nursery. I stayed in that job and then progressed once he got a bit older. I got up to management level, and then I had my daughter. I had to start at the bottom after that and I have not got any further yet.”

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## **b) A lack of flexibility**

Single parents are much more likely than others to have a lack of flexibility, which, as noted above, frequently prompted the decision of the single parents we interviewed to work part-time in the first place. While part-time workers, by definition, are less likely to have flexibility due to only being present in the workplace some of the time, further impacts are experienced by those with caring responsibilities, with associated time-specific commitments (such as school and childcare pick-ups) outside of the workplace. These impacts are exacerbated for single parents, who do not have a partner with whom to share childcare responsibilities, enabling extra flexibility. Interestingly, the Resolution Foundation found no significant effect of being a woman or having young children on the probability of escaping low pay, concluding that single parents, “will most likely face the barriers that other mothers do around part-time work, childcare and travel but these may be exacerbated without the help of a partner” (Resolution Foundation, 2014).

Those working in London (and single parents in particular) are likely to have the additional constraint of commuting to be factored in alongside their work and childcare commitments. This is particularly important as recently published statistics have shown that women in general, and mothers in particular, are more likely to leave a job because of a long commute, leading to them taking lower paid work (Office of National Statistics (ONS), 2019). Given the average commute is much longer in London than in other UK regions, this relationship is of particular relevance to single parents in the capital.

Discussing the concept of ‘less than total flexibility’, the Resolution Foundation concluded that, “people who were willing to work hard, often ‘beyond the call of duty’, doing unpaid overtime or covering shifts of people who were sick or hadn’t turned up were more likely to be chosen to progress” (Resolution Foundation, 2014). This is supported by the results of

recent in-work progression trials. Timewise's UC progression trial (in which 99 of the 102 participants were single parents) identified having a young child as a barrier to progression, with childcare costs and having enough time to balance work and care being highlighted. (DWP, 2017). In the longer-term, the evaluation found that, "some clients reported that prioritising family life over their career goals and aspirations acted as a barrier, as they had previously chosen roles or sectors that were convenient, easy to access or were compatible with family circumstances or needs" (Colechin and Bennett, 2017).

Many of the single parents we interviewed had identified precise time-frames within which they were able to work and found it hard to flex their time at work beyond this; this was especially the case for those without access to informal childcare, as detailed in the next section. Many single parents felt the inability to flex their time was a barrier to being able to impress at work and to progress. The socialising aspect of some jobs, which took place outside of daytime work hours, was identified as an issue by some single parents, who felt their inability to participate limited their opportunities for progression. Anna, discussing the evening events undertaken to bring in work to her company, concluded, "They go out regularly once a week...I am never going to meet those people because I can't...I think, no wonder women lose out on career progression and the money and everything. I've got a full-time job at home."

In addition, single parents highlighted the impact of commuting times on their work choices, with many having chosen roles that were close to their home and childcare. This was a conscious choice even though it limited their job choice and pay levels. A short commute could also lessen reliance on having to pay for childcare. As Joe commented, "I was struggling so much to find a suitable position whereby I could still pick my son up from school and be engaged in his life, so when it came up locally, I thought, 'Ooh, perfect.' I've had to come down quite a lot [in pay] just to take this position."

Single parents also talked about the difficulty of a long commute and parenting on their own. Olivia took a new job that was a step up and an increased salary but involved a longer commute of over an hour, on the understanding that she could work from home some of the time. Unfortunately, this did not materialise and she found it "quite difficult in terms of getting to and from work and managing childcare." This resulted in her leaving that role in favour of "a job which is less responsibility but nearer to home so I can actually do the childcare."

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## c) Childcare

There are a number of ways in which the availability and affordability of childcare limits parents' – particularly single parents' – opportunities to progress at work. Its location, availability (including outside of term-time) and opening times impact on the range and types of job options that are available once commuting times have been factored in. In addition, parents need to balance the costs of additional childcare against the increases in pay resulting from any longer working hours associated with progression. In the DfE's most recent Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents, 41% of single parents reported having difficulty paying for childcare, compared with just 14% of parents in couples (DfE, 2018). This was by far the highest rate of difficulty reported by any group, including those defined by income, working status, number and age of children.

These difficulties are exacerbated in London because of longer commuting times. In addition, research has shown that parents in London pay more for childcare than in any other UK region, with families in inner London spending an average of £8,000 every year on a part-time nursery place. Fewer than half of London boroughs have enough childcare for parents who are in full-time work, and the shortfall in childcare places in London is even bigger for parents who work atypical hours (Mayor for London, 2017). Indeed, maternal employment is at its lowest in London, with 40% of unemployed mothers pointing to childcare as a key barrier to getting a job (McNeil and Cory, 2017).

Similarly, DfE's latest Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents reveals that, among single parents working part-time, if there were no barriers, 34 per cent would increase their hours and 26 per cent would work full-time. Just 40 per cent would not change their working hours, compared with 59 per cent of mothers with partners (DfE, 2018) – providing clear evidence of the impact of childcare on working patterns, a factor known to be associated with progression outcomes.

Among the single parents we interviewed, the high cost and lack of availability of childcare were strong themes that emerged as barriers preventing single parents from being able to consider progression. It was clear that those single parents who had wider family support or informal childcare available could more easily consider a change of hours or job which could help with their progression. Olivia talked about the difficulty of matching working hours with childcare hours, with her previous job requiring childcare that finished at 7pm. Because available childcare only ran until 6pm, she needed to rely on her mother for childcare in order to do that job. It was also more difficult to access suitable childcare when single parents had a child with additional needs. Jade, whose youngest child has additional needs, has found it difficult to find suitable childcare and as a consequence has to work only when her son is at school. Her son cannot cope with after-school care and very few childminders have provision to look after children with additional needs.

The single parents without family support were more restricted by available formal childcare and this could prevent them from seeking better paid roles and progression. Looking forward, Ruby predicted, "If I was to progress any

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Many single parents had found meeting the costs of childcare, especially the up-front costs, challenging and, once again, some single parents had needed to rely on their family or wider support networks to cover these costs. This was acute for those single parents who needed to pay upfront nursery fees such as Chloe, who has found a nursery for her child requiring a £800 deposit and £800 upfront fees. She said, "There are no facilities that will [support you with the upfront costs]... it is ridiculous how they expect you to give up front. It is ridiculous. It is unfair." Meanwhile Vera, who currently relies on her mother to provide informal childcare, stated, "I have looked into childcare and I had to postpone the childcare [in nursery] because there were way too many upfront costs".

Single parents talked about having to mould their working patterns to fit the available childcare. Jade, who found it very challenging to obtain a part-time role in childcare, stated, "It is quite tricky to go back into private nurseries ...because they often like you to do full-time or 8 until 6 which I could not do." She looked at the 50 nurseries closest to her home in London and only three would have allowed her to do part-time hours or term-time working.

School holidays emerged as a particular issue across the board, with the result that many single parents had taken on roles that enabled them to take leave during these periods. Joe described how he worked his hours around his son, using some after-school care and saving his leave for school holidays. He described the availability of suitable childcare as "a nightmare", having found just one childminder in his area willing to work in the half-terms and holidays. Anna, a single parent with school aged children, commented, "I am fortunate in that I have got my parents who can help me out, otherwise I'd manage but be worse off financially if I had to pay for all the childcare during the holidays". Anna pointed out that she would also struggle with the availability of suitable childcare in the school holidays. She has found that holiday clubs running in school holidays are largely unsuitable to cover a working day, stating, "Holiday clubs are 9 until 3. What is that? Or a lot of them are not registered, so you will not get your money back on these." On the other hand, Amina had had to take unpaid leave during the recent school holidays.

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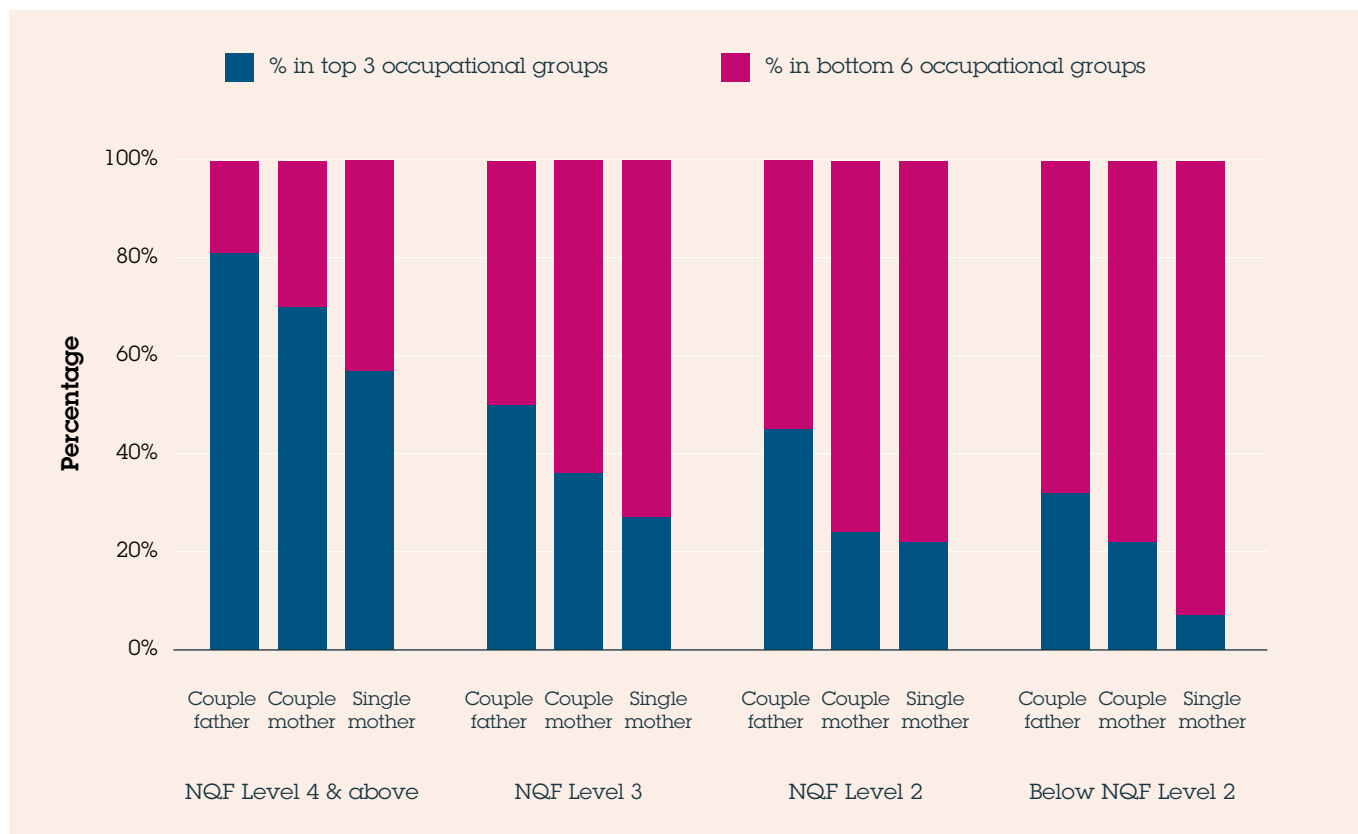
**"I am fortunate in that I have got my parents who can help me out, otherwise I'd manage but be worse off financially if I had to pay for all the childcare during the holidays".**

## d) Relationship between education and job roles

Progression is harder to achieve for those with lower levels of education. The Resolution Foundation found initially having a degree or getting one in the subsequent period were both positively associated with escaping low pay over a ten-year period (Resolution Foundation, 2014). Timewise’s evaluation of the Skills Escalator pilot found that those starting with qualifications at Level 3 and upwards had larger earnings gains than those starting with lower qualifications, while the evaluation of its UC Earnings Progression Trial reached a similar conclusion (Colechin and Bennet, 2017). Such research supports the findings of an earlier study, which showed that single parents with a Level 3 qualification tend to have longer periods of sustained employment, secure better wages and are more likely to work longer hours (Gingerbread, 2014).

This trend is significant for single parents, who tend to have fewer educational qualifications than the working-age population as a whole. Our analysis of LFS data indicated that, in 2017-2018, 27 per cent of single mothers and 26 per cent of single fathers in London had a high level qualification (at Level 4 or above), compared with 41 per cent of fathers in couples and 46 per cent of mothers in couples.

**Figure 4 Occupational grouping by level of education for different types of parents (2017-2018)**



Source: Labour Force Survey, 8 quarterly data-sets combined for 2017–18

On the other hand, many single parents are over-qualified for the work they are currently undertaking. As shown in Figure 4, for all groups defined by qualification levels, single mothers in London are substantially less likely than fathers and mothers in couples to be employed in the top three occupational groups. This was also the case for a number of the single parents that we interviewed; Amina has a degree and works part-time in retail while Barbara has a degree in business management and works as a receptionist in a school. Amina, “would love to use [her] degree, but [has] no idea what job [she] could possibly do.”

As discussed in the next section, single parents saw the mismatch between their qualification levels and job roles as having clear impacts on their potential to progress.

While lower levels of education will limit single parents’ rates of progression, improving qualification levels on its own will therefore not remove the disparity with other parents – rather, this would require addressing the factors encouraging single parents to work in jobs for which they are over-qualified, discussed previously.

## **e) Time out of the labour market**

Being consistently in employment is positively associated with escaping low pay (Resolution Foundation, 2014). While parents are inherently more likely to have ‘work gaps’, the fact that the employment rate for single parents is lower than for parents in couples, as depicted in Figure 3, indicates that they are even more likely to experience the impact of this characteristic on their progression at work. This is particularly the case for those with younger children; at the national level, around half of single mothers and one third of single fathers were not working in 2017-2018 when they had a child aged five years or less (Clery et al, forthcoming 2019).

The single parents we interviewed talked about both time away from work and time spent working below their skill levels as being barriers to progression. Some single parents found it difficult to secure a change from full-time to part-time hours when returning from maternity leave – which had led to them to leave their jobs or take a down-grade in seniority. Chloe stated, “I had to leave my previous employer because they could not give me part-time or flexible hours after I came off maternity”, while Olivia was allowed to reduce her hours in exchange for being given a more junior role. She has now moved to a different employer who is much more flexible, “but that role is not a management role.” Amina, who returned to the same company in an entry-level role with some of her previous responsibilities re-instated, emphasized “it would be nice to be paid as a manager for doing these things but I just can’t commit to the hours that they are asking. That is my biggest problem.” Single parents who had gone down this route often found it hard to progress back to their original roles and job status further down the line.

**“I had to leave my previous employer because they could not give me part-time or flexible hours after I came off maternity.”**

**“It would be nice to be paid as a manager for doing these things but I just can’t commit to the hours that they are asking. That is my biggest problem.”**

## What interventions or circumstances enable single parents to progress?

While some of the barriers discussed previously were viewed as being exacerbated by living and working in London (namely the costs and availability of childcare and the lack of flexibility inhibited by long commuting times), single parents were positive about the opportunities to progress available in London; in this way, living and working in the capital was seen as a facilitator of progression. While Olivia indicated, “For the industry that I am in, the career opportunities are here in London,”, Ruby stated, “I think it’s more expensive, the cost of living, but I do think living and working in London there are more opportunities to progress.”

“I think it’s more expensive, the cost of living, but I do think living and working in London, there are more opportunities to progress.”

As well as the opportunities afforded by living in London, our research highlighted four interventions and circumstances that have the potential to improve progression rates for single parents in London.

### α) Schemes and programmes that support progression

Despite recent policy interest, the evidence base regarding interventions that improve progression outcomes for single parents specifically in London, is limited. No interventions aimed at this specific population have been undertaken to date, although this will be rectified by a range of European Social Fund (ESF) projects to be delivered between 2019 and 2023, which identify those living in single adult households as a specific target group<sup>6</sup>.

To date, however, for those interventions in which single parents in the capital were a key recipient group, the evidence of widespread and long-term impacts is limited:

- The West London Alliance Skills Escalator Pilot, undertaken in Harrow and Hounslow from 2014, was aimed at those in rented or temporary accommodation, one third of whom were single parents. It aimed to “support working people on low household incomes...to gain better-

<sup>6</sup> These include projects on Sector Skills (seeking to provide appropriate training to enable participants to secure work and progress in six sectors) and on Parental Employment (seeking to enable parents to overcome barriers to entry and progress at work).

paid and more stable employment through a programme of personalised advice and skills acquisition”. Just one in five participants had increased their earnings by March 2016, with this outcome being more common among those aged under 40 and with qualifications of at least Level 3 (Colechin et al, 2017).

- Timewise Foundation’s UC earnings progression trial aimed to support and increase 102 low-income parents’ incomes beyond proposed UC income thresholds while maintaining flexible working, with support lasting up to a year. The model, delivered in South London, provided one-to-one tailored support alongside employer-facing support (DWP, 2017). At the end of the delivery period, 28 of the 102 participants had achieved a progression outcome, with 21 participants having increased their earnings (Colechin and Bennett, 2017).
- The GOALS UK Step Up model aimed to motivate and support 80 low-income part-time workers in London towards progression in work and greater financial independence. The model was based on a motivational coaching programme. 66 of the 80 participants were female, with 53 being sole carers. Five participants achieved positive employment outcome; two increased their working hours, two were promoted and one was starting a second job. This represents a very small proportion (fewer than 10 per cent) of all participants (DWP, 2017).

Despite this, many of the single parents we interviewed had participated in schemes or programmes aimed at achieving job entry and progression; these had variably been accessed through Jobcentre Plus, housing associations and Children’s Centres, but also through colleagues and friends. In a small number of cases, single parents had referred themselves to these programmes. The schemes variably involved mentoring, help with the recruitment process including CV writing, attending job fairs, networking and building self-esteem.

Single parents identified a number of positive outcomes from their participation, including securing new jobs, increasing their confidence and focusing on their future progression, including in the long-term. In general, single parents spoke enthusiastically about the schemes they had participated in and their long-term impacts. Describing the support she received from Women Like Us (WLU)<sup>7</sup>, Ruby stated, “It was fantastic. It was absolutely amazing!...it really taught me and helped me through my career of how to understand the recruitment process and what they are asking of me...I have been able to keep applying it to when I have reapplied to jobs.” So, Ruby was able to use the knowledge gained from the support from WLU when she applied for future jobs and has progressed rapidly in her career. Milly described how the GrOW programme<sup>8</sup> had helped her to get a job but also focused on her future job progression, stating, “I remember [the

**“It was fantastic. It was absolutely amazing!...it really taught me and helped me through my career of how to understand the recruitment process and what they are asking of me...I have been able to keep applying it to when I have reapplied to jobs.”**

7 Women Like Us <https://www.womenlikeus.org.uk/about-us/>

8 The GrOW Programme – get ready for work <https://getreadyforwork.org/grow-confidence/>

person who runs the programme] said ‘Where would you like to be in five years time?’”, which helped her to think about her future work and how she might earn more. The focus of many of these schemes on self-esteem and confidence building was viewed particularly positively across the board.

A number of the schemes were aimed at parents in general, or mothers or single parents specifically – a focus which the single parents participating found very helpful. Victoria, discussing a scheme she participated in called Successful Mums<sup>9</sup>, commented, “It helps you to know that you are not the only person in your situation, because you get to meet a group of women who are going through the same things as you, have similar aims and goals as you. A lot of them were really highly qualified and were just stuck in a rut because they could not find flexible hours with their children.” Vera talked about the value of the Leaders Plus<sup>10</sup> programme which helps new parents on their return to work. Vera described how the programme that was predominately for mums “...who are returning to work...and wanting to still be in senior roles, still be leaders and managers, and the programme is designed to support parents to do both.”

In some instances, such schemes were compared positively with the support available from the Job Centre. Rachel, who attended the GrOW Programme<sup>11</sup>, stated, “When you talk to the work coach it’s different to how I am with the programme; we can have a coffee and a chat and it is more relaxed. With a work coach, I feel like I am under pressure.”

While the evidence base regarding what works in improving progression for single parents should be built upon more systematically in the coming years, the current evidence also points towards the key role of policy change in removing some of the structural barriers currently inhibiting progression for them.

**“It helps you to know that you are not the only person in your situation, because you get to meet a group of women who are going through the same things as you, have similar aims and goals as you. A lot of them were really highly qualified and were just stuck in a rut because they could not find flexible hours with their children.”**

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9 Successful Mums <https://www.successfulmums.co.uk/about/>

10 Leaders Plus [www.leadersplus.org.uk](http://www.leadersplus.org.uk)

11 The GrOW Programme – get ready for work <https://getreadyforwork.org/grow-confidence/>

## b) Removal of structural barriers

Policy change is needed to address the barriers to progression for single parents discussed previously, and corroborated by the qualitative research undertaken as part of the evaluations of the interventions discussed, which cited these barriers as key in contributing to relatively poor rates of progression.

Childcare was the policy area consistently identified by single parents as one where government intervention could improve their ability to progress. Single parents' recommendations ranged from the government helping in some way with the up-front costs of childcare, to addressing the gap by which, as described by Olivia, "Parents who want to progress are not encouraged to [...] because you have the realisation that actually financially I benefit nothing from taking a job that may help my career but financially does not."

On the other hand, a range of projects have been delivered to re-design the actual roles those who wish to progress might apply for and processes by which they might apply – to make them fit more closely with the requirements of single parents and other part-time workers. In May 2017, Timewise launched a Retail Pioneer Programme with five retail partners, seeking to understand what was getting in the way of flexibility at store management level, and identifying key changes to break down the barriers. Their report indicated that employers were making some changes to facilitate this, including reviewing recruitment processes and branding to ensure that flexibility is clear, developing part-time job descriptions and delivering training to managers (Timewise, 2016a). On the basis of another Timewise project undertaken with Pets at Home, which aimed to develop and pilot career progression pathways into flexible management roles for women in entry-level part-time jobs, it was concluded that successful flexible working results from three key tenets: culture change needs to be driven by the leadership team; job design must routinely consider flexible working possibilities; and organisations need to communicate successes in flexible working (Timewise, 2016b).

Vera, who works for a charity, described how she found her employer to be particularly supportive of her need to work part-time hours. The charity needed a full-time person but created a job share role for her and filled the other vacancy. In addition, they also allow her to work from home some of the time. Approaching in-work progression from the angle of available job opportunities, as well as from the suitability of the available candidates, would be fruitful in removing some of the barriers to progression commonly experienced by single parents, primarily around part-time working and a lack of flexibility.

**"Parents who want to progress are not encouraged to [...] because you have the realisation that actually financially I benefit nothing from taking a job that may help my career but financially does not."**



### c) Life-stage

Analysis of LFS data at the national level highlighted an association between school stage and parental progression; specifically, those with secondary-aged children were much more likely both to work full-time and to progress over a one-year period (Clery et al, forthcoming 2019)<sup>12</sup>.

The single parents we interviewed identified life-stage, particularly with reference to the school stages of their children, as being a key inhibitor or facilitator of progression. For some single parents, the precise triggers for them to consider progression were highly specific, relating to, for example, the school stage which their children had reached or anticipating them reaching that school stage. Olivia talked about considering progression when her daughter is in secondary school: "I won't have to worry about childcare because she can come home by herself." Amina thought she would be more interested in progression when her eldest goes to secondary school and her youngest is settled in primary school, stating, "He'll want less to do with me once he gets to secondary school. I think once my daughter gets to about Year 1 or Year 2, then I will definitely try and move on and move up again."

### d) The role of employers

The academic literature and our research with single parents highlight that the attitudes and behaviours of individual employers can make a difference to the progression outcomes of single parents.

Single parents talked about the valuable role that their managers and employers could provide to help in their professional progression. This included the use of the formal appraisal systems but also innovative programmes designed to support women in the workforce including those returning from maternity leave. Ruby commented, "I've got managers who help me through getting the right experience [to progress]... We have yearly appraisals and a mid-year review of those appraisals. I do think progression is promoted."

Single parents also talked about the value of having a flexible and supportive employer which eased the challenge of parenting on their own and helped them to stay in work and develop their experience. Anna, who works for a small private sector employer, described how their flexibility helped her to manage her work and family commitments, stating, "It is three days and you can do them how you want as long as you get those hours done, so I've split them over four days... and they let me do things like take a morning off to go to a parents meeting... then do an extra couple of hours on my day off." Meanwhile, Maya - who works in a breakfast and after-school club - would like to progress to do more within the school where she works, and indicated that the head teacher had supported her and talked about her doing some work in classrooms, commenting, "Maybe you could try all the different classes and see what year you like and progress in terms of becoming a teaching assistant."

**"He'll want less to do with me once he gets to secondary school. I think once my daughter gets to about Year 1 or Year 2, then I will definitely try and move on and move up again."**

**"I've got managers who help me through getting the right experience [to progress]... We have yearly appraisals and a mid-year review of those appraisals. I do think progression is promoted."**

**"It is three days and you can do them how you want as long as you get those hours done... and they let me do things like take a morning off to go to a parents meeting... then do an extra couple of hours on my day off."**

<sup>12</sup> Analysis was not possible for London specifically, due to the small numbers of single parents with a youngest child at each school stage.



## e) The impact of universal credit

One of the aims of UC is to encourage progression at work and thus reduce reliance on benefits. UC promises more tailored support through a named work coach and, in theory, should be less process-driven and more customised than traditional benefits. We discussed with the seven single parents interviewed who were in receipt of UC how this was working in practice. These parents identified three elements of the way in which the benefit currently operates that make the idea of progressing challenging for them.

- **Pressure to obtain any work as quickly as possible:** Single parents talked about being put under pressure to find any job as quickly as possible under UC. Claimant Commitments often contained a tick-box approach to assess the number of jobs applied for each week. Jade, who is qualified in early years care, was told to apply for a certain number of jobs each week and to hand in her CV to employers. The pressure to get any work was paramount for Jade who described, “So, if I handed my CV into a coffee shop, I had to take a picture of the coffee shop... that is the pressure that I had; it got very stressful.” It is unclear how this approach will help claimants to move into work that might offer them opportunities to use their skills or to progress in the future.
- **Confusing expectations of hours to be worked:** While there is an hours expectation for single parents looking for work, there are no current requirements for single parents to progress when they have secured work (as DWP are not currently piloting their approach with single parents). However, single parents told us about the instructions that they received through their UC journal to increase their hours or fall under a threat of sanction. Claimants who move into work and reach the Administrative Earnings Threshold (currently £338 a month) should not be under pressure to increase their hours. However, there was pressure on parents working a lower number of hours to increase their hours, even though they had met the threshold. Joe moved into work after being unemployed for two years and is working 20 hours a week. He found when he moved into work, “I started to get bombarded by lots of messages to get more work... They didn’t mention hours, they just said, ‘It’s important, you’ve got legal commitments, you’ve still got to be looking for work.’”
- **Stress created through messages received via their online journal:** Single parents who had moved into work could feel under pressure from comments in their online journal. Sarah reported that the tone of the online journal “feels a little threatening.” The journal also includes a message about sanctions: “you have to read this thing about sanctions and sanctions can last two years,” meaning that “the whole experience is not very nice.”

“So, if I handed my CV into a coffee shop, I had to take a picture of the coffee shop...that is the pressure that I had; it got very stressful.”

“I started to get bombarded by lots of messages to get more work... They didn’t mention hours, they just said, ‘It’s important, you’ve got legal commitments, you’ve still got to be looking for work.’”

Single parents who had been incorrectly told that they must increase their hours or who had felt threatened by suggestions they were not doing enough work could feel alienated from the UC process, and this could sour their relationship with their work coach and the Jobcentre. This seems counterintuitive in helping to support single parents to progress. The comments from single parents highlighted that the Jobcentre was applying similar tactics to progression as they were to those who were unemployed. There was also an emphasis on increasing hours as a demonstration of progression. It is clear that a different approach and skills are needed from work coaches to facilitate the progression of single parents.

# Recommendations

The Government has designed UC with the specific aim of facilitating in-work progression. However, the five interconnected barriers to progression show that this is particularly challenging for single parents. The single parents who had already transferred to UC, and who were interviewed for our research, felt the current design of the benefit did not always promote or facilitate progression.

In order to remove or reduce the barriers to in-work progression currently facing single parents, a range of solutions is needed which requires action and collaboration nationally and in London:

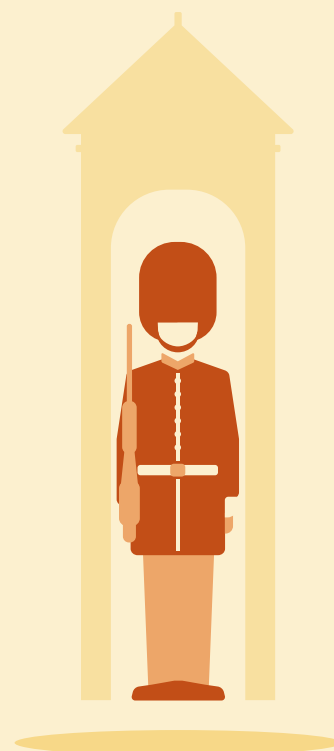
## National Recommendations

- DWP should be cautious in the development of in-work progression requirements for single parents, developing a better evidence base for what works for this group and moving away from a punitive approach including sanctions that are unfair and counterproductive in promoting progression.
- BEIS should legislate to introduce a day one right for employees to request part-time or flexible working. It is positive that BEIS is consulting on a duty for employers to consider if a job can be done flexibly and to make that clear when advertising a role; however, this needs to go further.
- DfE should urgently review the childcare cap, which limits the total amount that parents can receive and was set back in April 2003. This level has not kept up with rising childcare costs and prevents the promised 85% support for childcare under UC.
- DfE should reconsider the current operation of the 30 hour childcare offer to make it more compatible with the realities of working life, including offering this provision throughout the year.
- DWP should target career support and advice to single parents at key stages of their children's lives – in particular when their youngest child begins primary or secondary school.
- DWP should offer better training for work coaches in skills needed to help single parents progress in work.
- Employers should use their appraisal system to encourage single parents within their workforce to consider progression and offer coaching to build their confidence to progress.



## London recommendations

- DWP should pilot a London-wide Childcare Deposit Scheme for pre-school childcare, including deposits and the first month's advance payment for those parents on UC who are entering or increasing their hours of work. This should be universally available and paid for from a specific fund rather than being drawn on a discretionary basis from the Flexible Support Fund, as is currently the case. This could be based on the successful scheme devised by Gingerbread and developed by the GLA.
- JobCentre Plus District Managers should better co-ordinate tailored support for single parents from specialist providers across the capital, and ensure this support is publicised so that parents can more consistently benefit from the positive difference these schemes make to their job outcomes and future.
- GLA's Good Work Standard 'skills and progression' pillar should target single parents, including through their Our Time Initiative, which supports the progression of women and other disadvantaged groups.
- The Better Work Initiative, the London Progression Collaboration and the GLA's Parents in work progression projects should build on their existing positive work to target single parents and assess the impact of these initiatives for this specific group.
- Voluntary sector organisations including Gingerbread and advice bodies within London Councils should provide better support and information for single parents in the capital requesting to work flexibly and challenging discrimination, including those who are returning to work after maternity leave.



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# Appendix

## Sampling approach and characteristics of single parents interviewed

We asked for expressions of interest to participate in the qualitative strand of the project from Gingerbread's London Groups and our newsletter. From the single parents who expressed an interest, we selected 11 for interview, reflecting diversity on the characteristics shown by the literature to be associated with attitudes to and experiences of in-work progression – working pattern, age of youngest child and receipt of UC. Because the single parents accessed in this way were comparatively well-qualified, we interviewed a further four parents who were recruited through our contact with employability programmes in the capital. All fifteen single parents were interviewed over the telephone and received a £20 shopping voucher as a thank you for their time.

Name	Job title	Working pattern	Number of children	Age of youngest child	Universal Credit receipt
Chloe	Peer worker	Part-time	1	Pre-school	No
Barbara	School receptionist	Part-time	1	Pre-school	No
Bella	Finance administrator	Full-time	1	Pre-school	No
Vera	Charity manager	Part-time	1	Pre-school	Yes
Amina	Sales assistant	Part-time	2	Pre-school	No
Anna	Private sector administrator	Part-time	2	Primary	Yes
Ruby	Public sector service manager	Full-time	1	Primary	No
Joe	Private sector administrator	Part-time	1	Primary	Yes
Olivia	Charity officer	Part-time	1	Primary	No
Milly	Catering assistant	Part-time	1	Primary	No
Jade	Nursery nurse	Part-time	2	Primary	Yes
Rachel	Support worker	Full-time	1	Primary	No
Maya	Breakfast and after school club worker	Part-time	2	Primary	Yes
Victoria	Medical research	Full-time	2	Secondary	Yes
Sarah	Support worker	Full-time	1	Secondary	Yes

Highest educational qualification		Sectors		Commuting time		Number of dependent children		Age of youngest child	
GCSE or equivalent	3	Public sector	3	Under half an hour	7	One	10	Pre-school	5
A level or equivalent	3	Private sector	8	Half an hour to an hour	3	Two	5	Primary school age	8
Degree	7	Charitable or voluntary sector	4	More than one hour	5			Secondary school age	2
Higher degree or doctorate	2								



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