

# Caring without sharing

Single parents'  
journeys through the  
COVID-19 pandemic



**Final report, May 2021**

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In partnership with:

 **ies** institute for  
employment  
studies

# **About us**

**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.

**The Institute for Employment Studies (IES)** is an independent, apolitical, international centre of research and consultancy in public employment policy and HR management. It works closely with employers in all sectors, government departments, agencies, professional bodies and associations. IES is a focus of knowledge and practical experience in employment and training policy, the operation of labour markets, and HR planning and development. IES is a not-for-profit organisation.

**Standard Life Foundation** has supported this project as part of its mission to contribute towards strategic change which improves financial well-being in the UK. The Foundation funds research, policy work and campaigning activities to tackle financial problems and improve living standards for people on low-to-middle incomes in the UK. It is an independent charitable foundation registered in Scotland. Standard Life Foundation is a registered charity no. SC040877.

## **Acknowledgments**

Gingerbread is grateful to the Standard Life Foundation for their support with this report and the Institute for Employment Studies who provided the quantitative analysis and helpful suggestions in the development of our policy asks. Gingerbread would like to thank the single parents who were interviewed as part of our research and who gave valuable insight into their lived experience of working and caring during the COVID-19 pandemic so far.

**We want  
to create  
a world  
in which  
diverse  
families  
can thrive.**

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# Foreword

It's no secret that the pandemic and lockdowns over the last year have been hard on everyone. But this has been substantially harder for the UK's 1.8 million single parent families.

Single parents have long faced unfairness and inequality, even before the spectre of COVID-19. What this research shows is just how much the pandemic has exacerbated those inequalities and forced many single parents to cope with unsustainable pressure for months on end – with serious knock-on effects on both their own and their children's mental health.

This report highlights the fierce strain the first year of the pandemic has placed on single parents. Our interviews with parents bring to bear a detailed picture of the enormous effect that this social and economic upheaval has had on single parents and their children. The quantitative analyses conducted by our research partner – the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) – further illustrate the shocking scale of these pressures on single parents right across the country.

I would like to thank IES for their detailed and astute analyses, which have brought into stark focus the scale of the challenge currently facing single parents. I would also like to thank the research funder, the Standard Life Foundation, who has provided very welcome support, insight and feedback throughout the project.

It's vitally important we don't overlook or take for granted how social isolation, furlough, job losses and home schooling have had a disproportionate, and at times devastating, impact on single parents.

If we are serious about 'building back better' after the pandemic, then single parents cannot continue to be left behind. This report lays out a clear set of recommendations for both government and businesses – including where there are clear gaps in policy that maintain barriers against single parents working and being financially secure.

Though these challenges are significant, they are far from insurmountable. It is crucial they are tackled in order to remove the many inequalities that single parents continue to face.

Victoria Benson  
Chief Executive, Gingerbread

**It's vitally important we don't overlook or take for granted how social isolation, furlough, job losses, and home schooling have had a disproportionate, and at times devastating, impact on single parents.**

# Summary

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was little consideration of its potential impact on single parents.

Our research sought to fill this gap, focusing on single parent workers who were not defined as 'essential workers' and so were likely to face the greatest challenges in terms of needing to work and care simultaneously during this period.

The research involved two strands: an ongoing analysis of quantitative data from the official Labour Force Survey (LFS) and successive qualitative interviews with 40 single parents, in the summer of 2020 and early 2021 (where 33 of our original participants agreed to be re-interviewed). All quotes from single parents throughout this report are verbatim from these interviews. Full details of the research are in the technical appendix.

In the period immediately before the pandemic began, single parents were less financially secure and on lower incomes compared with other family types, for example mothers in couple households earned almost twice as much per week as single mothers. Single parents were concentrated in routine jobs in the retail and hospitality sectors, which were to be adversely affected by the economic impact of the pandemic. As the first lockdown hit in March 2020, the proportion of single parents working from home increased, although this shift was less pronounced than it was for couple parents. However, single parents were much more likely to be furloughed than couple parents.

Analysis of our qualitative interviews documented the dramatic changes experienced by single parents during the first lockdown, with the majority juggling home schooling and working on their own, requiring them to undertake what one interviewee described as "an impossible balancing act". While some single parents were furloughed, there was a lack of clarity regarding access to the scheme, which was perceived as being implemented very much at the discretion of employers.

As the UK came out of the first lockdown, the availability of childcare was more limited and single parents talked about an uncertain future with worries about job security. Overall, single parents did not think the unique challenges they face had been sufficiently considered in the policy and guidance response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Overall, single parents did not think the unique challenges they face had been sufficiently considered in the policy and guidance response to the COVID-19 pandemic.**



## Homeworking

Our second interviews with single parents in early 2021 found that a majority remained consistently in work throughout lockdowns, with many working exclusively from home. As in the summer of 2020, there were highly polarised views about whether working from home was a positive change, with those in favour advocating the greater flexibility it facilitated and those who were opposed emphasising the limitations it placed on social interaction. However, single parents were more resigned to working from home as the 'new normal' and to the fact that the social interaction that they missed during lockdown might not be available if they returned to socially distanced office environments.

## Furlough

Between March and December 2020, single parents were more likely to have been furloughed than couple parents. Single parents continued to view the use and interpretation of the furlough rules as being very much down to employers' discretion. Single parents who had been furloughed for long periods talked about its negative financial impacts and an increased concern about it exposing them to future job losses.

## Job security

There continued to be widespread concern about job insecurity amongst interviewees – although for some this concern had diminished compared with summer 2020. Where concerns remained, they tended to have broadened out to worries about the economy more generally.

Over the course of our research, only a handful of the single parents we interviewed lost their jobs, with some having already re-entered work or begun self-employment by the time we spoke to them again in early 2021. The LFS data shows little change in the extent or duration of single parent unemployment over the course of the pandemic so far. However, the economic impact of the pandemic on single parent unemployment may not be fully realised until the end of the furlough scheme in September 2021.

## Seeking work

The single parents we interviewed who had lost their jobs felt constrained applying for new roles. This was particularly in light of ongoing school and childcare closures, including when children were sent home to self-isolate. While several single parents talked about the support offered by their work coaches, none had found new work through their interactions with Jobcentre Plus. Instead, those who found work did so through existing contacts or by moving into self-employment. Single parents who had worked in sectors that no longer exist in the same way were keen to have focused support and guidance.

**"The furlough scheme should have been a little bit more definite and rules from government coming through to the person and not just going through the company."**

Katie

**"I just worry about job security which I think everyone does... it's something that is worrying me more...I am so used to being out busy travelling talking to people."**

Shona

**"I'm kind of at the crossroad. I don't know where, what to do now, because obviously aviation isn't going to be possible, so I'm kind of now at the starting block again."**

Sarah

## Returning to school and periods of self-isolation

Most of the single parents we interviewed (and their children) had found the return to school in September positive as this marked a largescale return to social interaction. However, such upbeat experiences were not universal.

Throughout the autumn term and beyond, children in education and childcare had to self-isolate if someone in their 'bubble' received a positive COVID test. For many, this had happened on multiple occasions; and employers were not always sympathetic. Support from schools was also patchy, making it harder for single parents.

## Coping with the third lockdown

A greater number of single parents we interviewed were offered school places during the winter 2021 lockdown compared with the first lockdown, reflecting national trends. However, places were often offered at the discretion of individual schools and some parents felt that the unique challenges faced by single parents to work without a school place were not always recognised.

For those parents who needed to work and home school there was a greater level of provision and communication from school in the third lockdown, including more structure and clearly defined activities. However, some parents felt what was required of them and their children was excessive, including for some primary aged children where they could be expected to do five or six hours of work a day requiring parent supervision. Struggles with balancing caring and working were especially pronounced in the third lockdown among those with primary aged children – and a lack of technology or online provision in some cases did not help in this regard.

## Employer flexibility

Encouragingly, overall experiences with employers were much more positive than in the spring 2020 lockdown. Many interviewees described how their employers had been flexible and understanding; for example, being able to fit working hours around caring responsibilities as long as they ensured that their work overall was completed. Some employers went even further, offering additional help with home schooling in terms of resources, such as digital technology and time off for parents.

However, while many employers were supportive, this was not the case for all the single parents who could feel overwhelmed by working and caring. This demonstrates the importance of flexibility for single parents which will continue to be vital – particularly as the risk of children and parents needing to self-isolate remains.

**"I was annoyed and upset because work were not supportive. They basically said you can have [time off] unpaid or you continue to work."**

Kelly



## Growing mental health concerns

The strain of looking after children and working had a negative impact on almost all the single parents we interviewed, including a handful who needed to be signed off work and/or take medication to manage anxiety or depression. This is borne out by the LFS data, which shows single parents are much more likely to report depression compared with other family types. Single parents also talked about the negative impact of the pandemic on their children's mental health, which has been documented in other research.<sup>1</sup>

"I think mental health is the real issue. I think having extended periods away from work and away from school and the consequences of that."

Karen

## Looking to the future

Three developments have occurred since March 2020, or are anticipated to occur in the coming months, which are likely to impact on single parents' experiences of working and caring in future:

- **Home-working and hybrid-working should not be viewed as the only solution to flexible working.** While home-working has created flexibility for some single parents, it should not be viewed as the only solution to flexible working. Broader change is needed in how work is structured, including access to good quality part-time roles.
- **Ongoing restrictions in the availability of childcare and wraparound support will make it harder for single parents to stay in work or retrain.** It is likely there will be further childcare closures and more limited provision of wraparound care in the coming months. The pandemic has also led to increases in the costs of childcare. Given Universal Credit (UC) does not deliver the promised 85 per cent of childcare support, single parents will continue to struggle with both the upfront costs of childcare and the payment of childcare costs in arrears.
- **Single parent employment is concentrated in industries that have been hard hit by the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.** This means they are vulnerable to job cuts, particularly when the furlough scheme ends in the autumn. Focused back to work support is very much needed, along with a greater focus on single parents to retrain in order to move into new areas of work.



<sup>1</sup> Space Study (2021), Changes in children's and young people's mental health symptoms: March 2020 to January 2021.

# Conclusions and recommendations

## 1 Improve access to childcare and reduce the upfront costs for single parents

A lack of affordable childcare prevents many single parents from entering and staying in employment. The COVID-19 pandemic has already had an impact on the supply and costs of childcare.

The government needs to finally address this barrier to single parent employment by investing in childcare and changing how its costs are met under Universal Credit.

Longer-term, the government should also consider meeting childcare costs for all parents who are out of work and who are undertaking training or improving their skills.

**We recommend the following:**

- The government should create a childcare infrastructure support fund to help stabilise the childcare market and prevent providers from closing.
- The government should roll out a national childcare deposit fund to help parents meet any upfront costs of childcare when they enter work, building on the scheme developed by Gingerbread in partnership with the Greater London Authority. This should be universally available and paid from a specific fund rather than being drawn on a discretionary basis from the Flexible Support Fund.
- The Department for Education should review the childcare caps set in 2003, which do not deliver the promised childcare support of up to 85 per cent under UC.
- The Department for Work and Pensions should act on the High Court ruling in January 2021 to change the payment structure under UC so that childcare costs are made upfront, rather than in arrears.

## 2 Increase opportunities for flexible working

A lack of quality part-time and flexible jobs prevent many single parents from entering or progressing in employment. The pandemic has shown the capacity for many more jobs to be done flexibly than was previously thought possible.

Our interviews showed the vital role that employers can play in supporting single parents to work flexibly. However, the last year has also highlighted that access to part-time and flexible working is still very restricted, not least for those entering work or trying to change jobs. For example, splitting a full-time role into a job share would help single parents to move into a wider variety of roles and better paid employment, at the same time this could provide a business benefit to employers by providing the skills of two employees for one role. A lack of access to good quality flexible roles is a significant barrier for many single parents, including those who lose their jobs as a result of the pandemic and need to find new employment.

**We recommend the following:**

- The government should expedite the delayed Employment Bill and include a duty on employers to advertise vacancies flexibly unless there are good business reasons not to do so.
- In the interim, the government should remove the 26-week qualifying period and make it a day-one right for employees to make a flexible working request. Business reasons for refusing a request need to be reviewed and strengthened.
- The government should work with employers and employer bodies to emphasise the business case for greater flexibility in job roles and consider financially incentivising employers to divide full-time roles into job shares.
- We urge the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the Flexible Working Task Force to work together to develop job sharing as part of the flexible working menu in adapting to new ways of working after the pandemic.

## 3

### Clearer support for single parents whose children need to self-isolate

Single parents and their children will need continued support as it is anticipated that there will be temporary breaks in school and childcare as children are sent home to self-isolate.

It is good that, since the recommendation in our interim report, the UK and Welsh governments have improved the financial support for low income parents in England and Wales who cannot work because of the closure of a child's class or childcare provider by extending eligibility for the £500 Test and Trace Support Payment to parents in these circumstances. However, there is a low awareness of the scheme and the current guidance particularly in England is scant.

#### We recommend the following:

- The UK government needs to ensure there is greater awareness of the expanded eligibility for the Track and Trace grant in England, through schools, childcare providers, Jobcentre Plus information, and work coaches.
- In the event of future school and childcare closures, it is vital that there are emergency childcare easements in place for single parent job seekers and that the DWP produces guidance for work coaches as a matter of urgency. Information about childcare easements should be publicised, including in Universal Credit journals.

## 4

### Tailored back to work and training support for single parents

The government must ensure that it provides high quality employment support tailored for single parents both through Jobcentre Plus and the new back to work schemes to help single parents move into good quality work. Thousands of single parents will have worked in sectors that will not exist in the same way following the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important that single parents are not left behind in opportunities to retrain. Single parents should be offered a supportive and empowering approach rather than pressuring parents into work that would not be sustainable.

#### We recommend the following:

- The UK government should press ahead with its review on the effectiveness of sanctions.
- Jobcentres should use the expansion of work coach capacity as an opportunity to re-introduce specialist single parent advisers and tailored programmes to better support single parents into a job that reflects their skills and caring responsibilities.
- DWP should provide newly unemployed single parents priority access to employment support schemes. Single parents should be referred to the DWP's 'Job Finding Support' scheme and should be prioritised in the new Job Entry Targeted Support (JETS) back to work programme and the Restart scheme (including those who have been on furlough). Providers should be encouraged to put in place specialist single parent support, building on the evidence of what has worked in previous programmes such as the New Deal for Lone Parents.
- The new Lifetime Skills Guarantee must reflect the needs of single parents, including matching access to courses with free childcare through UC.
- As well as extending the 30-hour free childcare offer to single parents who are in training and have preschool-age children, childcare support should be made available to all job-seeking single parents who are undertaking training or improving their skills.

## Ensure single parents aren't left behind in post-pandemic recovery

Single parent families have been hit harder than other family types throughout the pandemic and the last year has exacerbated ongoing inequalities faced by single parents. Childcare continues to be one of the biggest barriers for single parents who want to work or retrain.

Single parents and their children have also been disproportionately affected by isolation and this has seen a marked impact on their mental health compared with other family types. It is vital that single parent families have access to mental health services as we emerge from the pandemic and aren't further left behind.

### We recommend the following:

- Given the vital role of childcare as an enabler to allow parents to get into and stay in work, the UK government should use the next Spending Review to expand the definition of infrastructure to include childcare and incorporate funding to overhaul provision and affordability into its post-COVID recovery plans.
- The Spending Review should also prioritise specialist back to work support for single parents and financial help for employers to embrace flexible working practices, including including advertising jobs as flexible by default.
- The Treasury's public services support and recovery investment to tackle the mental health problems due to the pandemic is welcome. We urge the government and service providers to ensure that single parents and their children have priority access to mental health services.



# The story so far

## Experiences during the early part of the pandemic



Our interim report,<sup>2</sup> published in November 2020, focused on the period immediately prior to the start of the first lockdown, and assessed the impact of the pandemic on single parents between March and August 2020. Drawing on LFS data, it included a quantitative analysis of how single parents fared in work before COVID-19 together with an examination of the early impact on single parents and their employment.

LFS UK data shows that in early 2020 single parents were less financially secure and on lower incomes compared with other family types, with mothers in couple households earning almost twice as much per week, compared with single mothers. Nearly half (46 per cent) of single parents worked in routine occupations, compared with just over a quarter of couple parents (26 per cent). Such routine jobs in retail, hotels and restaurants were to be particularly impacted by cuts to hours and job losses due to COVID-19.

The first lockdown in March 2020 saw an increase in the proportion of single parents who reported working from home. This shift was less pronounced for single parents (21 per cent) than for couple parents (38 per cent),<sup>3</sup> however single parents were more likely to have been furloughed (30 per cent) compared with couple parents (21 per cent). This reflects both single parents' caring responsibilities and the fact that they were more likely to work in sectors shutdown as a result of the pandemic. LFS data from the first lockdown showed that single parents were more likely to report poor mental health, compared with other family types. Between January and June 2020, 51 per cent of single parents reported having depression, bad nerves or anxiety compared with 27 per cent of couple parents.<sup>4</sup>

Qualitative data from our baseline interviews with single parents reflected the dramatic changes to working times and locations experienced as the country went into the first lockdown, with most of the single parent interviewed moving to homeworking. A small number of single parents needed to continue working in offices or other settings, either partially or fully – especially those in public-facing roles. At the same point, schools and childcare settings were closed to all but

**LFS UK data shows that in early 2020 single parents were less financially secure and on lower incomes compared with other family types.**

2 Gingerbread (2020), *Caring without sharing: Single parents' journey through the COVID-19 crisis – Interim Report*.

3 We can be less confident about the actual rates of home-working, as the LFS question asks respondents whether they work from home in their main job, rather than what they are doing currently meaning we cannot be sure whether answers are based on current situations or contractual arrangement. However, we can assume that interpretations of the question were consistent across the three family groups, meaning the proportionate increases are genuine.

4 Gingerbread (2020), *Caring without sharing: Single parents' journey through the COVID-19 crisis – Interim Report*.

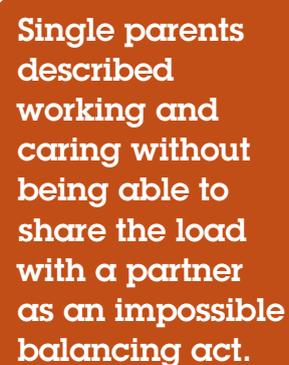
essential workers and so single parents who were working from home were also juggling home schooling and childcare on their own. Attitudes to homeworking within the context of the first lockdown were polarised. Most of the single parents in our research changed their hours to fit around caring and those whose employers offered some flexibility in how they organised their work and time were more positive about this change. Where employers were more rigid, single parents found balancing home-working with their caring responsibilities to be extremely challenging.

A number of the single parents we interviewed were furloughed from work (using the government's Job Retention Scheme).<sup>5</sup> Some of the other interviewees would have liked this option but encountered a lack of clarity and consistency from their employers. While some single parents were furloughed due to their childcare needs, others did not know this option was open to them. Single parents saw being furloughed as a mixed blessing as it facilitated caring and home schooling but was perceived to have negative impacts in terms of finances and future job security or career development.

Single parents discussed home schooling in terms of the challenges involved, such as difficulties motivating their children to stay focused on school work and practical issues including online access and patchy provision from schools. Single parents described working and caring without being able to share the load with a partner as an impossible balancing act. Several interviewees described having to make trade-offs to fulfil their working and caring roles, many of which they were highly uncomfortable with. Employer flexibility played a critical role in easing difficulties, but was sometimes limited or not forthcoming. As a result, mental health impacts for single parents and their children were widespread. As the UK came out of the first lockdown, single parents who were interviewed found that available childcare options (both formal and informal) had become more limited – due to, among other causes, nurseries' social distancing requirements and the health concerns of older relatives.

Looking forward, single parents we spoke with in summer 2020 reported an uncertain future regarding how they would balance their working and caring roles through autumn and winter 2020, due to a lack of clarity on a range of matters including the timing of office returns and the availability of childcare including wraparound care. There was enthusiasm about continued homeworking among most of the single parents, due to the associated increases in flexibility and the number of hours they could potentially work, although a number did worry about the impact on their isolation. Whilst only a small number of single parents had lost their jobs or anticipated this outcome, there was a widespread concern among the single parents about future job security.

The single parents we interviewed felt that the unique challenges facing them had not been sufficiently accounted for in policy and guidelines developed in response to the pandemic. There was a view by many that they should have been given 'essential worker' status, to reflect the fact that they needed to work and care on their own. There was also considerable appetite for greater support with education and childcare and for more targeted mental health provision.



**Single parents described working and caring without being able to share the load with a partner as an impossible balancing act.**

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<sup>5</sup> The term 'furlough' was much more commonly used by the single parents we interviewed, compared with the Job Retention Scheme (JRS). We therefore refer to the JRS using this term throughout the report.

# Single parents' work journeys through all three COVID-19 lockdowns



While all of the single parents we interviewed for this project were in work at the start of the pandemic, our interim report documented how their work trajectories through the first lockdown and into the summer of 2020 diverged significantly. While many single parents remained in work, a number were furloughed, either for childcare reasons or because they worked in shutdown sectors. A small handful had lost their jobs by the summer of 2020.

In Table 1, we have updated these journeys to illustrate the different paths single parents followed until mid-February 2021. Inevitably, single parents' work histories are complex and do not necessarily neatly fit into the time periods presented below. Nevertheless, this graphic captures the diversity in the paths and outcomes experienced by single parents through the pandemic.

**Figure 1: Work trajectories of single parents we interviewed between March 2020–February 2021**

| First lockdown and summer              | Autumn term inc. second lockdowns | Third lockdown | Number of parents   |
|--|-----------------------------------|----------------|---|
| <b>Consistent Journeys</b>             |                                   |                |   |
|  | Worked throughout                 |                |  21 |
|  | Furloughed throughout             |                |  1   |
| <b>Journeys involving furlough</b>     |                                   |                |   |
| Furloughed                             | Working                           | Working        |  2   |
| Furloughed                             | Working                           | Furloughed     |  3   |
| <b>Journeys involving unemployment</b> |                                   |                |   |
| Working                                | Unemployed                        | Unemployed     |  1   |
| Working                                | Unemployed                        | Working        |  1   |
| Working                                | Working                           | Unemployed     |  1   |
| Furloughed                             | Unemployed                        | Unemployed     |  1   |
| Unemployed                             | Working                           | Working        |  2   |

Considering the year-long period as a whole, we see that:

- 21 of the 33 single parents we interviewed on both occasions remained in work (either in employment or self-employment) throughout the period.
- Seven single parents had been furloughed at some point during the year, with this happening more than once for three of these parents. Only one parent remained on furlough throughout the entire period.
- Six of the single parents had lost their jobs or self-employed work at some point in the year. However, three of these parents had subsequently re-entered the labour market or begun self-employment.

Inevitably, the experiences of work during this period will have largely been mediated by these different journeys. In the remainder of this section, we explore qualitatively the common challenges facing different sub-sets of single parents during this period, providing quantitative data from the LFS to contextualise our findings where available.

## Working locations: patterns and preferences

For single parents who remained in work throughout all or some of this period, working location was an area where many experienced changes or new challenges.

A small number of single parents we interviewed continued to work outside of the home all or some of the time. These parents were predominantly in public-facing roles and described how their work involved a number of new procedures to make their workplaces Covid-secure, and with considerably less interaction with colleagues and customers or clients than they were used to.

“There’s only four of us who work and we don’t all work the same days, so I’ve been doing one day a week on Wednesday or Thursday and then it’s only either me in the office on my own or me and one other girl but we’ve got two rooms with computers in, so we are not next to each other”.

– Dawn

“I just have to be sort of mega careful, you know, make sure that I wear my mask constantly, washing my hands a lot, you just have to be aware because you are going into somebody’s house. Quite often, the people that live there aren’t around, or they’re in a different room, but I have to make sure that I am away from them”.

– Lucy

The majority of single parents we interviewed worked exclusively from home throughout the period covered by the research. While there were plans to return to offices in the autumn of 2020 in some instances, these did not happen in practice. This is reflected in LFS data, which shows that, between March and December 2020, rates of working from home for single parents were around double what they were before the pandemic.

**The majority of single parents we interviewed worked exclusively from home throughout the period covered by the research**

However, as documented in our interim report, single parents have been less likely to work from home during the pandemic compared with other family types, almost certainly reflecting differences in the roles and sectors that single parents predominantly work in.

In our interim report, we documented the polarised views regarding homeworking expressed by single parents in the summer of 2020. Those who were positive at that point referenced the increased flexibility, ability to work a large number of hours, and reduced commuting commitments as reasons why they saw benefits in homeworking. Interviewees who viewed homeworking negatively primarily cited the lack of social interaction which, in addition to being a problem in its own right, was sometimes seen as limiting opportunities for training and advancement. These opposing perspectives were still very much in evidence when we re-interviewed single parents in early 2021.

“I really like working from home because obviously there’s no commute. I used to pay for breakfast and afterschool club and that’s a bit of a save now I’m not having to do that and I just find it a lot easier from home, to be honest.”

– Lindsay

“I hate it. Yes. It was a bit of a novelty before, but I really struggled just because there’s no break from the house and I think I’ve probably said that before as well. It’s always the same.”

– Shona

However, there was also some evidence of homeworking coming to be perceived as the ‘new normal’ among single parents who had been doing it for almost a year. This sense of normality was even expressed by those single parents who had previously disliked homeworking because of a lack of social interaction. Reasons included anxiety about returning to an office environment, and the financial and productivity benefits of working from home.

“I think I would be a bit anxious to go back into the office now. I save money, I do not have so much of a rush in the morning”.

– Jasmine

“Now I’ve got used to it, I think I actually prefer working from home than actually going into the office. I’ve just found it, as I’ve got into a routine, it’s easier”.

– Esther

“I miss people. (But) it is the norm now. It’s been almost a year”.

– Rowena

Part of this growing positivity may reflect the fact that, in the autumn, many single parents we interviewed had experienced homeworking whilst their children had been in school or childcare. This was a marked difference to their experiences during the first lockdown, where many had to work and help with home schooling simultaneously. Equally, some single parents recognised that the social interaction which they missed whilst working from home stemmed to some extent from the broader COVID-19 restrictions, such as social distancing. These wider social restrictions would also affect COVID-secure offices to which they might return.

“I hate it. Yes. It was a bit of a novelty before, but I really struggled just because there’s no break from the house and I think I’ve probably said that before as well. It’s always the same”

“Now I’ve got used to it, I think I actually prefer working from home than actually going into the office. I’ve just found it, as I’ve got into a routine, it’s easier.”

“I do miss going into the office and seeing people and having that interaction and other people to see, especially at the moment because we’re in full lockdown.”

– Susan

“If I asked to go in the office, it won’t be the same as what I had before, so I won’t be any happier, I don’t think, because I want to be with people, I want to sit with people, I want to go to their desk and hug them. We were like a big family in the contact centre, so it still won’t be what I want it to be, so I don’t think I’d be any happier going back in the office with all this social distancing.”

– Kelly

“I do miss going into the office and seeing people and having that interaction and other people to see, especially at the moment because we’re in full lockdown”

## Feelings about furlough

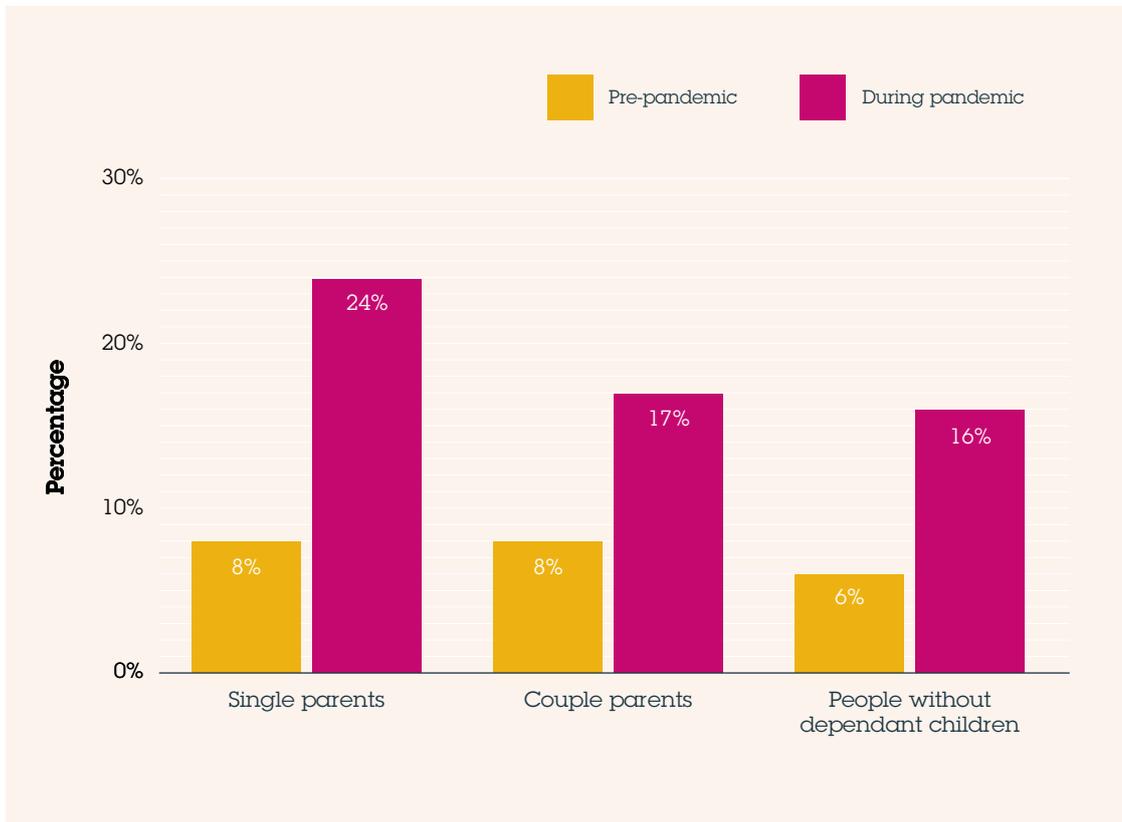
As depicted in Figure 1, seven of the single parents we interviewed had been furloughed at some point during the first year of the pandemic. For three this was restricted to the period covered by our interim report, namely between March and summer 2020. Four had been furloughed for the majority or all of the year-long period. Although our numbers are small, this pattern broadly reflects trends at the national level in terms of the use of the furlough scheme.<sup>6</sup> Our interim report documented how single parents were more likely to be furloughed than individuals in other types of households.

Analysis of the latest LFS data suggests that this remains the case, considering the entirety of the period from March to December 2020. As shown in Figure 2, on average one quarter (24 per cent) of employed single parents were away from work during the period, compared with one in six couple parents (17 per cent) or people without dependent children (16 per cent). Rates of absence increased more markedly for single parents between the pre-pandemic and mid-pandemic periods (trebling from 8 per cent, compared with a doubling for couple parents), a trend which can be interpreted as a proxy for individuals being furloughed. These far greater impacts will reflect both the higher exposure of single parents to industries hit more by the pandemic and the greater need of single parents to take time away from work during school closures.

Data from the LFS also supports the finding from our follow-up qualitative interviews that furlough was less commonly used in the latter part of 2020 and into early 2021. Looking at changes across the three quarters of the period, depicted in Figure 3, we see that furlough rates have fallen for all groups but remained significantly higher for single parents than others, even by the final quarter of 2020. This shows that even as the economy reopened in summer and autumn 2020, single parents were still more likely to be away from their jobs, either because of the sort of work that they do or due to ongoing disruption to childcare.

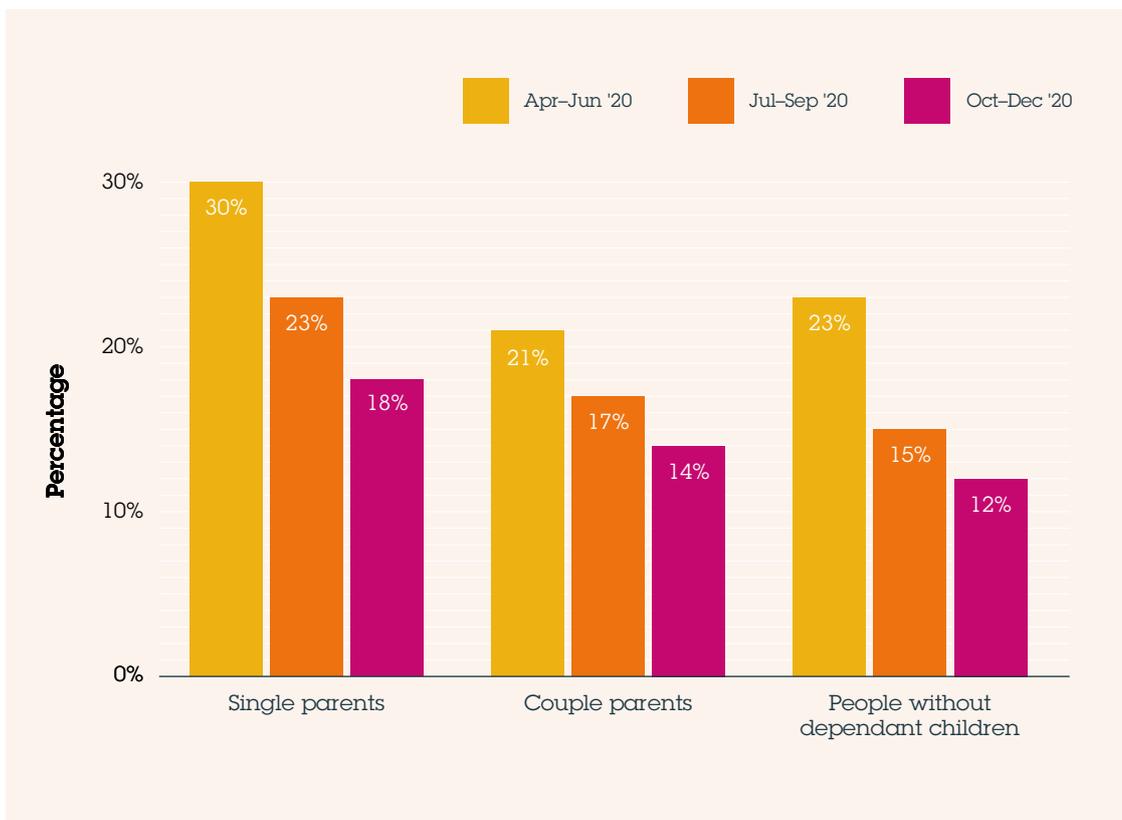
Even as the economy reopened in summer and autumn 2020, single parents were still more likely to be away from their jobs, either because of the sort of work that they do or due to ongoing disruption to childcare

<sup>6</sup> Labour Force Survey 30% single parents 21% couple parents.



**Figure 2:** Proportion of employees who are away from work<sup>7</sup> by family type and time period

Source: Labour Force Survey, April–December 2017–2020.



**Figure 3:** Proportion of employees who are away from work, by family type and quarter, 2020

Source: Labour Force Survey, April–December 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Being away from work will cover a range of circumstances in addition to being furloughed, meaning that these data should not be used to calculate furlough rates for different groups (given that, for example, 8% of single parents were “away from work” in the pre-pandemic period).

In our interim report, we discussed how single parents had experienced a lack of clarity about their eligibility for furlough. In general, furlough was characterised as a mixed blessing – positive in that it facilitated caring and home schooling, but negative in terms of its impact on finances and future career development.

These perspectives endured when we re-interviewed single parents during the winter. Interviewees reported how the use of furlough was very much down to their employers' discretion. This was the case for one interviewee, Susan, who was furloughed in the first lockdown with a preschool-aged child but, this time, was told that she could not be furloughed because her workplace had already provided adequate support and equipment to work from home.". Similarly, Lena was partially furloughed and reported that her employers were furloughing colleagues on higher salaries because "the government is paying". These experiences reflect a trend, reported by the Trade Unions Congress, for 68 per cent of requests for furlough made by working mothers to be turned down.<sup>8</sup>

This lack of clarity and consistency between employers also extended to the precise details of furlough packages offered. Katie, who worked for two different companies, described how one based her furlough pay on the hours she had worked in the last year, whilst the other based this on her 'core' hours even though in practice she often worked many more.

"The furlough scheme should have been a little bit more definite and rules from the government coming through to the person and not just going through to the companies".

– Katie

Single parents we interviewed who had been furloughed throughout or more than once also emphasised ongoing concerns about its financial impact and their long-term job security. The potential financial impact of furlough informed some interviewee's decision not to pursue this route in the third lockdown. Such experiences are reflected in findings from the Standard Life Foundation's Coronavirus tracker survey, which found that the proportion of single parent households in financial difficulty rose from 13 per cent in July 2020 to 18 per cent in January 2021.<sup>9</sup>

"Obviously when you are working you are getting all the money and that actually does make a massive difference to a lot of people".

– Sandra

"I was furloughed again for a month. During that time I was struggling badly with money, so instead of just having Child Tax Credit I had to then claim for Universal Credits , so I've now actually changed from just Child Tax Credits onto Universal Credits to help me out".

– Katie

"The furlough scheme should have been a little bit more definite and rules from the government coming through to the person and not just going through to the companies."

"Obviously when you are working you are getting all the money and that actually does make a massive difference to a lot of people."

<sup>8</sup> Trade Unions Congress (2021), *Working mums: Paying the price*.

<sup>9</sup> Standard Life Foundation and University of Bristol (March 2021) *Coronavirus financial impact tracker* | Standard Life Foundation.

“It’s been a combination that there wasn’t the demand for the work because of child care responsibilities and I think then it’s just been that the firm has managed without me, to be honest, which is then making me very concerned for the security of my job going forward”.

– Karen

A number of single parents we spoke with were opposed to the idea of being furloughed, even when they had been furloughed in the first lockdown. This negativity stemmed from the concerns relating to job security, finances, trade-offs, and wanting to remain in active work.

“I wouldn’t. Because I think like you say, there’s so much redundancy round here now, there are loads of people out of work... The reality, once you think about your salary, your bills and the impact, it’s not such an attractive offer, to be honest”.

– Alison

“We’ve never really spoken about it. I think the worry is that if you’re furloughed you’ll be first out. So everybody just wants a job”.

– Bethan

“I’m probably pretty lucky because my job is secure, but I don’t know. Obviously...it would mean taking even more of a pay cut but at least I would be able to focus solely on (my child’s) learning. But at the moment it’s just juggling. So I see it from both points”.

– Susan

“The last time round I asked if I could be furloughed, but this time round I actually didn’t want to be... I like my mind to be active and although it was great, I know everyone kind of seems like ‘getting paid for not working’. (But) I don’t like not working and I just like to be busy”.

– Sandra

## Job insecurity

When single parents were interviewed in the summer, the fear of job losses as a result of the pandemic was widespread. There was also considerable concern around the subsequent possibility of securing jobs in the same fields, particularly where single parents worked in sectors particularly hit by COVID-19 restrictions. When we re-interviewed single parents in early 2021, such concerns remained prevalent, although they had notably reduced for some.

This was the case for Lindsay, who had initially been concerned about the impact of the pandemic on the company where she worked but now felt that the business had successfully adapted their operations to the constraints imposed by the pandemic.

“This is kind of an unsettling time for everyone and in my company we do a lot of conferences abroad, a lot in Europe, and the rest of the world as well, so it was quite scary. So yes, it’s a bit up and down. But with going virtual it

“We’ve never really spoken about it. I think the worry is that if you’re furloughed you’ll be first out. So everybody just wants a job.”

seems to be working, so at the moment the company is doing okay, but initially I was a bit like, oh my god, how are you going to pull through it.”

– Lindsay

Dawn had also previously expressed concerns about work drying up as a result of the pandemic but, when we interviewed her in the winter, had not felt that this had borne out in practice.

“Because I contract to this lady and her business, I work for her mainly all the time, yes, I feel like if projects stopped or people run out of money... but it seems to have picked up steadily in terms of projects, so hopefully people still will need us.”

– Dawn

For those single parents whose concerns about job security remained in the winter of 2021, these had often broadened out to relate to the economy more generally and, in some instances, to concerns relating to the invisibility of working from home.

“I just worry about job security which I think everybody does... it's something that's started to worry me more. I think being at home, because I'm so used to being out busy travelling talking to people, I'm worrying that I'm not doing enough. Like no one has said anything, I think it's just something that's playing on my mind.”

– Shona

“I feel more secure than the retail and catering industry. But yes, it is more of a worry than it ever has been before”.

– Joanna

Other research, undertaken with mothers in general, signals widespread concern about job security, that will be reflected (and arguably even more prevalent) in the views of single parents. Recent research by the Trade Unions Congress (TUC) found that a quarter of mothers are worried about losing their jobs either through being singled out for redundancy, sacked or denied hours.<sup>10</sup>

## Job losses

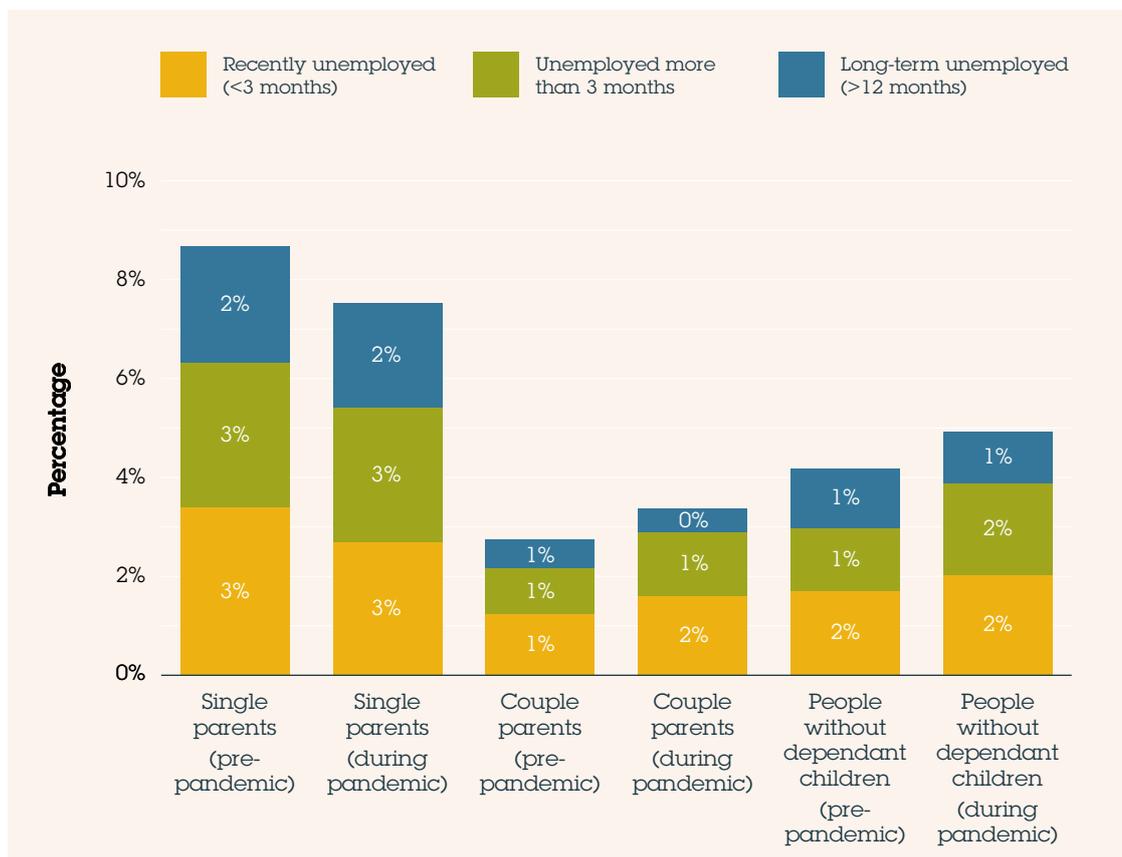
Over the course of our research, six of the single parents we interviewed had lost or left their jobs or self-employed work. However, three of these parents had already subsequently re-entered the labour market or begun self-employment.

Focussing on the single parent population as a whole,<sup>11</sup> analysis of LFS data presented in Figure 4 shows that overall unemployment fell marginally for single parents over the period covered by the research, whereas it rose slightly for couple parents and those without children. There is no evidence of significant variations during this period by length of unemployment.

“I feel more secure than the retail and catering industry. But yes, it is more of a worry than it ever has been before.”

<sup>10</sup> Trade Unions Congress (2021), *Working mums: Paying the price*.

<sup>11</sup> This analysis includes those single parents who were employed in 'essential worker' occupations at any point, as individuals may logically move between critical and non-critical occupations at any point.



**Figure 4:** Unemployment rates by duration of unemployment, family type and time period

Source: Labour Force Survey, April – December 2017 – 2020.

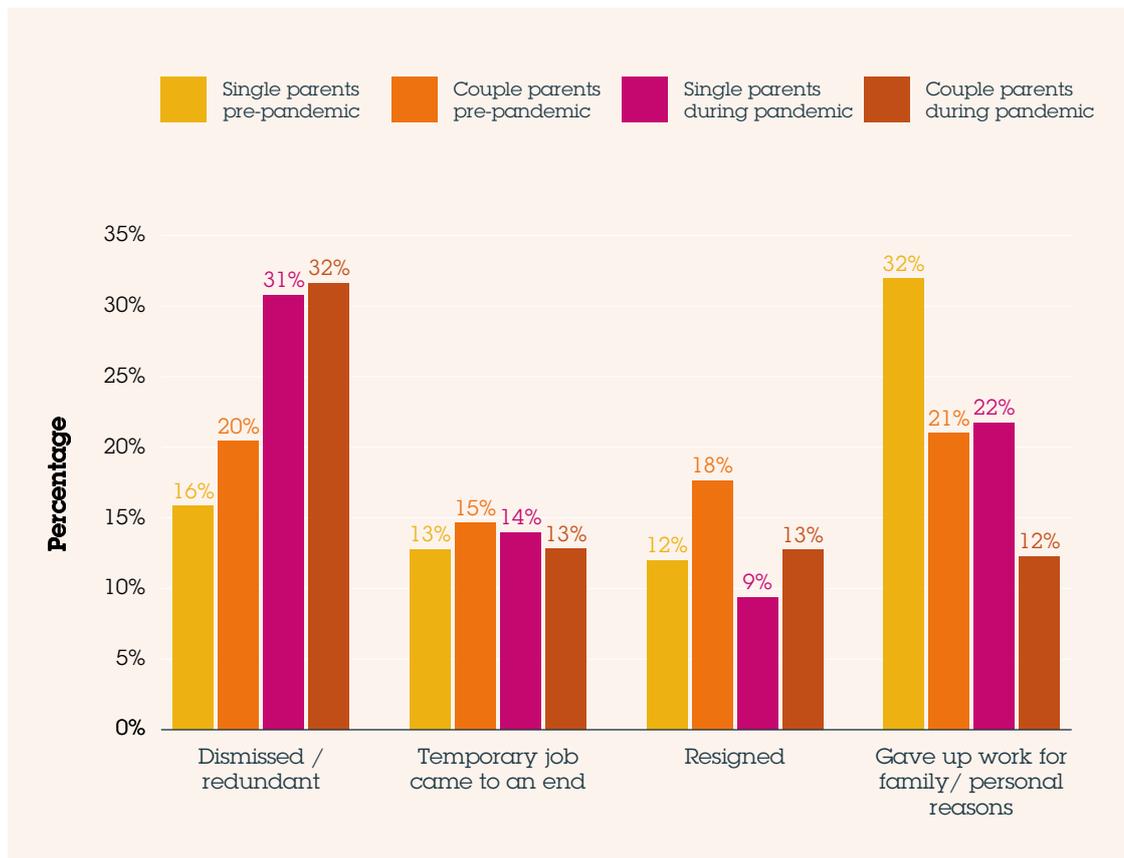
This may reflect the fact that it was the youngest workers who have seen the greatest rises in unemployment, and these groups are less likely to have dependent children. Nonetheless, these data also illustrate that single parents have a far higher unemployment rate than either couple parents or those without children, with 12 per cent of the single parent labour force actively seeking work. This will in part reflect socio-economic and demographic characteristics, but also the fact that many single parents will find it harder to find work that can accommodate their childcare needs.

While other research has identified a drop in single parent employment between February and June 2020<sup>12</sup> our analysis of LFS data focuses on the first year of the pandemic, compared with the three years immediately preceding it. Nevertheless, given such divergence in the results of different surveys, some caution may need to be applied to this finding. A greater impact on unemployment is also still anticipated to follow from the end of the furlough scheme in September 2021.

When we examine the reasons for people leaving work, depicted in Figure 5, the impacts of the pandemic are clear. Most starkly, the share of people who left work due to dismissal or redundancy has risen to nearly one third for both single parents (31 per cent) and couple parents (32 per cent). This rate of increase has been higher for single parents, up by 15 percentage points compared with 12 points for couple parents.

Interestingly, these data also imply that the pandemic and the measures put in place to protect jobs have likely also kept people in work who may have previously left for other reasons – with significant falls in the share of parents leaving work for

<sup>12</sup> Learning and Work Institute and Gingerbread (2020) Tackling single parent poverty after coronavirus.



**Figure 5:**  
**People who lost their jobs during the last six months:**  
**Reasons they lost their jobs**

Source:  
 Labour Force Survey, April–December 2017–2020.<sup>13</sup>

family or personal reasons (down by around ten percentage points for both single and couple parents). Resignations have also fallen. Both of these effects are likely to be temporary, where the furlough scheme has helped to keep people in work that they would otherwise not have been able to stay.

Considering the experiences of the single parents we interviewed who had lost or left their jobs during this period, we found that in individual circumstances the pandemic could have a range of impacts which played out in different ways on single parents' employment decisions.

Two of the single parents we interviewed had decided to step down from their jobs or take a break from self-employment due to impact of COVID-19 restrictions. This was the case for Janine who left her job by mutual agreement with her company. She had found it too difficult to work and care for her children, as two members of her family had contracted COVID-19 and were unable to help with her childcare.

*"I had the children. And then obviously once they locked down again after Christmas, I just knew home schooling, all three of them at home and I just couldn't do it without people to watch the children. But the job's still open."*

*– Janine*

On the other hand, Ruth owned a floristry business and found the impact of the pandemic on her work very challenging, because she was almost exclusively focused on funerals. As a result, Ruth is currently working reduced hours and is considering selling her business in the future.

<sup>13</sup> The four reasons presented in this figure cover 70 per cent of the reasons why people lost their jobs.

“I just found it all a little bit too much... as you can imagine, there’s a lot of funeral work at the minute and I’d just rather be at home... I just employed a manager.”

– Ruth

## Seeking work

Although only a small number of the single parents we interviewed were seeking or had actively sought work during the period covered by our research, a theme running through their stories is the role of the pandemic in mediating the amount of work they aimed, or were able, to seek. As noted above, Janine had taken a break from job-seeking, due to the extra caring responsibilities that had fallen on her. Sarah, who was made redundant from the aviation industry in the autumn of 2020, tells a similar story – she needed to put her job-seeking on hold in order to home school her primary school aged child. In any case, she was unsure which avenue of employment to pursue, given the ongoing downturn in demand for air travel.

Nevertheless, a small number of single parents had moved into new employment or taken up self-employment, demonstrating that it is generally easier to move into work when time out of the labour market has been more limited – a link that is reviewed in some detail in recent Gingerbread research on in-work progression.<sup>14</sup> However, in each case, the routes back into work had not been through the conventional route of applying for advertised vacancies, but rather through existing contacts and further developing freelance work. This was the case for Marilyn, who lost her job as an administrator at the start of the pandemic and found it difficult to find suitable work to fit around caring for her child.

“I’m a personal assistant for a lady that is disabled. So I just clean her house for her, do her shopping, that sort of thing. Load and unload her dishwasher, change her beds, that sort of thing. I got it through a friend.”

– Marilyn

Similarly, Eleanor was made redundant in the summer of 2020 from a PAYE job. Having done some limited hours on a freelance basis before the pandemic began, Eleanor was able to increase her freelance working hours which fit in with caring for her children after the summer holidays.

While it is anticipated that the full impact of the pandemic on employment is yet to be realised, it is undoubtedly the case that the situation for single parents remains precarious. The full impact on jobs and hours will be unclear until the furlough scheme comes to an end in September 2021, but it is likely to affect single parents disproportionately as they are more likely than others to work in shutdown sectors such as hospitality and non-food retail which are likely to see the greatest proportion of job losses.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the unique challenge facing single parents having to fulfil their working and caring responsibilities in isolation may grow, even after we leave a period of repeated

“I just found it all a little bit too much... as you can imagine, there’s a lot of funeral work at the minute and I’d just rather be at home... I just employed a manager.”

<sup>14</sup> Gingerbread (2019), *Untapped talent: single parents and in-work progression – the national picture*.

<sup>15</sup> Gingerbread (2020), *Caring without sharing: Single parents’ journey through the COVID-19 crisis – Interim Report*.

lockdowns. The requirement to self-isolate with children when someone in their school bubble receives a positive COVID test is likely to remain in place for some time, while the availability of childcare is likely to become more restricted, as discussed in our 'Looking to the future' section. These trends have the potential to exert a negative effect on the work opportunities for single parents specifically.

## Support from Jobcentre Plus

The government suspended work conditionality and benefit sanctions between the start of the first lockdown in late March 2020 until the 1st July 2020. During this time, single parents were not expected to look for work as a condition of receiving benefits. However, since July 2020 Jobcentre Plus branches have re-opened, and the sanctions regime has resumed. Single parents can be contacted by their work coaches including assessing their claimant commitment and the steps that they are taking to look for work.

The single parents we interviewed who had lost their jobs during the pandemic or had started new claims for UC tended to have contact with Jobcentre Plus through their online journals or by telephone with their work coaches. While most knew the names of their work coaches, they had experienced very different levels of contact.

The small number of single parents who had contact found their work coaches were supportive, although they were aware that their claimant commitments meant they needed to look for work or they could lose their benefit. Two of the single parents we interviewed were suffering with mental health and personal difficulties and their work coaches, in both instances, were kind and supportive.

"I think they've been overly understanding, and she (the work coach) just kind of said 'Right, we'll contact you again in six months'... they've been very supportive".

– Janine

Marilyn had two friends die during the pandemic and found her work coach phoned her every fortnight, asking about her personal difficulties alongside job-seeking.

"Every two weeks the work coach would call me for about five minutes and sometimes he would just be checking in on me to see if I was okay."

– Marilyn

While work coaches were largely supportive of single parents we spoke with, those who were unemployed and successfully secured work during the last year did not find their new jobs through Jobcentre or work coach contact. In this regard, the lack of suitable part-time and flexible vacancies was a constant theme. This reflects the challenge facing single parents, widely cited in other research, of securing work that fits around their caring responsibilities.<sup>16</sup>

"I think they've been overly understanding, and she (the work coach) just kind of said 'Right, we'll contact you again in six months'... they've been very supportive".

<sup>16</sup> Gingerbread (2019), *Untapped talent: single parents and in-work progression – the national picture*.

“(My work coach) went through a point where he was ringing with jobs and then they would turn out not to be suitable because although some of the jobs would be part-time, the training would be full-time and not from home.”

– Marilyn

Since conditionality has been reintroduced, the level of sanctions has remained low for all claimants on UC, standing at 6949 in February 2021.<sup>17</sup> It has been pointed out by David Webster from the University of Glasgow that there are two reasons for this. Firstly, the DWP has decided that claimants can only be sanctioned if their claimant commitment has been put in place or updated since the start of the pandemic, a process which is taking time. Secondly, the DWP has introduced new sanctions procedures which makes it more rigorous before a sanction can be imposed.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, there is likely to be a lower rate of sanctions once new agreed claimant commitments are in place for all claimants – but the threat of sanctions and work conditionality remains. These can be a concern for many single parents who would prefer a more supportive system to help them to move into more sustainable employment, to a system where they are under threat of a possible sanction.<sup>19</sup>

Single parents remain aware that they must look for work as a condition of receiving benefits and can be worried about the terms of their claimant commitments, especially while there the availability of childcare is restricted and a lack of suitable flexible job vacancies are available. Single parents have contacted the Gingerbread helpline concerned that they are still expected to job-seek or face sanctions, even though they would find it difficult to move into and sustain work as their children may be sent home from school to self-isolate. For example, a single parent phoned our helpline in January 2021 while she was home schooling and struggling to do a job search due to her caring responsibilities. She was contacted by her work coach to press her about her job-seeking. Although the single parent was not threatened with a sanction, she was upset by the phone call and concerned that she might not be able to comply with her claimant commitment.

While some improvements to the sanctions regime are welcome, the government has delayed the promised study on the effectiveness of sanctions, which was due to be published in spring 2019.<sup>20</sup> Previous Gingerbread research has found that single parents want to work but that sanctions make it less likely for parents to achieve this goal.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, we called for an overhaul of claimant commitments so that they are transparent, flexible and appropriate to single parents’ needs. We have also called for better support for training and a personalised approach that takes into account a single parent’s caring responsibilities. As restrictions continue and there are fewer jobs as a result of the economic fallout from the pandemic, it is important that single parents are not put under undue pressure in terms of their job-seeking requirements. A longer-term strategy is needed to help single parents who have lost their jobs during the pandemic to better support them into sustainable jobs including in new areas of work that may require career coaching and training.

“(My work coach) went through a point where he was ringing with jobs and then they would turn out not to be suitable because although some of the jobs would be part-time, the training would be full-time and not from home.”

17 Department for Work and Pensions (2021), *Benefit sanctions statistics to October 2020 (experimental)*.

18 Child Poverty Action Group (2021), *BRIEFING Benefit sanction statistics (February 2021)*.

19 Learning and Work Institute and Gingerbread (2020) *Tackling single parent poverty after coronavirus*.

20 Ibid.

21 Gingerbread (2018), *Unhelpful and unfair? The impact of single parent sanctions*.

# Schooling and childcare support



In September 2020, children in England and Wales returned to school, in most cases for the first time in six months (although a limited number of year groups opened for the previous summer half term). In this section, we consider single parent families' experiences of the return to school and the additional challenges involved as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

## A return to social interaction

Most of the single parents we interviewed had found schools reopening to be very positive, although a small number had concerns about it. Informing both the widespread positivity and the element of concern was the fact that the re-opening of schools marked a large-scale return to social interaction for children. Most parents identified this as something children had missed in previous months and where the return to school filled an important gap, as emphasised by the following three parents:

"Yes, they really enjoyed it actually, so they were glad to be going back and be out of the house, see their friends and everything. It was a massive relief for all of us."

– Marcus

"They were absolutely fine, they really enjoyed it, especially my younger one as well because he's at that age where he just really needs to be stimulated and be with other children."

– Lindsay

"I was really happy for her to go back to school. Obviously, she was missing her friends. She loves school. She's very, very bright. She loves learning. She was so happy to be back there, and I was happy for her to be back there."

– Sandra

However, the resumption of social interaction caused concern for a small number of single parents, primarily because children had been without it for so long.

"She did find it quite difficult going back into that group environment where she had been off for so long and I think she will find it difficult again this time just because she's quite shy and it takes a while for her to settle into situations and with people".

– Karen

"I was really happy for her to go back to school. Obviously, she was missing her friends. She loves school. She's very, very bright. She loves learning. She was so happy to be back there, and I was happy for her to be back there."

“I think it’s affected her, all of this, and she is starting to struggle. She did go back to school but she was very anxious”.

– Rowena

We consider the mental health impacts of the last year for children more broadly in the ‘third lockdown’ section of this report.

## New school procedures

Inevitably, the return to school involved a number of new routines for parents and pupils, to reduce opportunities for transmission of the virus. These were generally well-received in terms of their intent to keep children safe although they were often perceived as having wider, often unintended, positive or negative impacts. For instance, Rowena described how the approach of staggering school lunches made this part of the day much easier for her son, as the hall was less noisy and busy. On the other hand, Susan emphasised how social distancing and queueing procedures for parents made it difficult to meet other parents.

“It’s very difficult to get to know the other parents when you’re all in this queueing system and you collect your child and are ushered off-site quite quickly. So it’s not what usually happens”.

– Susan

In some instances, the use of staggered start and finish times for different year groups meant that single parents had to adjust their work hours.

“My hours at work were shorter and then having to pick work up in the evening time.”

– Dawn

## Wraparound care

Requirements for social distancing sometimes meant there was a less availability of wraparound provision, such as breakfast and after school clubs. It was this reduced availability that, for Dawn, led to her working different hours.

“I just thought I’d be able to book sessions like normal, I didn’t really realise they had lowered the amount of kids that could go, so when I went to book some afterschool sessions so I could stay later at work there was nothing available.”

– Dawn

However, even where wraparound care was available, single parents had to consider the convenience of using it, with the increased risk of being required to isolate, if there was a positive case within the ‘bubbles’ of the wraparound provision.

“I think it’s affected her, all of this, and she is starting to struggle. She did go back to school but she was very anxious.”

“I just thought I’d be able to book sessions like normal, I didn’t really realise they had lowered the amount of kids that could go, so when I went to book some afterschool sessions so I could stay later at work there was nothing available.”

“What I did do is pick her up earlier from afterschool just because she was obviously mixing with other classes and that was a bit of a risk. If somebody in that class (received a positive test) afterschool then she cancelled as well as having to isolate.”

– Grace

In our interim report, we highlighted the concern of some single parents that the reduced availability of wraparound care, including breakfast and afterschool clubs in schools, would reduce their ability to cover their working and caring responsibilities – especially as informal help with childcare, such as from grandparents, was less likely to be available. In practice, this concern did not materialise to the degree expected, largely because many single parents continued to work from home making it easier to collect their children from school and then continue working. As noted previously, this convenience was a key factor underpinning enthusiasm for homeworking.

## Experiences of self-isolation

Throughout the autumn term and beyond, children in education and childcare provision had to isolate (initially for 14 days, amended to 10 days from mid-December) if someone in their ‘bubble’ received a positive COVID test. While some of the single parents we interviewed had not needed to do this, many had – and often on multiple occasions.

The need to self-isolate with their children affected single parents’ ability to work. While those working from home who had older children were able to continue working whilst their children isolated, this was more problematic for those with younger children who required more care. It was of course particularly difficult for those parents who worked outside of the home. These parents dealt with the conflicting demands on their time in a number of ways. Some took annual leave, unpaid leave, or a combination of the two. A number of interviewees said their employers provided sick pay. None of the single parents we spoke to were furloughed to care for children over this period, nor did they mention this as a possible solution.

Inevitably, taking sick pay or unpaid leave had financial implications and there is evidence of some parents weighting these against the need to care for their children. This was the case for Kelly, who continued to work with a young primary aged child self-isolating. As a result of prioritising her family’s financial situation, Kelly reported that she was unable to complete any home schooling with her child during that period.

“I was annoyed and upset because work weren’t supportive. They basically said, ‘You can have it unpaid, or you continue to work’.”

– Kelly

Alice also reported that she lost out financially when she was required to isolate, despite the fact that the positive case with whom she had had contact isolated on full pay.

“What I did do is pick her up earlier from afterschool just because she was obviously mixing with other classes and that was a bit of a risk. If somebody in that class (received a positive test) afterschool then she cancelled as well as having to isolate.”

“I was annoyed and upset because work weren’t supportive. They basically said, ‘You can have it unpaid, or you continue to work’.”

“So yes, that affected pay as well, that did, because they would only give us Statutory Sick Pay for the week.”

– Alice

For those parents who had to work outside the home, the conflict between their working and caring responsibilities, and their ability to follow the government’s COVID guidelines, was even starker.

“Obviously we have to follow the protocol of isolating. I can go to work apparently, but my son can’t go to school, but he can’t actually leave the house. So I am a single parent (and) you’re saying it’s okay for me to go to work but what do I do with my son if he’s obviously been in contact with somebody, so I can’t leave him with anyone? It just doesn’t make any sense.”

– Penny

## Track and Trace grant

One of the policy solutions introduced by the government to address the difficulties described above is the Track and Trace Support Payment – a payment of £500 for those who have been told to isolate by NHS Tack and Trace because of their contact with a positive COVID-19 case, but are unable to work from home. This scheme was introduced in Wales in November 2020, with a similar scheme being made available in England in February 2021.

“They told us to apply for a grant thing off the Government which I did, and I got...so that was a massive help. They were absolutely brilliant.”

– Ruth

However, though other single parents we spoke with may have been eligible for the grant, there is evidence of a lack of awareness.

“I didn’t know about it, to be honest. I didn’t know there was a grant that you could take, to be honest.”

– Stacey

Dawn, on the other hand, who was aware of the grant, found that it was not a straightforward process to access the support.

“I didn’t realise is you only had two weeks to claim it. So I didn’t claim it in the two weeks and when I thought ‘oh actually I will claim it’, it was too late. I was totally entitled to do it, but I just felt like £500 was more than I would have earned, I didn’t really need that much. Maybe I should have, I don’t know. I was too late in the end anyway.”

– Dawn

In our Recommendations, we set out how the government should better publicise the availability of the grants to enable single parents to self-isolate with their children, and which could lessen the negative financial impact for low income single parents.

“Obviously we have to follow the protocol of isolating. I can go to work apparently, but my son can’t go to school, but he can’t actually leave the house. So I am a single parent (and) you’re saying it’s okay for me to go to work but what do I do with my son if he’s obviously been in contact with somebody, so I can’t leave him with anyone? It just doesn’t make any sense.”

“I didn’t know about it, to be honest. I didn’t know there was a grant that you could take.”

## Home schooling during self-isolation

In our interim report, we detailed the patchy home school provision provided by schools during the first lockdown. A similar diversity of provision was evident during those periods where children were required to isolate.

“The problem when it is an official lockdown and all the schools are closed – they get a little more notice to organise themselves, the schools, but when there are cases within their year bubbles, they are not given a lot of notice of the cases. It is very difficult for the schools to organise work instantly”.

– Thomas

Regardless of the short notice for bubbles having to self-isolate, there was a considerable diversity in the extent and nature of the home-learning provided by schools.

“When he was off they asked if he had access to online learning, and they said if he didn’t then they’d provide a laptop, and he actually had to get a laptop...It was a proper laptop. It was a Dell. Yes, it was good.”

– Stacey

“They do give them online work, but it is a little lacking quite often.”

– Thomas

“I can’t remember if they sent him anything, actually. Yes. I don’t think they did.”

– Esther

This picture of patchy provision contrasts strongly with the support with home-learning provided by schools in the third lockdown, which we consider in the next section.

“The problem when it is an official lockdown and all the schools are closed – they get a little more notice to organise themselves, the schools, but when there are cases within their year bubbles, they are not given a lot of notice of the cases. It is very difficult for the schools to organise work instantly.”

# The third lockdown

In this section, we discuss single parents' experiences of working and caring from the start of January 2021, when the decision was taken to close all schools in England to all but the children of key workers (this was also the case in Wales, although Welsh schools had also experienced closures prior to Christmas).

While the third lockdown might appear similar to the first lockdown implemented in March 2020, in terms of school closures and the need to work and care simultaneously, the experiences described by single parents proved in some ways rather different. These differences result from a number of factors, including the time of the year (single parents tended to perceive lockdown to be harder in the winter), the evolution of policy in terms of support provided to single parents, and their own attitudes and concerns.



## School closures: who got places and was it fair?

In our interim report, very few of the children of the single parents we interviewed had been offered school places, with only one or two taking these up – in instances where their child had an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) or where the non-resident parent was a key worker.

In the third lockdown however, the situation was rather different. A sizable proportion of the single parents we interviewed were offered (and accepted) school places, either full-time or part-time, in a wider range of situations. This reflects the national picture painted by statistics from the Department for Education, in the final week of school closures in March 2021, pupil attendance in state-funded schools was 19 per cent, rising to 28 per cent in primary schools.<sup>22</sup> The equivalent overall proportion in the final week of the first lockdown was 3 per cent.<sup>23</sup>

Single parents described how school places were sometimes offered at the discretion of schools, once they had provided places to the children of key workers and vulnerable children. Some parents felt that this was in recognition of the unique challenges facing single parents, while others were less clear about the rationale.

<sup>22</sup> Department for Education (2020), *Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak – summary of returns to 22 May*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

“I don’t know how they choose them because it’s not all of them but, yes, it could be because I’m a single parent and they knew that I was struggling a bit because I was working from home as well...but they didn’t actually say why.”

– Esther

While some schools were explicit about the availability of school places for those who would like them, in other instances, securing them required a lot of communication and persuasion from single parents.

“They’ve contacted everybody including myself and said ‘Are the children alright? Would you prefer them to be in school? Would it be easier? Would it help in any way?’ And you can put your name on a list if so.”

– Janine

“I was honest with them and said, ‘I can’t do everything,’... they tried to push back a bit, but I did keep going with it and they’d just let us know on a weekly basis if we can do anything less, or only send one of the children or something like that.”

– Kelly

There was a prevailing awareness among single parents that schools were taking different approaches to the allocation of places, and a perception that this was unfair.

“I don’t think it’s been done fairly, necessarily, each school seems to have different rules, there’s no consistency, which for me has worked out, but I understand there’s a lot of anger and frustration from other parents.”

– Kelly

“It is not across the board because there are kids that I know that are going to school in different schools, so the criteria has been met in different ways by different schools.”

– Michelle

In our interim report, we documented a considerable feeling among single parents that they should have been given a greater priority in the provision of support during the first lockdown, and perhaps even essential worker status, because of the unique challenge of working and caring alone. Reflecting this perception, the majority opinion among single parents was that school places should have been consistently available to children in single parent families in the third lockdown.

“It should be opened up to single parents, because at least if you’ve got somebody else there you’re sharing the responsibility. You could say ‘I’ll take this for a while and I’ll sit with him.’ Even going out to the park or something, just so they get a bit of air, you have to try and squeeze everything in whereas if there were two of you it’s much more flexible.”

– Susan

“I do think for, say, especially solo parents, where there’s literally only one parent, and the other one’s not involved, they should get some sort of priority. I can’t imagine if there’s a single parent who’s got kids that they have to

“I don’t know how they choose them because it’s not all of them but, yes, it could be because I’m a single parent and they knew that I was struggling a bit because I was working from home as well... but they didn’t actually say why.”

home school, like more than one kid, I don't know how they can cope and hold down their own job as well. They need some sort of priority because they must be going crazy."

– Leanne

"So I think for parents where they are actually at home and working from home I think there should have been more allowances made for those, even if it was just that the children could only go back for the morning. You could have half the children back in the morning and then the other half in the afternoon."

– Carla

However, this view was not universal, with a minority of single parents emphasising that health considerations should take priority in decisions about school places. This was the case for Jasmine, who disagreed that single parent families should have been offered school places in the third lockdown.

"I do think that health comes first and I feel sorry for the teachers that would possibly be put in that situation and then have to go home to their family – and maybe pass it on."

– Jasmine

"I do think that health comes first and I feel sorry for the teachers that would possibly be put in that situation and then have to go home to their family – and maybe pass it on."

## Home schooling

Because of the greater provision of school places, a smaller proportion of the single parents we interviewed were undertaking home schooling in the third lockdown. Here too, their experiences were rather different in some respects to those reported in the first lockdown, documented in our interim report. However, a number of the challenges highlighted by single parents in the summer remained. Single parents commonly described difficulties motivating their children, especially secondary aged children, to learn at home and the own personal challenges they faced attempting to teach a curriculum which was often rather different and delivered in a different way to what they had experienced at school.

What was markedly different in the third lockdown, however, was a greater level of provision and communication from schools. As a result, single parents described how their children's days were much more structured, with a clearly defined set of activities frequently including live or pre-recorded lessons. This development was generally viewed positively, as testified in the following quotations – primarily because it removed or reduced some of the difficulties noted above.

"I feel that school has definitely changed their approach to home schooling. Whereas before, obviously it was understandable, it was completely new for school as it was for parents as well."

– Carla

"Yes. I feel it's a lot better this time, because last time round there wasn't any form of Zoom call, they didn't have any of them last time at all...I still think

it's a lot better with the teacher interaction a couple of times a day for the kids, definitely."

– Sandra

"I just thought they were much better prepared. Instead of (my child) being asked to go on and do the odd thing or pick from a list, it was a set timetable. He had to be on his computer at nine o'clock and he had live lessons with the teachers there. And just so much better; he's come on loads since he's been doing this."

– Ruth

Where single parents were critical about the nature of provision from schools, this was primarily because what was required from them and their children was excessive. It was a common view that families would have been able to undertake a smaller quantity of home schooling more effectively, within the time available, especially when single parents were also working.

"They are expecting them to be able to do too much at home at the moment, if that makes sense, and his time would be better focused on more important things than trying to spread too thinly across all the subjects."

– Karen

As a result, some single parents favoured, and sometimes independently adopted, to concentrate on what they viewed as the most important or 'core' subjects.

"He does Maths, English, he does his Science, he does his History, but anything like DT or anything I just do it because otherwise we would be there all day and I'm working anyway and then he has to watch assemblies and he has to talk to his teacher...it's a lot of work."

– Emma

However, there was some evidence of inconsistency between schools, particularly in terms of the amount of work required from primary aged children, some of which were requiring five or six hours of work (despite the existence of national guidance).<sup>24</sup>

"School have said that they only expect the children to do three hours of home schooling a day, which is good because that means the children get up in the morning, do their home school in the morning and then by lunchtime they are normally finished for the day."

– Carla

Whilst single parents did not favour a greater amount of provision from schools, there was some dissatisfaction with the balance, with a demand for more live teaching, especially for primary school aged children.

"I think the senior schools they've got it sussed, they have every lesson online or they do it via Teams. (But) they're not getting it with the younger ones, it's just not there, and I don't know why."

– Rowena

"Yes. I feel it's a lot better this time, because last time round there wasn't any form of Zoom call, they didn't have any of them last time at all...I still think it's a lot better with the teacher interaction a couple of times a day for the kids, definitely."

"I think the senior schools they've got it sussed, they have every lesson online or they do it via Teams. (But) they're not getting it with the younger ones, it's just not there, and I don't know why."

<sup>24</sup> This is presented in <https://dfemedia.blog.gov.uk/2021/01/08/what-should-remote-education-look-like-how-can-your-child-learn-remotely-if-you-dont-have-a-laptop-we-answer-your-remote-learning-questions>.

## Problems with technology

In our interim report, we documented how single parents had encountered problems with digital technology and online access to their children's home schooling in the first lockdown. Whilst such issues had not been eliminated by the third lockdown, they were less commonly reported by the single parents we interviewed. This is despite the fact that the prevalence of online and synchronous learning had increased since the first lockdown. Data from the Office for National Statistics reports that 69 per cent of children had accessed real-time learning in January 2021, compared with 25 per cent in May 2020 (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This trend is supported in the accounts provided by single parents we interviewed.

"He was trying to log on... and he'd only got his phone and it wouldn't work. So the teacher... contacted the Head of Year who the next thing contacted somebody higher, and then my phone was ringing a little bit later on in the day to offer this tablet."

– Alice

However, where schools did not provide assistance, which tended to be the case when children were of primary age, problems with technology and online access remained and could inhibit children's learning.

"I've had to give him my iPad, which is not ideal. Well, it's not even an iPad, it's a Fire so it doesn't support the Google Classrooms... I don't have any access, like I don't have a spare laptop to give him."

– Susan

More widely, research by the Child Poverty Action Group has shown that, among low-income families, 35 per cent are still missing essential resources for learning, with laptops and devices most commonly missing.<sup>25</sup>

## Food

As in the first lockdown, single parents had to provide lunches for their children while schools were closed. Our interim report documented how the continuation of the Free School Meal scheme (where schools provided a meals package, vouchers or a cash alternative) was generally viewed positively.

"It's a massive help and I haven't had to use my money as such for the shopping, for the necessities, I've got Aldi vouchers as it happens so I've used them there and it was just brilliant, it's an absolute godsend".

– Janine

However, some parents were confused about eligibility and felt this should have been wider. These attitudes were broadly evident in the third lockdown too.

"I've had to give him my iPad, which is not ideal. Well, it's not even an iPad, it's a Fire so it doesn't support the Google Classrooms... I don't have any access, like I don't have a spare laptop to give him."

"It's a massive help and I haven't had to use my money as such for the shopping, for the necessities, I've got Aldi vouchers as it happens so I've used them there and it was just brilliant, it's an absolute godsend."

<sup>25</sup> Child Poverty Action Group (2021), *The cost of learning in Lockdown: March 2021 update* Department for Education (9th March 2021) Department for Education (9th March 2021), *Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, Week 13 2021*.

Research by the Child Poverty Action Group among low-income families has documented how 75 per cent of families receiving cash payments to replace free school meals thought this worked well or very well, a much higher level of satisfaction than had been found for other replacement methods.<sup>26</sup>

However, eligibility remained a matter of contention for some, particularly those with the youngest children who would have received free school meals, had school been open.<sup>27</sup>

“Because they get their lunches and things at school, but because I don’t get any benefits, there’s no offer to provide the vouchers for his lunches. It’s only if you’re on benefits, which I just feel is slightly unfair... Well, I’ve lost income due to (the pandemic), I’ve lost my second income and I don’t claim any benefits so my situation has been impacted and he is entitled to a lunch in school.”

– Kelly

## **Balancing working and caring**

When we interviewed single parents in the summer of 2020, we were consistently told about the ‘impossible balancing act’ they were required to perform in the first lockdown as a result of their multiple working and caring roles. Subsequently, many found themselves making compromises in terms of their work and caring responsibilities, some of which they were deeply uncomfortable with. Such accounts were less prevalent in the third lockdown, presumably because of the availability of more support with caring, for example childcare settings remaining open, school places being made more widely available, and the availability of support bubbles for single parents. Nevertheless, a number of single parents described the negative consequences of the choices they had to make when juggling work, caring and home schooling, with the latter generally being the area where compromises were made.

“You would not think it would put pressure on children this time, but because she is a bit older, she speaks to friends, she knows that she has not done work one day, she will get upset that she is going to get in trouble and I am having to try and explain to her, ‘I have got to do my work’.”

– Jasmine

“It is quite hard. I mean, Monday, Tuesday, it’s horrendous because I’m really busy with work and I go to bed very stressed and tearful, but then Wednesday, Thursday, Friday it eases up a bit for my job, so it gets a bit easier. But it is too much. In fact, I was thinking this week of just doing Maths and English and just not doing the rest, quite frankly.”

– Emma

“You would not think it would put pressure on children this time, but because she is a bit older, she speaks to friends, she knows that she has not done work one day, she will get upset that she is going to get in trouble and I am having to try and explain to her, ‘I have got to do my work’.”

26 Child Poverty Action Group (2021), *The cost of learning in Lockdown: March 2021 update* Department for Education (9th March 2021) Department for Education (9th March 2021), *Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, Week 13 2021*.

27 Free school meals are available to all children in England in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 (<https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals>, accessed April 2021).

Struggles with balancing work and caring appeared to be much more prevalent in the third lockdown amongst those with younger primary aged children – presumably because those with preschool-aged children still had access to childcare and older children were more able to manage their own learning. The particular challenges facing single parents with children in this age group were explained by two single parents:

“She cannot just sit at a laptop and I cannot just say, ‘Get on with it.’ I need to be the one that controls the laptop. I have to obviously teach her it as well as we go along and then I am not a teacher, so I do not know what I am doing.”

– Jasmine

“He can’t read. The school are setting work but he can’t read, so it’s not like he can sit down and do it. Everything is ‘Ask a parent to help, ask a parent to explain. Pause this and talk to your parent.’ And I’m thinking ‘I can’t even do emails for ten minutes without being asked,’ and that’s in between the hundred snacks that he needs a day.”

– Susan

## The role of employers

In our interim report, we described how flexibility from employers played a critical role in easing some of the difficulties single parents encountered juggling working and caring. However, in some instances, this was rather limited or not forthcoming at all. In the third lockdown, experiences of employers were much more positive, with single parents almost universally describing them as flexible and understanding. This often translated into allowing them to work the hours that best fitted around their caring responsibilities, as long as they ensured that their work overall was completed. There was also considerable evidence of colleagues, many of whom were in the same boat in terms of home schooling, supporting each other, by swapping days, shifts and tasks. These types of flexibility, and their impacts, were depicted by a number of single parents we interviewed.

“They have been good to people really, they try and be as accommodating... And generally the team are good, because they’ll say “Well, I’ll cover you and you do another day for me” when it perhaps would be your day off, so they’re quite good like that really, on the whole.”

– Alice

“So they’re all aware, and they make allowances, like if you need to go off, and also she’s there during meetings and they’re like just normal with it, they’re absolutely fine with it. And other people, you can hear they’ve got their kids in the background and they’re home schooling and things like that.”

– Leanne

“It is really difficult, but my work are really good and they are really flexible. They know I’ve got my two children with me, so if I do need to go out or take them out for an hour, I can catch up with my work in the evening. As long as I do my five hours a day, at some point do what I need to do, they are pretty good and really flexible.”

– Lindsay

“She cannot just sit at a laptop and I cannot just say, ‘Get on with it.’ I need to be the one that controls the laptop. I have to obviously teach her it as well as we go along and then I am not a teacher, so I do not know what I am doing.”

“It is really difficult, but my work are really good and they are really flexible. They know I’ve got my two children with me, so if I do need to go out or take them out for an hour, I can catch up with my work in the evening.”

Some employers went even further, and offered additional help with home schooling, in terms of resources and time off.

“They even said if you are struggling for resources and your school isn’t providing you with resources, then we have got some useful tools for you to use.”

– Carla

“The company as a whole gave us an extra five days leave that we could use, basically for the home schooling of the children, and you could break down that leave into hours, so say I needed to take a couple of hours off to help my children with their school work, I could just ask on the same day and say, ‘I need an hour off,’ and I could just take it out of those extra leave days.”

– Esther

While this degree of flexibility and support is impressive, it should be borne in mind that the option of using full-time or part-time furlough for childcare, which was designed to assist in precisely these situations, was not widely taken up. Though in some instances this was the preference of single parent, it could also reflect the reluctance of employers.

## Growing mental health concerns

Taken together, the experiences of the pandemic so far has resulted in negative mental health impacts for both single parents and their children. This is despite the fact that arguably more practical support was available to parents in the third lockdown compared with the first.

Turning first to single parents’ mental health, almost all parents we interviewed said that the third lockdown was, to varying degrees, the reason they had experienced poorer mental health. A handful of the single parents explained that they had talked to their GPs to access medication to ease anxiety or depression. A small number of single parents were currently on sick leave, had left their jobs, or reduced their hours because of mental health problems. Work pressures, furlough, and the ongoing challenges of homeworking were all mentioned as reasons why some interviewees had seen a decline in their mental health during this period.

“I do not know if it is just the lockdown or what, but I am struggling broadly with my mental health and I did go back doing a sixteen (hours) on a phased return, but it was making me ill. I just could not cope and I do not know... whether it was more the fact that it was from home and not being in an office.”

– Anna

“You get a little bit of the (bereaved family’s) story and stuff like that, and it just gets on top of you, it’s just upsetting.”

– Ruth

“They even said if you are struggling for resources and your school isn’t providing you with resources, then we have got some useful tools for you to use.”

“I do not know if it is just the lockdown or what, but I am struggling broadly with my mental health and I did go back...but it was making me ill. I just could not cope.”

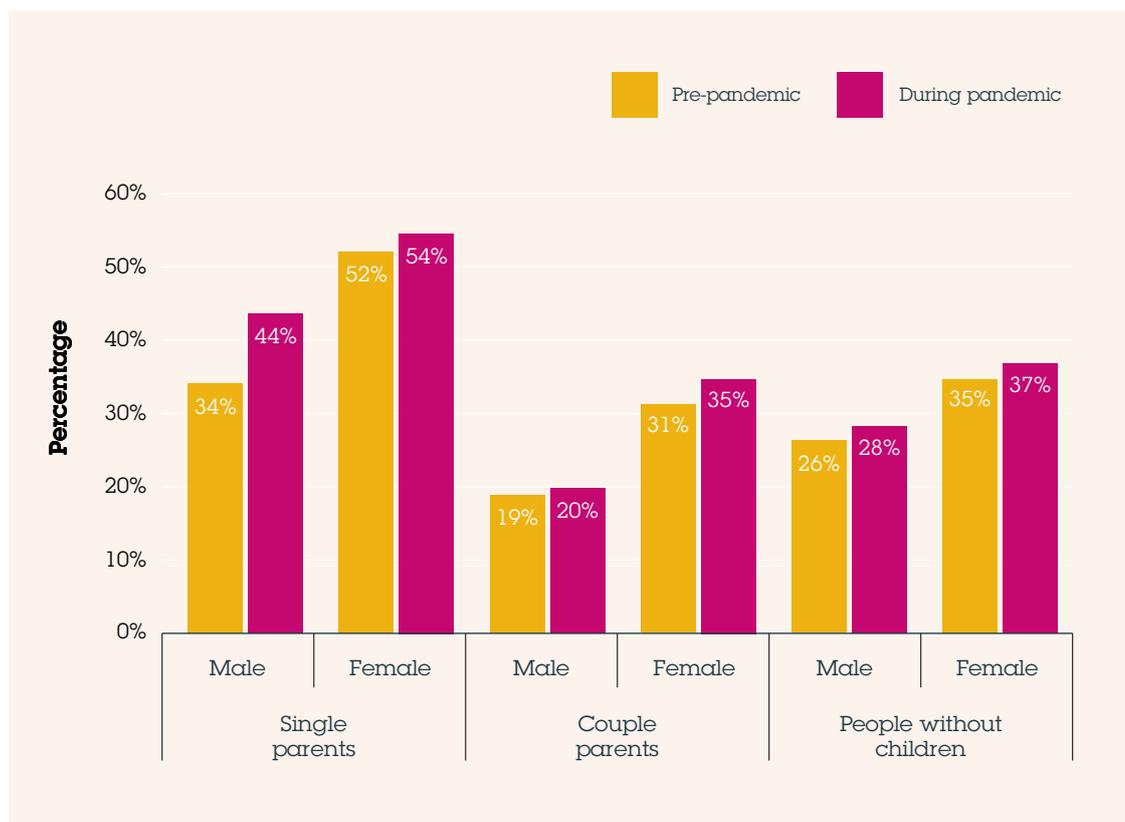
“I feel a bit like I’m sort of floundering and I’ve lost my sense of identity and then we are trying to juggle everything else. So I think mental health is the real issue, I think, in having these extended periods away from work and away from school and the consequences of that”.

– Karen

In addition to specific difficulties as a result of working or being furloughed, single parents pointed towards a sense of fatigue with multiple lockdowns, the inability to go outside or exercise effectively when caring for young children, and the fact many personally knew of COVID fatalities as contributing to negative outcomes in the area of mental health.

These experiences are reflected by data at the population level which shows that measures of personal well-being including happiness and life satisfaction reached very low, and often their lowest ever, levels in January 2021.<sup>28</sup>

Our own analysis of LFS data shows that, between March and December 2020 (incorporating the first two lockdowns), all groups defined by sex and family type were more likely to report depression and bad nerves, compared with the pre-COVID period.<sup>29</sup> As shown in Figure 6, both male and female single parents remain much more likely to report depression and bad nerves compared with other family types, however the greatest increase in depression rates is amongst male single parents (a rise of ten percentage points).



**Figure 6:** Experiencing depression and ‘bad nerves’ by family type and time period

Source: Labour Force Survey, April–December 2019–2020.

<sup>28</sup> Office for National Statistics (2021), *Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: 19 February 2021*.

<sup>29</sup> We only use 2019 for the pre-pandemic period to avoid capturing changes on the reported levels of depression due to changes in attitudes towards mental health issues. As discussion over mental health issues becomes more prominent, individuals are more likely to recognise and report such issues compared to the past.

When it came to their children, single parents described a variety of concerns. Most commonly, these involved children missing their friends and usual activities and routines.

“I think this lockdown is affecting my little boy more as well just because we are not going to the parks. We do tend to go out for walks, but all the local playgrounds and that round where we are closed, so we can’t go down to the swings or anything and with it being darker at night, we are just confined to being at home.”

– Shona

“It’s been very, very difficult for the children to be taken out of their routines, away from their friends and to be essentially prisoners in their own home.”

– Karen

A smaller group of single parents reported more serious concerns, primarily in relation to secondary-age children, who they felt were becoming isolated.

“I just worry about the mental health impact. My son doesn’t go out for any kind of exercise at all and if I say, ‘Do you want to come on a walk?’ it’s like, ‘No,’ and I just feel, I don’t know, that maybe he is anxious and he doesn’t... he wouldn’t tell me if he felt anxious.”

– Dawn

“My youngest has just been in her room all the time. She does not want to come out. The curtains are shut, even in the day, and we went to the doctor’s because of her mental health.”

– Lena

Once again, these experiences reflect data for the population of children in the UK as a whole. Analysis has shown that behavioural, emotional, and restless/attentional difficulties increased after the third lockdown was introduced in January, particularly among primary aged children, those with special educational needs and disability (SEND) and from low-income or single adult households. These children continued to show increased mental health problems throughout the pandemic, with higher levels of behavioural, emotional, and restless/attentional difficulties.<sup>30</sup>

It should be acknowledged that, amongst the parents we interviewed, concerns about children’s mental health were not universal. For example, Janine described how lockdown and home schooling had gone well because her two children were just one year apart in age, while Eleanor recalled that her son was enjoying school more in lockdown because of the smaller number of children in attendance. Nevertheless, such experiences and concerns around mental health were rather more prevalent than in the first lockdown, with children’s mental health being a key area where single parents felt policy needed to be directed in the future.

“It’s been very, very difficult for the children to be taken out of their routines, away from their friends and to be essentially prisoners in their own home.”

“My youngest has just been in her room all the time. She does not want to come out. The curtains are shut, even in the day, and we went to the doctor’s because of her mental health.”

30 Skripkauskaitė, S et al (2021), Changes in children’s and young people’s mental health symptoms: March 2020 to January 2021.

# Looking to the future

In this section, we consider three developments that occurred (or are anticipated to occur) following the pandemic, which are likely to mediate single parents' experiences of working and caring in future. Namely, a possible shift towards different working arrangements, a decline in the availability of childcare, and a likely rise in single parent unemployment.

While our interviews with single parents were primarily retrospective, focusing on their experiences of the pandemic so far, there was some discussion of each of these issues, as many single parents expressed aspirations or concerns in relation to them moving forward. These represent the backdrop against which our recommendations for change have been developed.



## The future of home, hybrid and flexible working

As noted previously, the majority of single parents we interviewed for our research have been working from home throughout the pandemic, with analysis of LFS data showing that rates of home-working doubled for single parents during this period. In many cases, single parents were anticipating working from home for a while longer, with considerable evidence of communication from and consultation by employers around this issue. In some cases, single parents anticipated a form of 'hybrid' working becoming available to them. In some cases, single parents were awaiting their employers guidance on this issue.

"It is going to be possibly an option going forwards that people can work from home that need to, more like a hybrid working so people can pick and choose when they come into the office."

– Susan

"What they are talking about is in the near future doing is what they call blended working, which is where I spend a couple of days in the office and two or three days at home. The exact working patterns are still to work out."

– Leanne

When we asked single parents who had worked from home during the pandemic about their preferences for working location in the future, a strong consensus emerged in favour of hybrid working, with single parents

"It is going to be possibly an option going forwards that people can work from home that need to, more like a hybrid working so people can pick and choose when they come into the office."

undertaking at least half or the majority of their work hours at home. When considering what would work best, single parents clearly took into account the different sorts of duties they needed to perform at work, as well as the advantages of home and office working in terms of flexibility as opposed to social interaction.

“I would do the split. So maybe two days in the office and one day at home, or depending what’s on? Say if it’s a lot of meetings, then we’ve found that they work perfectly fine over Skype, so maybe on certain days where it’s all just meetings then doing that from home is actually more efficient. Other days where it helps to have colleagues and I’d go in, so I would like the flexibility of a bit of both.”

– Leanne

This balance of opinion reflects that found among UK employees as a whole regarding future work locations. A major research project<sup>31</sup> has found that 75 per cent of employees, across, a broad range of industries, want some home-working once things return to normal, with 13 per cent preferring to work from home all of the time.

Whilst a greater prevalence of homeworking would undoubtedly create additional flexibility, of particular benefit to single parents, it should not be viewed as the only solution necessary in this area. Broader change to how work is structured, including greater access to good quality part-time work, is also needed. The Timewise Flexible Jobs Index showed that, at the start of 2020, just two in ten jobs were advertised with options to work flexibly. A few months later, following the impact of the pandemic on work including a big shift in homeworking for employees, “the dial barely moved in the jobs market. The ratio of flexible jobs rose slightly to 22 per cent, or just over 2 in 10.<sup>32</sup> Without opening up flexibility at the job advertising stage, single parents will find it hard to move jobs, to progress and, for those who lose their jobs as a result of the pandemic, to move into new employment.

Indeed, the Government’s Behavioural Insights Team has found that showing and offering flexible working options in job adverts increases applications by 30 per cent and that greater transparency in job adverts would create at least 174,000 flexible jobs to the UK economy per year.<sup>33</sup> This led the Minister for Women and Equalities, Liz Truss, to call for employers to make flexible working a standard option for employees, to help level-up the UK, and boost opportunities for women and reduce geographic inequality as we recover from COVID-19.<sup>34</sup> The now overdue Employment Bill also represents a positive opportunity to create what Working Families have termed ‘flexistability’ – “a labour market and rights framework where all parents can access and progress in quality, permanent genuinely two-sided flexible work”.<sup>35</sup> The Employment Bill is needed to legislate and enforce for jobs to be advertised as flexible by default.

“I would do the split. So maybe two days in the office and one day at home, or depending what’s on?... Other days where it helps to have colleagues and I’d go in, so I would like the flexibility of a bit of both.”

31 Work After Lockdown, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

32 Timewise (2020), The Timewise Flexible Jobs Index 2020.

33 Government Equalities Office, Behavioural Insights Team and the Rt Honourable Elizabeth Truss MP (2021), Press release: Government says in the interest of employers and employees to make offer of flexible working standard.

34 Ibid.

35 Working Families (2021), Flexistability: Building back better for the UK’s working families.

There are also other ways to increase the number of quality flexible jobs. The civil service has been a trailblazer in opening up flexible job opportunities in relation to job shares.<sup>36</sup> Job shares mean that a role can be divided up for two people where full-time hours are needed for a role. This enables applicants to apply for a wider range of jobs including at more senior levels and the civil service gains from the experience and skills of two people for a role. The civil service has a job share finder and actively supports existing and new recruits for job share roles.<sup>37</sup> It would be positive if the government were to take forward the good practice from the civil service and scale up to encourage job shares more broadly in the public and private sectors.

The Timewise Flexible Jobs Index<sup>38</sup> concludes that there is a fractured job market with part-time work amongst the lowest paid jobs and conversely homeworking and other flexible working options disproportionately offered at higher salary levels and rarely available for those in low paid jobs. Consequently, women, including single parents, experience workplace inequality and this will continue if homeworking is seen as the only answer to flexibility.

**Women, including single parents, experience workplace inequality and this will continue if homeworking is seen as the only answer to flexibility.**

## **The availability of childcare**

While we have detailed how childcare provision during the third lockdown made it much easier for parents with preschool children, some parents nevertheless reported continued restrictions to childcare availability. This was the case for Emily, whose child was able to attend nursery during term-time, but in school holiday periods places remained restricted to children of essential workers. More dramatically, Penny had seen her childcare provider close because it was no longer financially viable as a result of the pandemic and the associated social distancing requirements. As a result, her only available childcare is now 15 miles away from her work.

When we discussed wraparound care, some single parents also experienced a lower availability of breakfast and after-schools clubs, although this was less problematic than expected, as many continued to work from home. This was also the case for sporting and other leisure activities, which might also allow single parents more time to work.

*“My eldest plays football three times a week and my youngest does Tae-Kwon-Do twice a week, (but) they weren’t allowed to do any of that.”*

*– Alison*

This more limited availability of wraparound care within schools, and the provision of clubs, is likely to continue within school settings whilst social distancing and the maintaining of separate ‘bubbles’ continues.

<sup>36</sup> Job sharing in the Civil Service, GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)).

<sup>37</sup> ‘Our 10 Year Job Share Story’ by Tina & Deanna, Civil Service ([blog.gov.uk](http://blog.gov.uk))

<sup>38</sup> Timewise (2020), The Timewise Flexible Jobs Index 2020.

While these restrictions in availability may be time-limited, the situation for preschool childcare is potentially longer-term. Describing the early impacts of the pandemic on the childcare market, the 2021 Coram Childcare Survey found that over a third (35 per cent) of local authorities reporting that the number of childcare providers permanently closing in their area had gone up in the last year.<sup>39</sup>

While many providers have taken advantage of short-term government support for the childcare sector through, for instance, the furlough scheme, there remains a risk that, when the support ends, many providers could close, creating shortages in childcare availability.<sup>40</sup> In London the position is particularly stark with recent research by the Greater London Authority showing 64 per cent of non-domestic childcare providers (nurseries, preschools, maintained nursery schools) and 56 per cent of childminders indicating that for financial reasons they were at immediate risk of closure or concerned they will not be operating in 12 months' time.<sup>41</sup>

The cost of childcare also remains an ongoing concern for parents, and this is a particular priority for single parent households who rely on one income to pay for childcare. The Coram Childcare Survey 2021 found that childcare use has been considerably lower since March 2020 than in usual times and prices in England have risen above inflation, which they think may be driven by childcare providers having to increase their prices in order to stay viable. The survey also found that childcare providers were struggling to remain sustainable during the pandemic, with 39 per cent of local authorities seeing childcare providers raise their prices.<sup>42</sup>

Whilst childcare costs can be supported within UC, single parents who had moved over to the benefit during the pandemic expressed concern about having to pay the costs upfront and claim back later. The level of childcare costs that can be claimed under UC is also capped at a level set back in 2003. As the predicted costs of childcare have increased as result of the pandemic this is also likely to make childcare too expensive for many single parents to move into or sustain a job going forward.

“Getting the money and putting that down before then having to claim it back through Universal Credit. ... I have got friends who would love to put their children in [childcare] but they cannot afford to.”

– Anna

The cost of childcare also remains an ongoing concern for parents, and this is a particular priority for single parent households who rely on one income to pay for childcare

39 Family and Childcare Trust (2021), *Childcare Survey 2021*.

40 Family and Childcare Trust (2020), *Childcare Survey: early release on the impact of COVID-19 on childcare in England*.

41 Early Years Alliance and SEEDA, *The business support needs of London's early years sector and how they can be met: Report on research carried out by the Early Years Alliance and CEEDA on behalf of the Greater London Authority*.

42 Family and Childcare Trust (2020), *Childcare Survey: early release on the impact of COVID-19 on childcare in England*.

# **Jobs for single parents and back to work support**

Before the start of the pandemic, single parent employment stood at a record level – 69 per cent.<sup>43</sup> The concentration of single parents in the industries that have been hit hardest by the pandemic means that they are highly vulnerable to the cuts in jobs anticipated as the furlough scheme comes to an end in the autumn. Back to work support therefore needs to address both the requirements of single parents to work and care on their own and the big hit to sectors where single parents worked before the pandemic, which may not exist to the same extent. It is important that single parents are not left behind and that they have opportunities to have tailored back to work support that makes the most of their skills, including opportunities to retrain into new and emerging sectors.

Previous schemes to help single parents into work were geared towards voluntary support with the New Deal for Lone Parents and specialist support from Lone Parent Advisers. However, since the introduction of ‘Lone Parent Obligations’ support for single parents from Jobcentres has been largely through generalist work coaches. Based on the current rules, there are also limited opportunities for single parents to train or improve their skills. This is set as a maximum of 10 weeks for most claimants. Single parents and main carers in couples who have a preschool-aged child do have additional training flexibilities, which is written into work coach guidance, where there is the possibility that they could train for up to a year and have their job-seeking turned off for this period. Despite this flexibility, parents are not eligible for the extended 30 hour childcare offer as it is only open to those in employment, creating an additional barrier to taking up training. The government has also not provided figures or an assessment showing the number of parents who have been permitted to take up longer term training, making it hard to assess awareness and uptake.

Single parents who were interviewed for the project and who lost their jobs were often unclear about where they should start in their job search or retraining. This was especially true for those who worked in an industry that has been hard hit by the pandemic.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has introduced a series of employment support schemes for claimants. In the first 13 weeks of a UC claim someone can be referred by their work coach to the ‘Job Finding Support’ scheme (introduced July 2020) which offers online one to one support of up to four hours and this might include for instance help with updating a CV. For those that have been out of work for between 3-12 months there is the Job Entry Targeted Support Scheme<sup>44</sup> (JETS – introduced October 2020) with support by an outside provider of up to six months.

**Back to work support therefore needs to address both the requirements of single parents to work and care on their own and the big hit to sectors where single parents worked before the pandemic.**

<sup>43</sup> Office for National Statistics (2020), *Working and workless households in the UK: April to June 2020: Table P.*

<sup>44</sup> Job Entry Targeted Support (JETS) – does your job search need a boost?, Job help (campaign.gov.uk).

By the summer of 2021 there will be a new programme called the Restart scheme<sup>45</sup> which will predominantly support those that have been unemployed for between 12-18 months and there can be more limited referrals for those who have been unemployed less time but where their work coach believes the programme would be beneficial – for example adults leaving the care system. This scheme offers longer term more sustained support. The government has also almost doubled the number of work coaches (to 26,500) since the start of the pandemic.<sup>46</sup> They have also increased the number of specialist work coaches including those who support disabled claimants and introduced youth employment coaches to provide support for claimants aged 16-24.

The Women and Equalities Select Committee inquiry included evidence that traditionally female-dominated work sectors had been hard hit during the COVID-19 pandemic and job vacancies in the service industries will remain depressed. The Committee Inquiry Report called for review of childcare provision including making this open to those who are job-seeking or retraining. The Inquiry recommendations also include that the “DWP must expand and tailor its offer for mothers seeking employment, so that it encompasses retraining and re-skilling for jobs in the most viable sectors”.<sup>47</sup>

Single parents already faced significant disadvantage in the labour market before the pandemic and subsequently their position in the labour market has worsened. It is important that single parents are not left behind and that they have opportunities for tailored back to work support that makes the most of their skills including opportunities to retrain into new and emerging sectors. A change in mindset is needed by DWP, with longer term job outcomes at the forefront of the design of back to work services for single parents rather than a short term ‘work first’ agenda.

A big risk facing single parents in the coming months is that they are more likely to have been furloughed and would not be considered longer term unemployed, despite in effect having been away from work for a significant period. Those single parents who ultimately lose their jobs after the furlough scheme closes in autumn 2021 should be a priority, with similar access to the back to work schemes for those who are longer term unemployed. The current system relies too heavily on generalist work coach support and there should be the re-introduction of specialist single parent advisers. Many single parents will need support to retrain and reskill, and it is vital that this is backed up with affordable access to childcare.

**The Women and Equalities Select Committee inquiry included evidence that traditionally female-dominated work sectors had been hard hit during the COVID-19 pandemic and job vacancies in the service industries will remain depressed.**

**Many single parents will need support to retrain and reskill, and it is vital that this is backed up with affordable access to childcare.**

<sup>45</sup> Restart scheme, GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)).

<sup>46</sup> Thousands of new Work Coach vacancies open across the UK, GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)).

<sup>47</sup> Women and Equalities Committee (2020), *Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact*.

# Conclusions and recommendations

## 1 Improve access to childcare and reduce the upfront costs for single parents

A lack of affordable childcare prevents many single parents from entering and staying in employment. The COVID-19 pandemic has already had an impact on the supply and costs of childcare.

The government needs to finally address this barrier to single parent employment by investing in childcare and changing how its costs are met under Universal Credit. Longer-term, the government should also consider meeting childcare costs for all parents who are out of work and who are undertaking training or improving their skills.

We recommend the following:

- The government should create a childcare infrastructure support fund to help stabilise the childcare market and prevent providers from closing.
- The government should roll out a national childcare deposit fund to help parents meet any upfront costs of childcare when they enter work, building on the scheme developed by Gingerbread in partnership with the Greater London Authority. This should be universally available and paid from a specific fund rather than being drawn on a discretionary basis from the Flexible Support Fund.
- The Department for Education should review the childcare caps that were set in 2003, which do not deliver the promised childcare support of up to 85 per cent under UC.
- The Department for Work and Pensions should act on the High Court ruling in January 2021 to change the payment structure under UC so that childcare costs are made upfront, rather than in arrears.

**Longer term, the government should also consider meeting childcare costs for all parents who are out of work and who are undertaking training or improving their skills**

## 2 Increase opportunities for flexible working

A lack of quality part-time and flexible job roles prevents many single parents from entering or progressing in employment. The pandemic has shown the capacity for many more jobs to be done flexibly than was previously thought possible.

Our interviews also showed the vital role that employers can play in supporting single parents to work flexibly. However, the last year has also highlighted that access to part-time and flexible working is still very restricted, including for those entering work or trying to change jobs. Splitting a full-time role into a job share would help single parents to move into a wider variety of roles and better paid employment, at the same time this could provide a business benefit to employers by providing the skills of two employees for one role. A lack of access to good quality flexible roles is a significant barrier for many single parents, including those who lose their jobs as a result of the pandemic and need to find new employment.

We recommend the following:

- The government should expedite the now delayed Employment Bill and include a duty on employers to advertise vacancies flexibly unless there are good business reasons not to do so.
- In the interim, the government should remove the 26-week qualifying period and make it a day-one right for employees to make a flexible working request. Business reasons for refusing a request need to be reviewed and strengthened.
- The government should work with employers and employer bodies to emphasise the business case for greater flexibility in job roles and consider financially incentivising employers to divide full-time roles into job shares.
- We urge the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the Flexible Working Task Force to work together to develop job sharing as part of the flexible working menu in adapting to new ways of working after the pandemic.

**The pandemic has shown the capacity for many more jobs to be done flexibly than was previously thought possible**

## 3 Clearer support for single parents whose children need to self-isolate

Single parents and their children will need continued support as it is anticipated that there will be temporary breaks in school and childcare as children are sent home to self-isolate.

It is good that, since the recommendation in our interim report, the UK and Welsh governments have improved the financial support for low income parents in England and Wales who cannot work because of the closure of a child's class or childcare provider by extending eligibility for the £500 Test and Trace Support Payment to parents in these circumstances. However, there is a low awareness of the scheme and the current guidance, particularly in England, is scant.

We recommend the following:

- The UK government needs to ensure there is greater awareness of the expanded eligibility for the Track and Trace grant in England, through schools, childcare providers, Jobcentre Plus information and work coaches.
- In the event of future school and childcare closures, it is vital that there are emergency childcare easements in place for single parent job seekers and that the DWP produces guidance for work coaches as a matter of urgency. Information about childcare easements should be publicised, including in Universal Credit journals.

The UK government needs to ensure there is greater awareness of the expanded eligibility for the Track and Trace grant in England

## 4 Tailored back to work and training support for single parents

The government must ensure that it provides high quality employment support tailored for single parents both through Jobcentre Plus and the new back to work schemes to help single parents move into good quality work.

Thousands of single parents will have worked in sectors that will not exist in the same way following the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important that single parents are not left behind in opportunities to retrain. Single parents should be offered a supportive and empowering approach rather than pressuring parents into work that would not be sustainable.

We recommend the following:

- The UK government should press ahead with its review on the effectiveness of sanctions.
- Jobcentres should use the expansion of work coach capacity as an opportunity to re-introduce specialist single parent advisers and tailored programmes to better support single parents into a job that reflects their skills and caring responsibilities.
- DWP should provide newly unemployed single parents priority access to employment support schemes. Single parents should be referred to the DWP's 'Job Finding Support' scheme and should be prioritised in the new Job Entry Targeted Support (JETS) back to work programme and the Restart scheme (including those who have been on furlough). Providers should be encouraged to put in place specialist single parent support, building on the evidence of what has worked in previous programmes, such as the New Deal for Lone Parents.
- The new Lifetime Skills Guarantee must reflect the needs of single parents, including matching access to courses with free childcare through UC.
- As well as extending the 30-hour free childcare offer to single parents who are in training and have preschool-age children, childcare support should be made available to all job-seeking single parents who are undertaking training or improving their skills.

## 5

## Ensure single parents aren't left behind in post-pandemic recovery

Single parent families have been hit harder than other family types throughout the pandemic, and the last year has exacerbated ongoing inequalities faced by single parents.

Childcare continues to be one of the biggest barriers for single parents who want to work or retrain. Worryingly, single parents and their children have been disproportionately affected by isolation and this has seen a marked impact on their mental health compared with other family types. It is vital that single parent families have access to mental health services as we emerge from the pandemic and aren't further left behind.

We recommend the following:

- Given the vital role of childcare as an enabler to allow parents to get into and stay in work, the UK government should use the next Spending Review to expand the definition of infrastructure to include childcare and incorporate funding to overhaul provision and affordability into its post-COVID recovery plans.
- The Spending Review should also prioritise specialist back to work support for single parents and financial help for employers to embrace flexible working practices including job advertising as flexible by default.
- The Treasury's public services support and recovery investment to tackle the mental health problems due to the pandemic is welcome. We urge the government and service providers to ensure that single parents and their children have priority access to mental health services.



# Technical appendix

## Qualitative data collection and analysis

We undertook two sets of retrospective qualitative interviews with single parents in England and Wales who were in work at the start of March 2020 but were not defined as “essential workers” by the government, giving them access to key worker education and childcare. Our sample was designed to ensure diversity on the characteristics known to be associated with single parents’ experiences of working and caring, and the early impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic that would also be likely to affect experiences in these areas. A sampling company, Criteria Fieldwork Ltd, was employed to recruit 40 single parents to be interviewed, reflecting these sampling criteria. The sampling characteristics, and the number of single parents we interviewed with each attribute for the baseline stage of the project, are detailed in Table A.1 below.

Single parents were recruited through Criteria Fieldwork Limited across the full range of Government Office Regions and were diverse in terms of sex and ethnicity, although these characteristics were not explicitly accounted for in our sample frame.

The single parents who agreed to participate were provided with information in advance about the purpose of the study and ensured anonymity. They were interviewed at pre-agreed times on the telephone in July or August 2020, by one of a team of two researchers. Interviews typically took between 25 and 40 minutes. Participants were provided with a £20 incentive in the form of an Amazon voucher, to thank them for their time. In addition, all participants were asked to consent to be re-interviewed in January 2021.

The two researchers attempted to re-contact all of the 40 single parents who participated in the first set of interviews between January and February 2021. This was done by email and, in the case of non-response, by telephone. Because many single parents were combining work with home schooling during this period, the process of arranging and conducting qualitative interviews was particularly challenging, with these needing to be re-arranged or conducted outside of working hours in a number of instances.

Of the original 40 single parents, we were unable to contact or secure consent to participate from seven within this timeframe.

The follow-up interviews were slightly shorter, taking an average of 30 minutes, as we had collected key demographic data and employment histories as part of the baseline interviews. As before, these were conducted on the telephone and participants were provided with a £20 incentive in the form of an Amazon voucher, to thank them for their time.

Interviews from both waves of data collection were transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach, using the Taguette software package. Codes and themes were developed iteratively.

For the baseline interview, this was done within a broader analytic framework based around the areas of working, caring, the interaction of these two activities, the role of government and future expectations and concerns.

For the follow-up interviews, this was based around the areas of working location, furlough, the return to school, self-isolations, school closures, home schooling, mental health, the role of government and ‘looking to the future’.



**Table A.1: Qualitative sample of single parents: characteristics sampled and numbers with specific attributes**

|  | Characteristic                        | Attribute   | No. of single parents interviewed |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| Characteristic associated with experiences of working and caring | Employment status                     | Employed  | 32                                |
|  |                                       | Self-Employed   | 8                                 |
|  | Working pattern                       | Full-time   | 15                                |
|  |                                       | Part-time   | 25                                |
|  | Highest educational qualification     | Level 2   | 14                                |
|  |                                       | Level 3   | 15                                |
|  |                                       | Level 4+  | 11                                |
|  | Number of children                    | 1   | 17                                |
|  |                                       | 2+  | 23                                |
|  | School stage of youngest child        | Preschool   | 15                                |
|  |                                       | Primary   | 17                                |
|  |                                       | Secondary   | 8                                 |
| Early impacts of COVID-19 pandemic                               | Impact on work                        | Moved to Job Retention Scheme or accessed Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (due to lack of childcare)          | 6                                 |
|  |                                       | Moved to Job Retention Scheme or accessed Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (due to working in shutdown sector) | 9                                 |
|  |                                       | Lost job immediately  | 2                                 |
|  |                                       | Remained in work  | 23                                |
|  | Access to childcare (March–July 2020) | Formal (due to EHCP or key-worker eligibility)  | 5                                 |
|  |                                       | Informal  | 15                                |
|  |                                       | None  | 20                                |

## Quantitative analysis of Labour Force Survey (LFS) data

In this report we compare the experiences of single parents, couple parents and people without dependent children during the pandemic so far. To understand how their labour market positions have been affected by the measures put in place to mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic, we use last three years' data to capture the period before the crisis. The pandemic period is captured by the second, third and fourth quarter of 2020 in the LFS (April 2020 – December 2020) and the pre-pandemic period includes the second, third and fourth quarters of years 2017-2019. In our analysis we exclude key workers and focus on people aged 18-64 years old. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) is used to adjust for inflation, so that earnings are reported in year 2020 values. Appropriate weights are used for all calculations.

However, it should be noted that 2020 LFS weights might suffer from biases.<sup>48</sup> Due to coronavirus, since March 2020, the LFS interviews have not been taking place face-to-face. A “by telephone” approach has been followed, which has had some ramifications on the sample interviewed. More specifically, owned accommodation households have been over-sampled and rented accommodation households have been under-sampled. The ONS has updated the weights provided to help mitigate biases due to this different sampling process. However, any weights provided also depend on official population projections that are based on pre-pandemic trends. For this reason, the ONS advises that levels and changes in levels in values computed from the LFS should be used with caution.<sup>49</sup>

**Table A.2: Personal and household characteristics by family type**

|                           |                 | Single parents | Couple parents | People without dependent children |
|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Gender</b>             |                 | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>                          |
| Female                    | Pre-pandemic    | 81             | 44             | 44                                |
|                           | During pandemic | 79             | 43             | 44                                |
| <b>Age</b>                |                 |                |                |                                   |
| Average age               | Pre-pandemic    | 34             | 38             | 43                                |
|                           | During pandemic | 34             | 38             | 43                                |
| <b>Number of children</b> |                 | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>                          |
| 1 child                   | Pre-pandemic    | 55             | 42             | -                                 |
|                           | During pandemic | 56             | 44             | -                                 |
| 2+ children               | Pre-pandemic    | 45             | 58             | -                                 |
|                           | During pandemic | 44             | 56             | -                                 |
| <b>Level of education</b> |                 | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>                          |
| Low education             | Pre-pandemic    | 45             | 31             | 40                                |
|                           | During pandemic | 39             | 27             | 36                                |
| Intermediate education    | Pre-pandemic    | 40             | 36             | 33                                |
|                           | During pandemic | 44             | 36             | 34                                |
| High education            | Pre-pandemic    | 15             | 33             | 27                                |
|                           | During pandemic | 17             | 37             | 30                                |

*Table continued*

<sup>48</sup> ONS (2020), *Coronavirus and its impact on the Labour Force Survey*.

<sup>49</sup> ONS (April 2021), *Coronavirus and measuring the labour market*.

|                                      |                 | Single parents | Couple parents | People without dependent children |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Socioeconomic status</b>          |                 | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>                          |
| Higher managerial                    | Pre-pandemic    | 25             | 45             | 43                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 27             | 50             | 46                                |
| Intermediate occupations             | Pre-pandemic    | 28             | 26             | 26                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 29             | 25             | 25                                |
| Routine and manual occupations       | Pre-pandemic    | 47             | 28             | 32                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 45             | 25             | 29                                |
| <b>Industry</b>                      |                 | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>                          |
| Agriculture, forestry and fishing    | Pre-pandemic    | 0              | 1              | 1                                 |
|                                      | During pandemic | 0              | 1              | 1                                 |
| Energy and water                     | Pre-pandemic    | 2              | 3              | 2                                 |
|                                      | During pandemic | 3              | 3              | 2                                 |
| Manufacturing                        | Pre-pandemic    | 6              | 11             | 11                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 6              | 11             | 11                                |
| Construction                         | Pre-pandemic    | 5              | 11             | 10                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 5              | 11             | 9                                 |
| Distribution, hotels and restaurants | Pre-pandemic    | 37             | 22             | 24                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 34             | 21             | 22                                |
| Transport and communication          | Pre-pandemic    | 4              | 9              | 8                                 |
|                                      | During pandemic | 4              | 10             | 9                                 |
| Banking and finance                  | Pre-pandemic    | 23             | 25             | 24                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 24             | 26             | 26                                |
| Public admin, education and health   | Pre-pandemic    | 13             | 10             | 11                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 14             | 12             | 12                                |
| Other services                       | Pre-pandemic    | 10             | 7              | 8                                 |
|                                      | During pandemic | 11             | 7              | 8                                 |
| <b>Housing tenure</b>                |                 | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>                          |
| Owned                                | Pre-pandemic    | 8              | 11             | 30                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 8              | 12             | 30                                |
| Mortgage                             | Pre-pandemic    | 20             | 56             | 33                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 19             | 57             | 32                                |
| Rent/part rent/squatting             | Pre-pandemic    | 72             | 33             | 37                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 73             | 31             | 38                                |
| <b>Employment status</b>             |                 | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>                          |
| Employee                             | Pre-pandemic    | 86             | 79             | 82                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 87             | 81             | 83                                |
| Self-employed                        | Pre-pandemic    | 13             | 20             | 17                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 13             | 19             | 16                                |

Table continued

|                                      |                 | Single parents | Couple parents | People without dependent children |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Employment tenure</b>             |                 | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>                          |
| Permanent                            | Pre-pandemic    | 93             | 96             | 94                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 94             | 96             | 94                                |
| Non-permanent                        | Pre-pandemic    | 7              | 4              | 6                                 |
|                                      | During pandemic | 6              | 4              | 6                                 |
| <b>Private/Public sector</b>         |                 | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>                          |
| Private                              | Pre-pandemic    | 91             | 91             | 90                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 89             | 90             | 89                                |
| Public                               | Pre-pandemic    | 9              | 9              | 10                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 11             | 10             | 11                                |
| <b>Benefits</b>                      |                 | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>       | <b>%</b>                          |
| Yes                                  | Pre-pandemic    | 74             | 38             | 16                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 74             | 35             | 18                                |
| <b>Median hours worked</b>           |                 | <b>hrs</b>     | <b>hrs</b>     | <b>hrs</b>                        |
| Female                               | Pre-pandemic    | 24             | 30             | 37                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 24             | 30             | 37                                |
| Male                                 | Pre-pandemic    | 38             | 40             | 39                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 38             | 40             | 38                                |
| <b>Median weekly earnings (real)</b> |                 | <b>£</b>       | <b>£</b>       | <b>£</b>                          |
| Female                               | Pre-pandemic    | 208            | 336            | 389                               |
|                                      | During pandemic | 240            | 392            | 423                               |
| Male                                 | Pre-pandemic    | 364            | 617            | 517                               |
|                                      | During pandemic | 365            | 650            | 538                               |
| <b>Median hourly earnings (real)</b> |                 | <b>£</b>       | <b>£</b>       | <b>£</b>                          |
| Female                               | Pre-pandemic    | 9              | 12             | 11                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 10             | 13             | 12                                |
| Male                                 | Pre-pandemic    | 10             | 15             | 13                                |
|                                      | During pandemic | 10             | 16             | 14                                |

Source: Labour Force Survey, 2017-2020 (Quarter 2-Quarter 4).

Notes: Number of observations: single parents pre-pandemic (22,164), single parents during the pandemic (4,665), couple parents pre-pandemic (124,655), single parents during the pandemic (31,568), people without dependent children pre-pandemic (211,867), people without dependent children during pandemic (58,600).



# **Gingerbread**

**Single parents, equal families**

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**Instagram:** [instagram.com/gingerbreadcharity](https://instagram.com/gingerbreadcharity)

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