

The Single Parent Employment Challenge:

Job loss and job seeking after the pandemic

Interim report
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In partnership with:

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.

abrdn Financial Fairness Trust has supported this project as part of its mission to contribute towards strategic change which improves financial well-being in the UK. abrdn Financial Fairness Trust 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 trust registered in Scotland (SC040877).

Acknowledgments

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Background

Throughout 2021, Gingerbread's 'Caring without Sharing' research project highlighted the unique challenges facing working single parents during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gingerbread, 2020; Gingerbread, 2021)¹.

Our new research, funded by the abrdn Financial Fairness Trust (previously known as the Standard Life Foundation), focuses on the sub-set of single parents who experienced unemployment during the pandemic. It explores the routes that led to them becoming unemployed and their attitudes to and experiences of job-seeking and back-to-work support.

On the basis of our findings, we make a number of policy recommendations geared towards easing the process of moving back into work for single parents, as well as enabling government, through its Plan for Jobs (GOV.UK, 2022)², to capitalise on single parents' skills and experiences in the workforce as we emerge from the pandemic. Our aim is to ensure that single parents are high on the political agenda, as the government seeks to 'level up' and support those who are unemployed back into work.

Methodology

The research involved two strands:

1. An analysis of quantitative data from the official Labour Force Survey (LFS) and an online (YouGov) survey of benefit recipients conducted in May-June 2021
2. Qualitative interviews with 45 unemployed single parents in the autumn of 2021

Quotations from single parents are taken verbatim from these interviews, with single parents' names being anonymised. Full details of the research are contained in the technical appendix.

¹ Gingerbread (2020), *Caring without sharing: Single parents' journey through the COVID-19 crisis – Interim Report* [Gingerbread \(2021\), *Caring without sharing: Single parents' journeys through the Covid-19 crisis \(final report\)*](#).

² GOV.UK, Plan for Jobs (accessed January 2022), [Plan for Jobs - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Becoming unemployed

Single parents have historically been less likely to be in employment and, conversely, more likely to be unemployed or inactive (of working age but not seeking work), compared with other groups – including parents in couples. Whilst single parents and coupled parents face some similar challenges in combining work and caring, these can be more acute for single parents as they juggle working and caring on their own.

For instance, single parents are not able to 'shift-parent' in the same way as coupled parents, so they are not able to share school drop offs and pick ups, or split looking after children in school holidays or when their children are unwell. Moreover, single parents need to meet childcare costs from just one wage.

Between July and September 2021, the period in which we began to conduct our qualitative interviews, 64% of single parents were in employment, compared with 83% of couple parents.

At that point in time, single parents were twice as likely to be economically inactive, compared with couple parents (30% and 15%) and were also substantially more likely to be unemployed (5%, compared with 3% of couple parents). Despite some minor fluctuations due to unemployment becoming more common for all groups in late 2020, these proportions have remained remarkably stable since the period before the COVID-19 pandemic began. Even pre-pandemic, single parents have tended to be more likely to be 'underemployed' i.e. wishing to work a greater number of hours at their current rate of pay.

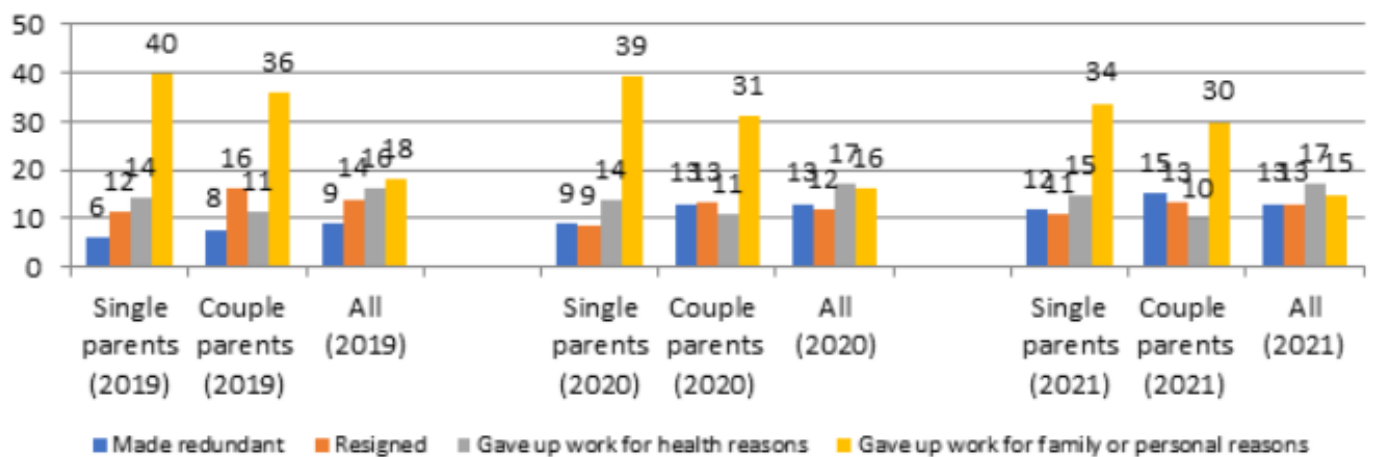
Our latest estimates show that these rates remain very similar to those seen in 2019 (15% of single parents are currently underemployed, compared with 8% of couple parents).



However, as shown in Figure 1, the reasons for single parents leaving work differ markedly from the working-age population as a whole and, to a lesser degree, those of couple parents. More than one third (34%) of single parents gave up work in 2021 because of “family or personal reasons”, compared with 30% of couple parents and 15% of the working-age population as a whole. However, it should be noted that the proportion giving up work due to family or personal reasons declined by six percentage points among both single parents and couple parents between 2019 and 2021. Single parents were more likely to give up work for health reasons than couple parents (15% of single parents, compared with 10% of couple parents).

Since 2019, the proportion of single parents who have given up their jobs because of compulsory redundancy has doubled from 6% to 12%. This reflects the experience of couple parents who saw an increase from 8% to 15%, but is not matched across the working-age population as a whole where there was an increase from 9% to 13%.

Figure 1 - Main reasons³ for leaving work for different groups, 2019, 2020 and 2021+



Source: Labour Force Survey individual data-sets, 2019, 2020 and 2021

Base: those in work who had left previous job in last three months and those unemployed who had left previous job within previous eight years

+ Data for 2019 and 2020 only include the second, third and fourth quarters of data, to enable a comparison of the impact of the pandemic. Data for 2021 only includes responses from quarters 2 and 3, as data for quarter 4 is not yet available.

³ The reasons for leaving work depicted are those selected by more than 10% of single parents, across any of the three years. Reasons not depicted were: being dismissed; taking voluntary redundancy; having a temporary job that came to an end; taking early retirement; retiring at or after State Pension Age; leaving work to pursue education or training; and leaving work for some other reason. Inevitably, some of these reasons were more common amongst the oldest or youngest sections of the overall workforce.

There is also some evidence that single parents may be experiencing longer periods of unemployment on average, a trend that is not entirely mirrored among other groups. As shown in Figure 2, unemployed single parents have been consistently more likely to be out of work for longer than couple parents and the unemployed population as a whole. However, this has become more marked across the period of the pandemic.

Whilst the proportions who were out of work for less than three months declined for all groups in 2020 and 2021, the proportion of single parents out of work for the longest periods of time increased. Amongst single parents, the proportion that had been out of work for more than a year increased from 23% in 2019 to 30% to 2021, whilst this proportion remained largely unchanged for couple parents (20% in 2019 and 2021). In other words, the tendency for single parents to experience longer periods of unemployment appears to have become more pronounced than for couple parents over the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

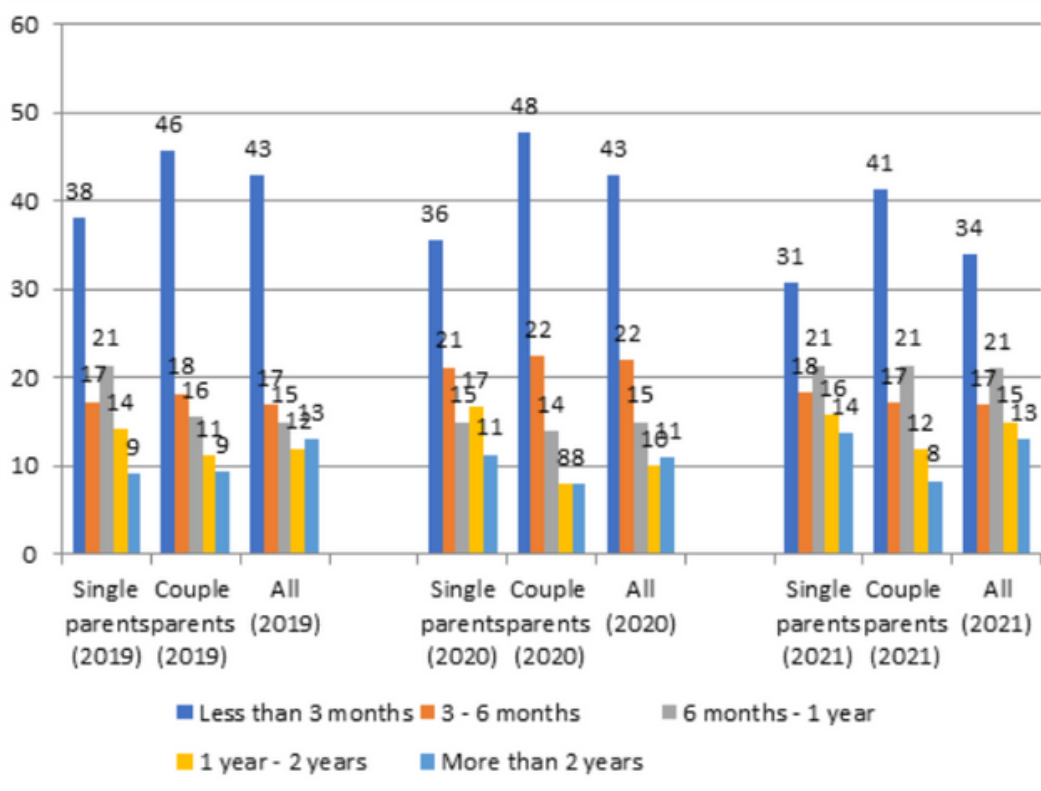


Figure 2:
Lengths of unemployment+ for different groups, 2019, 2020 and 2021++

Source: Labour Force Survey individual data-sets, 2019, 2020 and 2021

Base: those who were unemployed during quarter of data collection

+ Length of unemployment is calculated from when the respondent stated they left their last job or how long they stated they have been looking for a job.

++ Data for 2019 and 2020 only includes the second, third and fourth quarters of data, to enable a comparison of the impact of the pandemic. Data for 2021 only includes responses from quarters 2 and 3, as data for quarter 4 is not yet available.

Routes into unemployment

The interviews we conducted with single parents illuminated how these trends in unemployment were experienced in practice by single parents. Single parents described a diverse range of routes that they had taken into unemployment. One set of single parents had left their jobs due to redundancy, sometimes after a period (or periods) of furlough. This was frequently the route into unemployment for single parents who had worked in sectors which had been particularly impacted by the pandemic, such as travel and tourism, hospitality and retail.

However, a considerable number of single parents had left their jobs voluntarily. In some cases, this was prompted by reductions in hours which meant that jobs were no longer financially viable - for instance, their reduced wage would not cover childcare or travel costs. In other instances, single parents had left work voluntarily due to pressures associated with being a single parent and caring for their child or children on their own - sometimes at the point at which their relationships had ended and they became a single parent.

However, many single parents identified pressures linked to the pandemic that had encouraged them to voluntarily leave their jobs. These reasons included deteriorating mental health and the extra childcare they needed to provide to allow their children to self-isolate at short notice. This was compounded by a lower availability of formal and informal childcare.



The latter routes out of work reflect a widely-reported trend towards lower labour market participation than has resulted from any crisis in the past four decades (The Resolution Foundation, 2021)⁴. However, it should be acknowledged that many of the single parents we interviewed would be required to work as job-seeking requirements become more actively enforced by the DWP. Unless a single parent is considered not fit to work or is medically signed off, or their youngest child is under three years of age, they must actively seek work as a condition of receiving Universal Credit.

Whilst some job-seeking requirements were relaxed between March and July 2020, these are now back in place. Indeed, there is recent evidence that job-seeking requirements are being more actively enforced with a big rise in sanctions over the summer of 2021 for those who are unemployed (University of Glasgow, 2021)⁵. In January 2022, the government announced even more stringent job seeking requirements for all claimants under their 'Way to Work' campaign, with claimants expected to search more widely for work from the fourth week of their Universal Credit claim⁶ or face a sanction.

Previous Gingerbread research has shown (Gingerbread, 2018)⁷ that sanctions and the threat of sanctions do little to help single parents who are job seeking, and the financial impact could take them further away from the job market as they focused on making ends meet for their children rather than looking for work.

"They cut my hours right down and I physically couldn't afford to stay there because it was costing me more to get to work than I was being paid...I was coming out with less money than I was earning."

Alison (gave up part-time job in retail when her hours were reduced)

4. Resolution Foundation (2021) The Economy 2030 Inquiry <https://economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org/reports/begin-again/>

5 University of Glasgow (November 2021), Benefit sanction statistics November 2021

6 GOV.UK Way to Work Campaign (January 2022), [New jobs mission to get 500,000 into work - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/campaigns/way-to-work)

7 Gingerbread (2018), Unhelpful and unfair? The impact of single parent sanctions

Yes, I was furloughed and then, yes, I lost my job, I was made redundant, the shop shut down. I think the pandemic just took its toll.”

Nicola (previously worked in food shop)

“Because I’ve got four [children], they were all taking turns to isolate...I think they were only in school probably four weeks during that term, between the lot of them, because it was class bubbles getting sent home... it was just so last minute. And it was hard to work when it was like that.”

Sara (previously worked full-time in customer services for train company)

“The plan was to look for work. But obviously during the pandemic, my mental health went downhill as well, so obviously I’ve just been signed off work since then.”

Ruth (previously worked part-time as a domestic in a hospital)

Attitudes to unemployment

Those single parents who had recently become unemployed tended to view the experience negatively, especially when they had not wanted to leave their job, where losing their job had been unexpected, or when they had worked for the same organisation for a number of years.

There was a widespread view amongst interviewees that a long period of time out of the labour market should be avoided as it would make the process of re-entering the workforce hard and longer – a perception borne out by recent data (Office for National Statistics, 2021b)⁸. Those single parents who had been furloughed before losing their jobs expressed additional concern about the fact that they had already not actively worked for some time prior to becoming formally unemployed⁹.

Concerns about the impact of furlough prior to unemployment are particularly relevant to single parents, as 31% were furloughed during the first year of the pandemic, compared with 24% of couple parents (Office for National Statistics, 2021a)¹⁰.

8 Office for National Statistics (2021b), Which groups find it hardest to find a job following a period out of work?

9 It should be noted that these single parents would not be eligible to join back-to-work schemes for the longer-term unemployed, such as Restart, because periods on furlough are not counted as periods of unemployment.

10 Office for National Statistics (2021a), An overview of workers who were furloughed in the UK

Long-term unemployed (for at least a year) single parents we interviewed, described a more balanced view of the pros and cons of being out of work, with a notable lack of enthusiasm among some interviewees about re-entering the workforce. However, even this group widely acknowledged that being unemployed and consequently having less social contact was negative for their mental health, and that long-term unemployment could reduce confidence about finding work in the future - a perception endorsed by other research with single parents (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2021)¹¹

Nevertheless, their lack of enthusiasm about finding work was frequently underpinned by the perception that they would not be financially better off working, and the drawbacks would include adding to their levels of stress in terms of managing their work and caring responsibilities. Immediately after our interviews with single parents, it was announced in the Budget of October 2021 that there would be a change to the work allowance and taper rate, to increase the amount that Universal Credit (UC) claimants in work would receive.

Whilst some single parents exhibited a limited understanding of the taper rate, there was a low level of understanding overall and considerable nervousness around the issue of whether they would be better off in work and what this would mean for their benefit receipt, such as Council Tax support.

“Every £1 we make over our claim they take 60p, so then we get 40p left. But then if we are having to pay fuel expenses and more nursery fees, does it actually equal out that we are better off going to work and spending less time with our children than if we were to just stay at home?”

Annette (worked full-time as a teacher before leaving job in 2018)

“I’m very conscious as well that having now been furloughed and then been out of work, that the longer you’re out of work the harder it is to find something. So yes, I’m just keen to get back into the workforce however that may be.”

Eleanor (made redundant after being on long-term furlough from part-time role as paralegal)

“I just think through the last couple of years with everything that’s happened, I think it’s made me take a backseat a little bit and lose confidence in looking for a job and obviously worrying about finding something suitable.”

Ruth (lost part-time job at start of first lockdown)

¹¹ [Joseph Rowntree Foundation \(2021\), *Freeing low-income single parents from in-work poverty's grip*](#)

Seeking work: considerations and challenges

Single parents we interviewed were at different stages in their job-seeking journeys. Some had recently made the decision to look for work, whilst others had been actively doing so for some time. Single parents identified a common set of considerations around seeking work, with those who were further along in their journeys describing their successes and challenges in addressing these factors in practice.

Timing of job search

In general, the interviewees who had been made redundant were keen to get back into work relatively quickly, whereas those who had left voluntarily tended to want to first resolve the issues had caused them to leave.

Beyond this distinction, there was widespread evidence from our interviews that the pandemic has led to single parents delaying job searches. Reasons include the extra caring commitments required of single parents, exacerbated in some cases by limited availability of formal and informal childcare, or because of uncertainty about the future and what jobs would be available in particular sectors.

Single parents who felt working would cause them more stress, but not leave them any better off financially, expressed marked reluctance to look for work, despite the majority being technically required to do so as part of their UC Claimant Commitment (which have become more stringent since the recent introduction of the 'Way to Work' provisions)¹².

"It's just outweighing the cost, it just doesn't seem to be massively worthwhile...when I've looked before and I've made loads of calculations on jobs I've looked at and applied for, I've looked at the hourly rate and what I would have to pay out for childcare and what I would be working for. One of the times I calculated I'd be basically going to work for 25p an hour."

Hannah (previously worked as lunchtime supervisor in a school)

¹² GOV.UK New Ways to Work Campaign (January 2022), [New jobs mission to get 500,000 into work - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/new-ways-to-work)

This perception was especially prevalent amongst those looking for low-paid part-time work, to fit around the care of pre-school aged children.

Even amongst those single parents who wanted to find a job as soon as possible, many had taken the decision to delay pursuing their longer-term career goals. A number of single parents who were keen to start their own businesses were looking for 'stop-gap' jobs, to give them some more time to investigate next steps, undertake training, or wait a little longer for the post-pandemic situation to become clear. Other single parents were seeking such stop-gap jobs until their children were older, and required less from them in terms of childcare – a phenomenon widely documented in previous Gingerbread research (Gingerbread, 2020)¹³.

"I want to see where this pandemic is going to take me because I don't want to try and fit into my long-term thing and my long-term thing breaks down because of the pandemic again, then I feel like I'm back to where I was. Yes, I think everything is just up in the air at the moment."

Nicola (previously worked in food shop but interested in re-training in longer-term)

"Am I going to be in a similar situation that I'm going to have to say to a prospective employer "Look, I'm really sorry but I'm not able to come in because of childcare" again? So I think that is a worry, whether Covid is done and finished or whether it's going to keep on causing issues."

Eleanor (made redundant from part-time role as paralegal)



13 Gingerbread (2020), Untapped talent: Single parents and in-work progression – the national picture - Gingerbread

Consideration of different roles and sectors

Many single parents were seeking work that was similar to what they had been doing previously, with the stated logic that this would be the easiest and quickest way of getting back into the labour market.

Although it was acknowledged that this would be more challenging for those who had worked in sectors that had been particularly impacted over the last two years.

Separately, there was evidence of some single parents seeking work in sectors with which they were not familiar. This choice was explained on the basis that their previous sectors were not amenable to their current circumstances, for example not offering sufficient flexibility, or were recruiting less as a result of the pandemic. The former consideration was particularly pronounced among those who had been out of work since before their children were born.



"There's nothing, no. The aviation industry is finished... Obviously, I'm going back to my roots, warehousing, forklift driving, van driving, that kind of thing."

Luke (made redundant from role in aviation and now seeking roles in alternative fields)

"I think the hours are difficult and, right now, given the current climate, I think the hospitality industry is suffering quite a lot, so to try and get back into it, but either number one they are not hiring or, number two, the positions that they are hiring for just don't suit my schedule."

Jessica (lost job as bar manager during pandemic and now seeking work in other sectors)

A widespread need for flexibility

The over-riding requirement of single parents seeking new jobs was for flexibility. Specifically, they required work that fitted in with their existing commitments, primarily school or childcare pick-ups and drop-offs and school holidays. For many single parents, this meant working part-time, indeed single parents are not expected to work full-time under UC rules until their youngest child is 3 years of age (GOV.UK, 2020)¹⁴.

Some single parents described how they had built up flexibility with their previous employers over a long period and were anxious about the feasibility of acquiring it from the start with a new employer. The government has recently held a consultation on 'Making flexible working the default' but are limiting the consultation to a day one right to request flexible working (GOV.UK, 2021)¹⁵, falling short of government's commitment (Queen's Speech, 2019)¹⁶ to make flexible working the default. However, single parents emphasised that they would need to know the precise nature of the flexibility in a new job at the job advertising stage in advance of applying or accepting an offer, in order to ensure that it did not impact on their ability to carry out their caring and other responsibilities. The much more restricted day one right to request will therefore be of limited use to many single parents seeking flexible work.

When it came to applying for work, single parents felt that it was unclear from job adverts which roles were truly 'flexible'. Often they had to go some way through the recruitment process to find out what flexibility would mean in practice. Subsequently, and particularly in the case of part-time work, flexibility was often found to operate to the advantage of the employer. Interviewees described potential employers requiring them to work shifts, often during anti-social hours or at short notice, or for them to have zero hours contracts – patterns clearly at odds with single parents' caring schedules.

14 GOV.UK (2020), Universal Credit: further information for families - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

15 GOV.UK (2021), Making flexible working the default - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

16 Queen's Speech (2019), Queen's Speech December 2019 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Single parents spoke about many employers advertising part-time roles, with basic hours on offer, but with an expectation that they could be called upon to work additional hours. This lack of transparency around the flexibility on offer was also discussed in relation to jobs that were advertised on the government's 'Find a job' website, the jobs board that many single parents are referred to by their work coaches. A number of single parents spoke more positively about how the public sector advertised flexible jobs by making it clear at the advertising stage what precise flexibility different roles could entail – which had encouraged them to apply.

Single parents were often reluctant to stipulate what flexibility they required early on in the recruitment process, as they felt this would mean that they were viewed less favourably by potential employers. This reflects the finding of a survey of working mothers by the Trades Union Congress, which found that 42% would not be comfortable asking about flexibility in a job interview (TUC, 2021)¹⁷.

Flexibility was regarded as particularly important and challenging to achieve by those with pre-school aged children, who were receiving 15 free hours of childcare (the 30 hours offer is only available to those who are in work a minimum amount of hours). It was felt that it would be much easier for them to secure work or undertake training, had they been offered 30 hours free childcare at the outset whilst they were job-seeking.

"There's quite a lot of jobs, but I just don't think they are accommodating of single mums. There's one job going in [COFFEE CHAIN], and that's saying evenings and weekends. As soon as I said, "Oh, I can't do that," they didn't want to know me."

Dawn (previously worked as a part-time dental nurse, now seeking work in sectors with more flexible opportunities)

The availability of informal childcare could alleviate this problem to some extent – but this was regarded as being less readily available than before the pandemic, as discussed in the next section.

17 TUC (2021), Denied and discriminated against: The reality of flexible working for working mums

The experiences of interviewees seeking flexibility are reflected in the work of Timewise, which found that the proportion of job advertisements referencing flexible working remains low, rising from 17% at the start of 2020 to 26% in the second quarter of 2021, primarily as a result of an increase in home-working. Moreover, the availability of different types of flexibility were not evenly distributed by sector or pay level; part-time working was most common amongst jobs earning less than £20,000 p/a (19%), falling to 9% of higher-paid roles (Timewise, 2021a)¹⁸.

There was some interest among single parents in home-working, but there was a perception that few such opportunities were available in practice. This is reflected in recent research by Bright Blue (Bright Blue, 2021)¹⁹ and through the Timewise jobs index. Home-working remains more prevalent among those already established with an employer and was more commonly advertised at higher levels, appearing in just 3% of advertisements for jobs earning less than £20,000 p/a (Timewise 2021a)²⁰.

“They are quite rigid now. You would have thought with the last 18 months that companies would be a lot more flexible about homeworking and flexible working but no.”

Debbie (previously worked in business development, now seeking flexible work to fit around childcare commitments)

“And it’s quite hard, like I said, emailing or ringing up for a job or whatever, effectively almost being quite negative, like, “This is all I can do,” whereas years ago, “Yes, absolutely...I’d drop everything...It’s quite hard to show how dedicated you are when you are being so fussy.”

Caroline (previously worked as cabin crew, now seeking flexible job in local café)

“There’s a lot of part-time jobs,..and I feel if I had no children or just childcare, I would be able to get one tomorrow, but trying to find one that’s 16 or more hours within the times... It’s very hard.”

Orla (previously worked in customer services, currently seeking role that fit in with child’s funded nursery hours)

18 Timewise (2021a), Timewise Flexible Jobs Index 2021

19 Bright Blue (2021), No place like home? The benefits and challenges of home working during the pandemic

20 Timewise (2021a), Timewise Flexible Jobs Index 2021

The impact of childcare

There was an almost universal view among single parents that formal childcare was too expensive. For many interviewees, this influenced their view that they would not be gaining much financially by working, and that it would make their lives more stressful and reduce time with their children. Some single parents talked about the upfront cost of childcare as a barrier to them moving into work, including the difficulty of childcare costs being paid in arrears under UC. The perception that childcare is unaffordable had informed the decision of some single parents to only look for work for the minimum number of hours required (16 or 25 hours a week)²¹, which would fit into school or nursery hours and not require them to seek any additional childcare.

Those using part-time childcare through the 15 or 30-hour free entitlements reported a number of associated problems. There was little flexibility around the number and timing of part-time hours, with single parents having to fit prospective jobs into available childcare, rather than vice versa. Those single parents with pre-school aged children felt that the extension of their entitlement to 30 free hours would have made the process of securing a job considerably easier.

"I don't have any family nearby, so it's quite hard. I don't have anyone to look after them so I could go and do extra.

Obviously, the kids' clubs are quite expensive, so it wouldn't work out really, by the time I've put all three of them in, I wouldn't be any better off."

Kathy (single parent with three children, previously self-employed doing cleaning and ironing part-time)

Additionally, interviewees felt that it would not necessarily be easy to secure a greater number of hours of childcare in the same setting, were they successful in securing a job.



21 GOV.UK (2022), Universal Credit: further information for families - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

The view that childcare is expensive and can be difficult to access is endorsed by data from the latest Coram Childcare Survey. The Survey (Coram Family and Childcare, 2021)²² showed that childcare prices in England have risen above inflation since 2019, and that this is most markedly the case for the youngest children (4.4% increase for under 2s, 4.6% for those aged two, 3.1% for 3-4 year olds, using free entitlement). While more local authorities have enough childcare in their areas to meet demand, a trend likely to be due to a reduction in demand as a result of successive lockdowns, a lack of sufficiency remains particularly where the parent is not working full-time or there is not a free entitlement.

For parents working atypical hours, only 16% of local authorities reported sufficient childcare in all areas, 26% reported this for after-school childcare for 5-11 year olds and 13% for 12-14 year olds. Moreover, 35% of local authorities said that the number of providers permanently closing in their local area had increased in the last year, while just 16% said this had decreased.

"They've had to reduce the numbers. It's all done in bubbles and things like that now... There's a lot of parents who have lost their places, so a lot of my mum friends have been in a similar situation where they are panicking and trying to think of an alternative to afterschool care."

Debbie (no longer has option of informal childcare from relatives and concerned about shortage of formal childcare in her area)

"I had my mum to help me quite a lot, and she lived local to me so she used to come and help me loads with the childcare... But then with all the stuff going on and things like that, I didn't really want my mum to mix so that's why we had to separate; I just thought it was safer."

Emma (previously worked in administration, looking for part-time role in school hours, due to concerns about childcare)

"I was told that she would be able... to go full time just until she goes into Reception, but that's not available to me because I don't work but how I am supposed to be able to get a job when all the time it's a couple of hours here, a couple of hours there that she's going and then back home again?"

Angela (has not worked since birth of child and finding it hard to find roles that fit around her funded pre-school hours)

22 Coram Family and Childcare (2021), Childcare Survey 2021

Difficulties with the current labour market and recruitment processes

The common perception amongst single parents is that it is harder to find work now, compared with in the past. This was primarily because they had more constraints on their time than before the pandemic. In addition to limiting the number of jobs they could apply for, they felt that this meant they would not be viewed favourably by employers, due to the perception (and reality) that they would be unable to be flexible and would need to take time off when their children were ill.

Single parents felt that there were more people applying for a smaller number of jobs than had been the case in the past. Whilst job vacancies are at an all-time high, with the lowest number of unemployed people per vacancy since at least the early 1960s (Institute for Employment Studies, 2021)²³, those single parents who were seeking jobs during school hours or term-time reported that these attracted large numbers of applicants. Some single parents described how, while there were a number of jobs available, there was a lack of opportunities within their immediate geographic areas, or in which they were able to travel to work within their available hours.

It was felt that the need to apply online, the involvement of agencies and a lack of feedback on applications made the whole process of seeking work more difficult and less transparent than it had been in the past. This was particularly the case for those single parents who had not sought work for some time, and felt they did not have the necessary technical skills and knowledge to do so. Single parents reported missing the 'personal touch' they had experienced in the past when seeking work.

23 Institute for Employment Studies (2021), Labour Market Statistics, November 2021

"Things have changed so much with jobs. CV's are a difficult thing. I do a lot of things that are handwritten, and everything's more computer-based now. Everywhere I've been they've said to put a CV online but nobody's shown me how to do it."

Naomi (previously worked as nursery nurse, looking for work in a school)

"I have seen some things that are again part-time, and working from home as well that are quite good. Yes, one or two, but then you can see there's five thousand applicants or whatever."

Sophie (made redundant from project manager role in travel sector, seeking part-time home-working role)

"And now I'm starting to look for work, I've applied for so many jobs and not even had a phone call for an interview. It's unbelievable."

Rosie (previously worked as full-time cabin crew, now struggling to find part-time jobs that fit around her child's pre-school hours)

"When you're doing it online, everyone's just signing up online and you're just a number, just a name rather than a person that they've met. And they know your personality a bit more if they've met you face-to-face as well."

Emma (previously worked in administration, looking for part-time role in school hours)



Help with seeking work

Mixed experiences of JobCentre Plus (JCP)

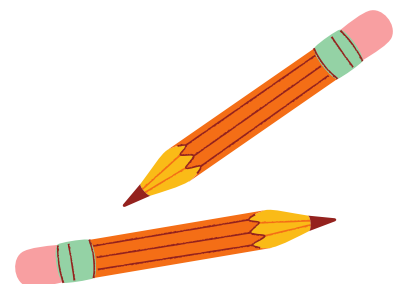
Single parents' experiences of contact with JCP were very mixed. A small number described positive relationships with named work coaches and bespoke help with job-seeking, whilst others recalled understanding about mental health problems or assistance with wider welfare issues such as housing. However, the majority of single parents were not aware whether they had a designated work coach and described a lack of support from JCP.

A number of single parents described how different work coaches had informed them of different job-seeking requirements. Some long-term unemployed single parents in particular seemed to have little contact at all with JCP and to be under very little pressure to find work, even where there was nothing obvious exempting them from job-seeking requirements. Single parents described their contact as largely a tick box exercise without any meaningful support.

There was an almost universal appetite for JCP to direct single parents towards jobs that reflected their skills and time constraints. Yet it was commonly reported that this did not happen in practice, with single parents frequently being pushed towards jobs that were not feasible given their other commitments.

"The only thing that I'd say that would help is if they are going to push this job thing and pressure into the job thing, at least pressure us with a job that we can actually take."

**(Nicola, previously worked in food shop,
seeking a part-time job in retail)**



JCP was perceived poorly by single parents in terms of its provision of advice in relation to specialist roles and sectors and there was a widespread view that it was primarily geared towards people with few qualifications who were seeking low-wage or entry-level jobs. Single parents who were better qualified and who had had well-paid jobs perceived that they were “lumped together” with those with few qualifications and put under pressure to apply for entry level roles. The pressure to apply for any job irrespective of qualification level is likely to get worse with the introduction of the ‘Way to Work’ campaign by the DWP²⁴.

There was clear evidence of an unmet need for support with finding relevant jobs and developing the skills necessary to apply for them, including presentational and technical skills. Some single parents compared the current JCP unfavourably to more targeted support they had received in the past, including Lone Parent Advisers that were in place for those who had been on Income Support.

There was clear evidence of a desire for support with working out the financial implications of accepting particular roles, in the event that single parents were successful in their applications. In addition, those single parents who were trying to find work, but not yet required to because their youngest children were not yet three, would have welcomed more support from JCP. In particular, these single parents referenced wanting support with training to improve their skills.²⁵

“Because I was a single parent 20 years ago as well, There were individual parent caseworkers who just worked with lone parents and had understanding and empathy and more knowledge about the situation, whereas I think it’s whoever lands on whoever’s desk, that you get this customer regardless of it being disability or lone parent specialist advisors. They don’t seem to get how hard it is...They don’t understand the barriers to work that lone parents face.”

Debbie (previously worked in business development, seeking flexible role to fit around childcare commitments)

24 GOV.UK Way to Work Campaign (January 2022) New jobs mission to get 500,000 into work - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

25 In August 2017, the then Welfare Reform Minister agreed at a meeting with Gingerbread and Cross Party Peers that, for lead carers of children aged 2-4 years old, there should be greater acceptance and encouragement for them to participate in training than the normal eight weeks. These parents can have their work search and availability to work turned off for a period of up to one year. Whilst benefit rights organisations include this detail in their handbooks, the DWP have not published the detail of this flexibility to parents.

Finally, there was a common view that JCP was less personable than it had been in the past, with more online contact and less consistent personal contact. This was partly viewed as a result of the pandemic, but also the direction in which things were moving more generally – reflecting perceptions in relation to the recruitment process discussed above.

“He’s really very nice. He’s really quite helpful...He put me onto a few relevant people that help with things to do with your housing and your rent.”

Ruth (not currently required to job-see because of poor mental health)

“We get by on the universal credit...That is my safety net now. And you want to take my safety net away but you are not telling me if I’ve got another safety net or if I’m just going to be struggling...What if I can’t feed my children because I’ve got to pay all this child care out?... That’s where I’m struggling at the moment. I’m not getting them answered.”

Orla (previously worked in customer services, seeking role that fits around child’s funded nursery hours)



Quantifying experiences of JCP support

Analysis of a quantitative online survey of benefit recipients undertaken in May-June 2021 as part of the Welfare at a Social Distance project²⁶, allows us to quantify some of the experiences of JCP support described by the single parents we interviewed. When considering the support they had received from JCP work coaches²⁷ or from other individuals to whom JCP had referred them in the past six months, single parents expressed mixed views, and were sometimes significantly less positive than couple parents. Around six in ten single parents rated the support received as being relevant and personalised to their situation, whilst fewer than half found the contact useful in helping them to prepare for or look for work.

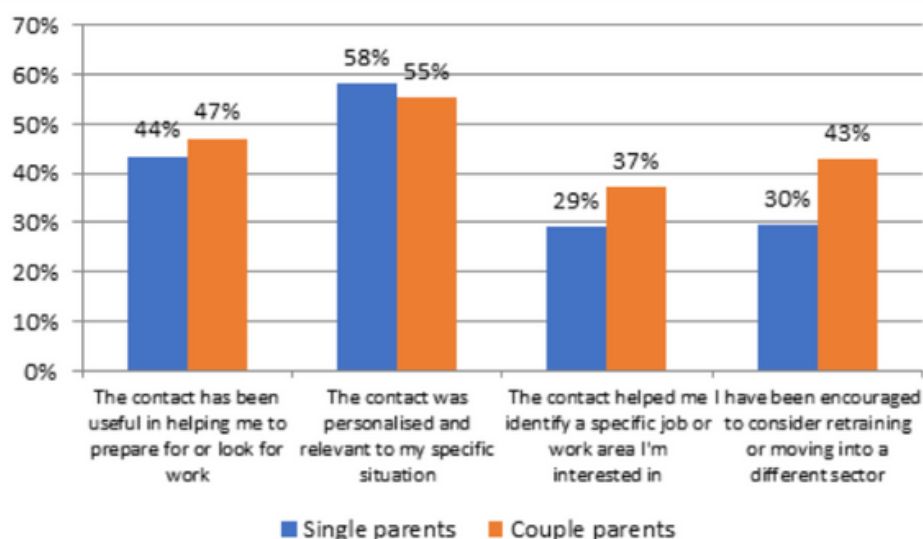
Single parents were less likely than couple parents to report that the contact helped them identify a specific job or work area, with 29% indicating this had happened, compared with 37% of couple parents. Single parents were also less likely than couple parents to feel that they had been encouraged to consider re-training or moving into a different sector (just 30% reported this, compared with 43% of couple parents).

Figure 3:

Experiences of JCP support in the past six months, by parental status

Source: Welfare at a Social Distance claimant survey, wave 2

Base: Those who had received any advice or support from an employment adviser or work coach as part of their benefit claim (whether via JCP or someone that JCP referred them to) in the past six months (single parents =161; couple parents=297).



²⁶ Welfare at a Social Distance is a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of UK Research and Innovation's Rapid Response to COVID-19. Further details are available at: <https://www.distantwelfare.co.uk/the-research>

²⁷ Survey participants were asked about JCP employment advisers or work coaches, as the term "work coach" is not universally understood.

The government’s plans announced in January 2022²⁸ are underpinned by a pressure on job seekers to move into new sectors. In order to move into these new sectors, including those where there are high vacancies, it will be important for JCP to better support single parents to retrain. This must include making single parents with pre-school aged children aware that they can train for up to a year and have their job seeking requirements switched off during that period.

Parents, and single parents in particular, were more negative than non-parents about how support provided by JCP took into account their individual circumstances. As shown in Figure 4, parents were less likely than non-parents to report that they had told JCP all the things that affected whether they could find and keep work, with single parents being the least likely to feel they had done this.

Similarly, parents were less likely than non-parents to feel that work coaches took these elements into account. This reflects the view prevalent among the single parents we interviewed that even where they had set out their specific constraints these were not necessarily taken into account in the recommended jobs and areas of work put forward to them by their work coach.

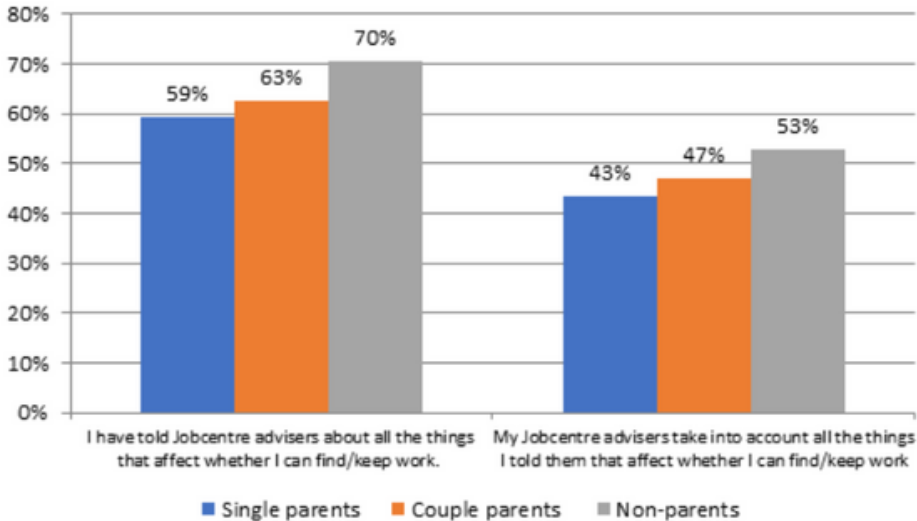


Figure 4:
Views about JCP work coaches among those who had received support in the past six months, by parental status

Source: Welfare at a Social Distance claimant survey, wave 2

Base: Those who had received any advice or support from an employment adviser or work coach as part of their benefit claim (whether via JCP or someone that JCP referred them to) or had received any other support from them in the past six months (single parents =333; couple parents =601; not a parent=2,125).

28 GOV.UK New Ways to Work Campaign (January 2022) New jobs mission to get 500,000 into work - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Those who had received support from a work coach in the past six months identified the different channels through which they had received this support, and separately ranked these channels in terms of their preferred approaches. Single parents were more likely than couple parents to have received support online through the UC journal or on the phone, and were less likely to have utilised other technological approaches including video-conferencing, internet messaging or direct messaging.

They were also more likely to express a preference for receiving support on the phone, with 39% selecting this as their first preference compared with just 22% of couple parents. This reflects the appetite for more one-to one and immediate support we found among the single parents we interviewed, and their lack of enthusiasm for less personal technological alternatives. The lack of enthusiasm overall regarding face-to-face support may at least partly reflect the stage of Covid vaccine rollout in the early summer of 2021, with younger age groups yet to be vaccinated.

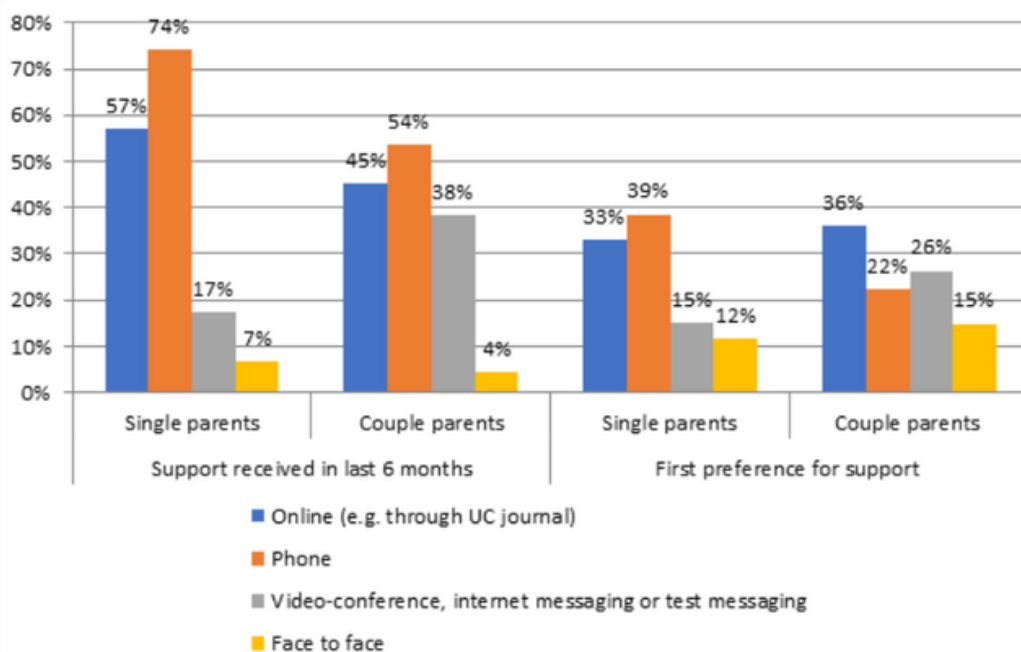


Figure 5:
Modes of support provided by JCP over past six months and first preferences for support, by parental status

Source: Welfare at a Social Distance claimant survey, wave 2

Base: Those who had received any advice or support from an employment adviser or work coach as part of their benefit claim (whether via JCP or someone that JCP referred them to) in the past six months (single parents=161; couple parents=297).

Limited but favourable experiences of back-to-work schemes

Amongst the 45 single parents we interviewed, just six had been referred to back-to-work programmes. Four were referred to Job Entry Targeted Support (JETS) for those who have been out of work for at least three months, and two were referred to Restart which provides enhanced support for those who have been out of work for at least a year.

Experiences of these programmes were relatively positive, with single parents comparing them favourably to JCP in terms of the bespoke individual support offered. This included help with CVs, interview practice, signposting to other agencies and locating jobs that fitted in with single parents' requirements. Amongst those single parents who had not been referred to these schemes, there was little awareness of their existence. And yet, our interviews with single parents illustrate clear evidence of demand for such types of support.

"I've only been with them for two weeks. Now, in two weeks I had a potential job placement. So for 18 months I've done exactly the same thing but done nothing and had no communication. Yes, it feels forced but maybe that's what I needed."

Anne-Marie (lost job as café assistant at start of first Lockdown, recently joined RESTART programme)

"When you say "comparing her to a Work Coach" the Department for Work and Pensions provide nothing at all like that. I wouldn't say they're coaching, they're not coaching me at all."

Henry (participated in JETS)

Recommendations

Our interim report recommendations are targeted to those areas where immediate action would help single parents move into work in the aftermath of the pandemic. Our final report, which will be published in September 2022, will contain longer-term recommendations for government, policy-makers and employers.

1. Support to get back to work

Single parents are unclear about what support is on offer and how back to work support can be tailored to their needs, with many 'parked' on an out of work benefit with little help to get back to work. Single parents need more consistent, focused and bespoke support to help them move into work including setting out the rights as well as the responsibilities for these parents.

- There should be written guidance for all single parents on UC about the available back to work support. This should include the flexibilities that are open to them, opportunities for career advice and retraining, specialist provision and back to work programmes, better off in work calculations and help with childcare when they move into work. This could be incorporated into the current GOV.UK guidance for 'Universal Credit: further information for families'
- Single parents should be identified in guidance as a priority group in the Job Entry Targeted Support (JETS) and Restart back to work programmes. Reminders should appear in work journals when single parents become eligible for schemes, so they can discuss moving onto them with their work coaches.
- The 'Way to Work' campaign must reflect the needs of single parents including the introduction of specialist Single Parent advisers.



2. Support to retrain

Many thousands of single parents have worked in sectors that have been severely impacted by the pandemic, jobs that will not exist to the same extent. In addition single parents with pre-school aged children are known to have lower qualifications and to be furthest from the job market. It is important that retraining into new sectors and broader training is supported and encouraged by JCP.

- There should be bespoke support for single parents who wish to move into new sectors including those impacted by the 'Way to Work' campaign. Single parents should receive early referral to careers advice – especially for those who need to change their area of work, to receive support about their transferrable skills. Single parents should be informed about available training and work experience and it should be recorded in their UC journal.
- There should be targeted support for single parents with pre-school aged children who are able to train for up to year so that they can make the most of gaining new skills when their children are young. Single parents with pre-school aged children must be alerted to this flexibility to train in their UC journal.



3. Clearer better off in work calculations

Single parents can be fearful that they will not be better off moving into work and this can be a barrier to them accepting a job or indeed applying for roles. Whilst the Budget in November 2021 included a more generous work allowance and taper rate within UC, single parents find it hard to access a clear back to work calculation including benefits that they will lose if they were to move into work. Single parents need a clearer understanding of how much they will earn if they accept a job offer.

- Specialist single parent advisers in JCP should provide clear 'better off in work' calculations to single parents, specifying the amount they will receive, were they to take a particular job, the level of childcare support they will receive and the benefits they will lose. Single parents should be advised that they can check their 'better off' calculation with an outside organisation, before being expected to accept a job offer. The UC journal should record details of the 'better off in work' calculation.
- The current GOV.UK guidance for 'Universal Credit: further information for families' should include an explanation of the increased work allowance and taper rate to set out to parents what this would mean, were they to move into work

4. Flexible working should be opened up

There are still far too few flexible jobs open to single parents especially part-time jobs and jobs during school hours. Whilst we await progression of the Employment Bill, to advertise jobs as flexible by default, and the results of the consultation on a day one right to request flexible working, interim action is needed.

- We urge the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the Flexible Working Task Force to work together to develop job sharing and term time working as part of the flexible working menu in adapting to new ways of working after the pandemic.
- The DWP should develop their 'find a job site' to make it much clearer which jobs are part-time and in school hours. This should include developing the website to include a search for parents looking for 16 or 25 hours of work.



5. Childcare should be more available and affordable for single parents

- The cost and availability of childcare was a major barrier for single parents moving into work. Single parents find meeting the upfront costs of childcare particularly challenging - with a current legal case²⁹ challenging the payment of childcare costs in arrears. Childcare costs were particularly difficult for those parents with pre-school aged children. Whilst we await the results of the legal case we would suggest a number of interim measures.
- The government should introduce a national childcare non repayable grant, similar to the scheme in Northern Ireland, to support low-income parents entering work, to meet the upfront costs and first months' childcare fees.
- The government should extend the eligibility for the free 30 hour childcare provision (children aged three and four) to job seekers.



Next steps

We plan to re-interview as many of the 45 single parents as possible in May 2022, to document the latter stages of their job-seeking journeys and the successes and challenges they experienced as the UK emerges from the pandemic. This together with the next stage of the quantitative analysis, will enable us to continue to campaign for policies that are reflective of the needs and circumstances of single parents in the UK.

²⁹ Further details on this case are available at <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/3512982-Gingerbread-Rule-15-Submissions.pdf>

Technical appendix

We undertook retrospective qualitative interviews with 45 unemployed single parents in England and Wales who were on job-seeking benefits (43 were on Universal Credit). Our sample was designed to ensure diversity on the characteristics known to be associated with single parents' experiences of unemployment and job-seeking.

In order to access existing data in relation to work trajectories, we contacted all of the single parents who had participated in our previous 'Caring without Sharing' research project, to ascertain whether any who were currently unemployed and seeking work would like to participate in our new project. Six single parents from 'Caring without Sharing' had lost their jobs during the pandemic and agreed to participate in the new project.

A sampling company, Criteria Fieldwork Ltd, was employed to recruit the remaining 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, with at least four single parents being drawn from each region.



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 September or October 2021, by one of a team of two researchers. Interviews typically took between 25 minutes on average.

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 the spring of 2022.

Baseline interviews were transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach, using the Taguette software package (Rampin et al, 2020)³⁰. Codes and themes were developed iteratively around the over-riding themes on which the interviews focused: routes into unemployment, aspirations for future work, experiences of job-seeking, availability and experiences of JobCentre Plus and other support.

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

	Characteristic	Attribute	Number of single parents interviewed
Demographic characteristics	Sex	Male	4
		Female	41
	Ethnicity	White	34
		BME	11
	Age of youngest child	Pre-school	17
		Primary	20
		Secondary	8
	Highest educational qualification	Level 2	23
		Level 3	12
Level 4		10	
Work-related characteristics	Working pattern in last job	Full-time	19
		Part-time	26
	Most recent employment status	Employee	40
		Self-employed	5
	Length of unemployment	Less than 3 months	6
		Between 3 months and one year	19
		More than one year	20
	Work history prior to unemployment	In work	31
		On long-term furlough	14
	Sector ³¹	Retail	7
Hospitality		6	
Travel and tourism		5	
Other		27	

³⁰ Taguette (Version 0.9.2). Zenodo (2021), 30 Taguette: open-source qualitative data analysis | Zenodo

³¹ Whilst we had insufficient time in our interviews to collect the information necessary to undertake coding by occupational group and industry, we asked the sampling company to ensure that we interviewed at least five single parents in the main industries known to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic – retail, hospitality and travel and tourism

Quantitative analysis of Labour Force Survey

Data from the last three years of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) (individual-level data-sets) have been used to understand how employment trends have changed before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis focuses on working-age individuals (aged 16-64 years).

Usually, all first interviews in the LFS are conducted face-to-face. However, all face-to-face interviewing was suspended at the start of the pandemic and switched to telephone-only interviewing. Unfortunately, this led to a fall in the response rate which necessitated increasing the number of people selected for interview.

In turn, this increase in sample size and the move to telephone interviews introduced increased non-response bias into the survey. Specifically, this was evident in a change in the housing tenure of the Household Reference Person (HRP), with an oversampling of households in which the resident owned the property outright and a lower proportion of those in rented accommodation.

To try and mitigate this source of bias, the weights have been updated to include housing tenure.

Though this provides a partial solution, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) advises that levels and changes in levels should be assessed with caution (Office for National Statistics, 2020).



Quantitative analysis of Welfare at a Social Distance data

Data from the second wave of a longitudinal survey of benefit claimants were analysed to explore single parents' attitudes to and experiences of work coaches and JobCentre Plus and how these compared to those of couple parents and the wider population.

This was a large (N=8k) survey of working-age benefit claimants, split between 'new' claimants since the COVID-19 pandemic started in the UK and 'existing' claimants (who were claiming before this). The focus was on the benefits that provide income to people who lose their job or whose earnings reduce, namely Universal Credit (UC), Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and Tax Credits (TCs).

The first claimant survey wave ran between May and June 2020 and the second wave (analysed here) ran between May and June 2021. A third wave is planned for early 2022.

Weights were used in the analysis to ensure that the results are broadly representative of the UK population. Weights are based on the existing/new claimant split, age, gender, region, education and benefit type, from a large, nationally representative subset of the screening data (N=16k).



The claimant survey uses the YouGov platform – which not only has an established online panel that enables rapid data collection during lockdown(s), but is also the largest online panel in the UK. There are two limitations to the representativeness of weighted YouGov surveys:

- While being broadly representative of the population, the YouGov panel inevitably under-represents those with weaker written English language skills (and therefore under-represents first-generation migrants) and those who struggle to access the internet via a computer/smartphone.
- Weighting ensures representative results where the weighting variables fully capture those factors that influence both participation in the survey and the phenomenon under investigation. To the extent that they fail to do this, biases can result.

It is worth noting that even 'gold standard' social research surveys – those using random samples of the population, with high response rates – must contend with threats to representativeness, as non-respondents may differ from respondents.

Further information on the methodology employed in the longitudinal claimant survey will be available from the UK Data Archive (<https://www.data-archive.ac.uk/>) in due course.



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