

# The Invisible Family: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on single parents living in London

**Interim report**  
**April 2022**

# About Gingerbread

We are 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 have 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 will not 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.

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed, exacerbated, and solidified deeply entrenched health and socio-economic inequalities, leaving many individuals and groups even more vulnerable now than they were before the pandemic began. Single parents are no exception and the last two years have presented particular challenges for single parents living in London – especially around employment, childcare, and mental health.

To track the impact of policy change and to gain a better understanding of how single parent experiences evolved throughout the pandemic, Gingerbread interviewed 32 single parents across London in November 2020 and February 2022. We particularly wanted to explore the impact the pandemic would have on single parent employment in London, building on previous research we have conducted into the pre-pandemic experiences of single parents.

As uncovered through Gingerbread's nationally focussed research over the same period, single parents collectively feel that they are an afterthought in policy making and government decisions. Or, as one of our interviewees succinctly put it, "we are the invisible family".

Consequently, we have identified the following themes which we will explore further with stakeholders to develop policy recommendations as part of a final report, due for publication later in the summer:

1. Employment
2. Childcare
3. Family wellbeing and mental health

## About this research

Gingerbread interviewed 15 single parents in November 2020 and 27 in February 2022.<sup>1</sup> Interviewees came from 18 different London boroughs, and included 7 single fathers, parents from a range of ethnic groups, as well as disabled parents and parents of disabled children. Our sample reflects the diversity in working experiences for single parents amid the Covid-19 pandemic, and the single parents we spoke with had a range of qualifications, sector experience, childcare requirements, working patterns (such as flexible working and home working) and key worker status.

This longitudinal approach allowed Gingerbread to capture a snapshot of the lived experiences of single parents at various times during the pandemic, and it enabled us to explore the impact over time between reactive policy and those for whom it is introduced to help.

To map the scale of the impact of the pandemic on single parents, this research combines the qualitative research with a quantitative analysis of the government's Labour Force Survey comparing the experiences of single and couple parents, both in London and nationally, from the quarter before the start of the pandemic (October-December 2019) to the final quarter of 2021 (October-December).



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<sup>1</sup> We interviewed 15 single parents in November 2020. The intention was to re-interview the same group in the second wave, however this was only possible for 10 of the original participants. To match the demographic sample identified in 2020, an additional 17 interviewees were recruited, meaning that 27 single parents were interviewed in February 2022.

# 1. Employment

In line with the national picture, our analysis has found that the work trajectories of single parents in London through the first stages of the pandemic were different to those experienced by couple parents.<sup>2</sup> Single parents were more likely to use the Job Retention Scheme (furlough) and experienced greater upheaval because of the need to home school their children on their own during the first and third lockdowns, as well as isolating with them at short notice where there were positive cases in school bubbles.<sup>3</sup>

While the overall level of single parent unemployment has not risen as much as had been feared once furlough came to an end in autumn 2021, single parents who are unemployed are now remaining out of work for longer than they were pre-pandemic and there has also been a drop in labour market participation.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is important that single parents have access to focused support in jobcentres and are given the opportunity to use their skills and/or retrain to get back into work.

Having access to local jobs is also key. The average commute for a Londoner is one and a half hours – the majority travel by public transport (particularly the Tube).<sup>5</sup> This is unique when compared to the experiences of working single parents living outside of London. The commute has a significant impact on single parents' time and finances as they cannot share the financial and time pressures with a partner. For these reasons, the commute often determines single parent employment opportunities. In the aftermath of the pandemic, single parents we spoke with reported being both reluctant and fearful about undertaking a long commute for work, reinforcing the need for flexible and local jobs across the London boroughs.

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<sup>2</sup> Gingerbread (2021), Caring Without Sharing: single parents' journeys through the COVID-19 pandemic – final report. <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/publications-index/caring-without-sharing-final-report/>.

<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics (2021), An overview of workers who were furloughed in the UK. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/effectsoffurloughonukworkersoctober2021>.

<sup>4</sup> Gingerbread (2022), Interim report: The Single Parent Employment Challenge – job loss and job seeking after the pandemic. <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/publications-index/interim-report-the-single-parent-employment-challenge-job-loss-and-job-seeking-after-the-pandemic/>.

<sup>5</sup> London Work, Travel, Convene Coalition (2021), All Change: Transport & Commuting. <https://www.aon.com/unitedkingdom/wtc-london/transport.aspx>.

## Sectors and job vacancies

Ahead of the pandemic, single parents in London were more likely than couple parents to work in health and social work (27 percent and 11 percent respectively), education (16 percent and 12 percent), and administration and support services (11 percent and 6 percent).<sup>6</sup> While a number of these differences appear to be explained by gender rather than parental status, comparing single mothers with couple mothers indicates that this is not the case in all instances. Most markedly, 27 percent of single mothers in London worked in health and social work in 2019, compared with 18 percent of couple mothers.<sup>7</sup> Concerningly, the single parents we spoke with who worked in these industries were more likely to describe a lack of understanding from their employer about the specific pressures they faced as single parents.

Interestingly, the distribution of single parents' jobs across different industries in the capital remained similar in 2021 compared to 2019. However, the proportions of single parents working in health and social care and in administration and support services fell by 6 percentage points and 2 percentage points respectively – with the former decline not being matched by the experiences of couple parents.

To better understand the potential challenges for single parents finding work, we also assessed the numbers of job vacancies, rather than just the number of industry jobs overall. Job vacancies are currently at an all-time high, with the lowest number of unemployed people per vacancy since at least the early 1960s.<sup>8</sup> Reflecting this trend, data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) shows that the number of vacancies per one hundred employee jobs nationally increased from 2.6 to 4.1 between the fourth quarter of 2019 and the fourth quarter of 2021 (unfortunately data is not currently available on a regional basis).

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6 ONS (2021), Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) household datasets, combined across 2019 and 2021

7 Ibid.

8 Institute for Employment Studies (2021), Briefing Note: Labour Market Statistics, November 2021. <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/labour-market-statistics-november-2021>

In the year prior to the start of the pandemic, 53 percent of single parents in London had jobs in the lowest four occupational groups, compared with 25 percent of couple parents in London – this compares with 49 and 28 percent nationally. Although women were slightly more likely to be in the lowest occupational groupings compared with men, the primary factor explaining these differences appears to be parental status and not gender. In 2019, 56 percent of single mothers and 30 percent of single fathers in London were employed in the lowest four occupational groups, compared with 27 percent of couple mothers and 23 percent of couple fathers. Thus, in studies analysing family types, it is useful to consider gender and parental status as separate identities or analytical frameworks.

When we compared the situation in 2019 with that in 2021, many patterns remain in spite of the pandemic, with single parents working in London more likely to have lower skilled jobs, compared with couple parents. Interestingly, the proportion of single parents in London in the lowest four occupational groups has declined by 8 percentage points since 2019, compared with a 4-percentage point reduction for couple parents. In the UK, both groups have experienced a comparable decline (two percentage points each). This change for single parents appears to be driven by an increase in the proportion working in administrative and secretarial occupations and a decline in those working in care, leisure, and other service occupations. As had been suspected might be an effect, it appears that the pandemic has had some influence over the occupations in which single parents in London are working in.



## Skills and training

Unemployment and economic activity alone can be a blunt measure when it comes to assessing the challenges single parents face in the job market. Gingerbread's previous research looking at single parents living in London has already shown that single mothers are much more likely than couple mothers to be over-qualified for the job they do.<sup>9</sup> Our analysis of LFS data shows that this remains the case. In other words, single parents remain persistently underemployed.

Our latest analysis shows that 18 percent of single parents in London with a qualification at Level 4 or above (the highest level) have a job in the four lowest occupational groups, compared with 11 percent of couple parents. Similarly, 58 percent of single parents with a qualification at Level 2 have a job in the four lowest occupational groups, compared with 38 percent of couple parents. This finding is replicated by the qualitative interviews in 2020 and 2022, as many single mothers with Level 4 qualifications (degree and above) were working in roles where a degree was not a requirement. More work is needed to match single parents with jobs that reflect their qualifications and for employers and jobcentres to provide tailored training opportunities to allow single parents to progress at work or to get back into work.



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<sup>9</sup> Gingerbread (2021), Caring Without Sharing.



## Flexible work

Previous Gingerbread research has highlighted how single parents need more flexibility at work to manage their childcare responsibilities.<sup>10</sup> However, prior to the start of the pandemic, our analysis has found just 15 percent of single parents in London reported having flexible working arrangements.<sup>11</sup> These rates were marginally lower than those seen for couple parents (17 percent).

Encouragingly, the proportion of single parents in London with flexible working arrangements increased by 6 percentage points between the final quarter of 2019 and the final quarter of 2021. But our interviews with single parents uncovered ongoing misunderstandings amongst some employers about exactly what encompasses flexible working, and it is worth emphasising that homeworking does not necessarily equate to a flexible working arrangement. Many interviewees reported that their employers expected workers to work the same set hours at home and increased their workload. This meant that many single parents had no choice but to work around home-schooling during lockdowns, which proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, many single parents were grateful to be able to build their hours around at-home responsibilities. Nevertheless, this newfound flexibility came at a cost – with many single parents working around the clock to meet domestic and working requirements.

**“I was told by my employer that if I take two hours out to home school, I have to make that up in the evening, but I can only do what I can do....” – Chelsea (November 2020)**



<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The LFS asks about six flexible work measures: flexitime, annualised hours, a term-time arrangement, a job share, a nine-day fortnight, and a four-and-a-half-day week.



Flexitime is the most common type of actual flexible working arrangement used by single parents and couple parents alike. There has been a small increase in its use for both groups over the past two years (4 percent and 2 percent respectively). Our analysis found that annualised hours and term-time working are the only other types of flexible working arrangement regularly used by one parent families in London.

The latest Timewise Flexible Jobs Index found that 22 percent of jobs in London were advertised as flexible in the second quarter of 2021.<sup>12</sup> This compares with 20 percent of London-based jobs in 2020 and 14 percent in 2019. Concerningly though, fewer jobs are being advertised as part-time, engendering greater competition, and deterring prospective applicants from asking about part-time working. Consequently, Timewise has concluded that, “there is a risk that the gap between opportunities for location-based flex and time-based flex is getting bigger. Options are narrowing for those who cannot work a full week.”<sup>13</sup> Some parents we interviewed reported having to take jobs a long way from home or having to accept a job with less pay than they were used to in order to fulfil their need for flexibility.

Our analysis has found that part-time working among single parents in London has declined by three percentage points since the period before the onset of the pandemic. This decline appeared even more dramatic in the summer of 2021, but it has been rectified to some extent in the final two quarters of 2021. Such a change is not replicated for single parents at the UK level, or for couple parents either locally or nationally. It might suggest that more single parents in part-time work have lost or left their jobs in London, or that single parents are increasingly shifting from part-time towards full-time work in the capital.

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12 Timewise (2021a), The Timewise Flexible Jobs Index 2021: An annual index of the proportion of UK jobs advertised with flexible working options. <https://timewise.co.uk/article/flexible-jobs-index/#:~:text=KEY%20FINDINGS&text=The%20proportion%20of%20jobs%20offering,home%2Dworking%20during%20the%20pandemic>.

NB, Timewise utilises a broader definition of flexible working – encapsulating part-time working and homeworking - alongside the various types of flexible working arrangements covered by the LFS.

13 Timewise (2021b), Voices from the pandemic: part time workers and job seekers. <https://timewise.co.uk/article/voices-from-the-pandemic-part-time-workers-and-job-seekers/>

## Support from employer

Having a supportive employer was a strong predictor of single parents in London successfully working through the pandemic. Key to this was an understanding from employers that single parents were under immense pressure to perform a multitude of roles – effectively acting as sole earner, teacher, parent, and playmate. Our interviews show some positive examples of how employers were both understanding and showed compassion to their single parent employees. But there were also some stark examples of employers doing the opposite. In the case of the latter, it was not usually down to ill intent by employers, but rather a lack of consideration for the added pressures facing their single parent staff. The perception amongst interviewees was that this was particularly prominent among employers who did not have children themselves.

Consequently, single parents who were working, often had to remind their employers of the stress they were under in order to explicate any decline in output. However, even when they did, the mechanisms put in place were not always helpful.

**“At the beginning it was really daunting because it was like, oh my god, this is work – meanwhile, I am late to meetings due to looking after my child, and then the meeting would take place on a bedroom floor amidst a load of toys. I was the only single parent in my team. It was the most stressful time of my life ever. I had to juggle this human being that has needs 24/7 and my work... You might have a bunch of managers who are families of a few people, they have support, there is a husband and wife at home. They cannot understand it [being a single parent] because they are not in it. There was nothing out there. We are the invisible family.” - Nikki (November 2020)**

**“The management team did not have any children and you had other staff members that had children, but they were adults, so it didn't affect them. So, they were not very understanding at the beginning [of] the fact that I was doing full-time.”  
– Louise (November 2020)**



Conversely, where support was offered, parents expressed immense gratitude to their employers for allowing them to focus on home-schooling over work as needed. It would often be a case of taking simple, practical steps to help parents get by, such as setting realistic work goals and accepting that output may fall during home-schooling; allowing parents to work around childcare/teaching arrangements; ensuring staff had the required equipment/help to be able to work from home effectively; granting furlough requests and allowing parents to take time off while they were sick or struggling.

But, in all these examples, the onus was on the single parent rather than on the employer. Of the 32 parents that we spoke with, not one mentioned that their employer had extra support or policies in place to help single parents throughout the pandemic (or indeed before). Two parents had the option of heavily subsidised childcare and a different two had parent support networks at their company. However, both options were available for couple and single parents, and this putting together under the same grouping often heightened feelings of loneliness and isolation at work – not all their colleagues could understand their situation as single parents.

### **Questions for further exploration:**

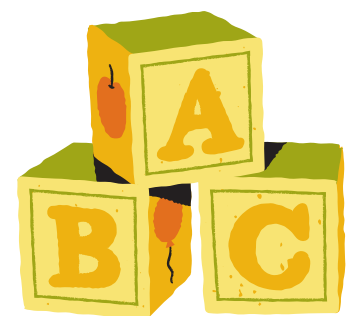
- 1. How can employment support be better tailored and extended to single parents in London who are out of work?**
- 2. What ways can single parents who need to retrain as a result of the pandemic be better supported through local opportunities, for example the Mayor's Academies Programme?**
- 3. What more can and should be done to ensure employers in London are able to offer supportive and flexible employment to allow single parents to stay in and progress at work while balancing their unique caring responsibilities?**
- 4. How can employment support providers, statutory services (e.g., jobcentres), local government and employers be engaged more to encourage flexible working and more opportunities within boroughs which could particularly benefit single parents?**

## 2. Childcare

Single parents are heavily reliant on childcare to be able to work and childcare is simultaneously the biggest enabler and barrier to single parents being able to work in the way they would like. Yet, the costs of formal childcare have far outstripped wages over the last two decades. The latest Coram Childcare Survey shows starkly that it has become more difficult to source and afford childcare in London over the last two years.<sup>14</sup> For single parents particularly, childcare prices are not sustainable, especially as wider costs of living are rising at the highest rate in decades.

In the last two years, there has been a decline in the proportion of local authorities in England reporting that they have enough childcare to meet demand for pre-school children. There has also been a reduction in the proportion of local areas with enough childcare (childcare sufficiency) for disabled children and parents working full time, while provision for parents working atypical hours and families living in rural areas has increased.

So far this year, between 11 and 31 percent of local authorities have reported reductions in the availability of various aspects of childcare. For example, 31 percent of local authorities reported a reduction in the number of wraparound childcare places for school age children.<sup>15</sup> Around half of local authorities further described an increase in charges and prices to parents, as well as reduced opening hours and a reduced number of staff, which brings into question the sustainability of post-pandemic childcare settings across the country. This is particularly the case in inner London where the cost of childcare per week for those under two is higher than any other region in England.<sup>16</sup>



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<sup>14</sup> Coram Family and Childcare (2022), Coram Family and Childcare Survey 2022. <https://www.coram.org.uk/resource/coram-family-and-childcare-survey-2022>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

The Understanding Society Covid-19 study has also revealed that in 2021, Londoners who did not live with a partner were more likely (12 percent) to be find their financial position “quite or very difficult” in comparison to those who live with a partner (3 percent). Having to pay for childcare from one income was a major driver of this financial precariousness.<sup>17</sup>

Unsurprisingly then, most parents we interviewed commented on just how expensive childcare is – with some acknowledging it would be more affordable and their finances would stretch further if they did not live in London. The pandemic though added a new problem into the mix: it was not just affordability that was a major barrier to care, but accessibility. It was near on impossible to find childcare if a parent or their child had Covid-19. This is still a problem in 2022 because single parents have no back-up if their child has to stay off school or nursery because they have tested positive with Covid and support schemes for those on very low incomes, such as the Test and Trace Support Payment, have now ended.

## Support Bubbles

The UK Government allowed single adult households to “bubble” with someone from outside of their household in June 2020. This policy alleviated some of the practical concerns single parents faced during the initial stages of the pandemic, such as shopping for food, household tasks, and formal and informal childcare, all of which helped reduce stress levels and improved the mental health of both parent and child.



**“Support bubbles were a lifeline for me and my daughter.”  
– Katherine (February 2022)**

<sup>17</sup> University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research (2021), Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study, 2020-2021.



Not all single parents were able to form a support bubble though. For example, if they lived a long distance from any family or friends or if they were worried about virus transmission (especially if they or their child were shielding). In some cases, not being able to form a support bubble increased feelings of loneliness and had a negative impact on mental health. It also of course reduced childcare options available to the parent.

The interviews revealed that Covid-19 restrictions, and differing feelings around how closely the restrictions needed to be followed, often forced changes to pre-agreed care arrangements with their child or children's other parent. Some parents used Covid-19 restrictions as a reason their child could not see their other parent, while other parents used Covid-19 restrictions as a way not to see their child and/or pay child maintenance. This had a negative impact on the wellbeing of both the parent with majority care and their child or children. It added to the general feelings of stress and anxiety described by single parents. This was especially so when child maintenance payments were stopped, as this sudden sole monetary responsibility was another burden to bear.

**“My ex, the father of my son, is quite nasty to me about my feelings about Covid, and my expectations for him in terms of contact time and how that is managed, because my son travels from London to Oxford with him to see his 12-year-old half-brother who also comes from another home, and that home is an anti-vaxxer home. And then my son's father has lodgers, so I've said 'Look, I expect everyone in this mixed scenario to test, and I need to see the results of those tests and we will provide ours.' And my son has no problem doing those tests, I have no problem, but he's given what for about it, and it's incredibly stressful.” – Polly (February 2022)**



## Food Insecurity

The interviews highlighted just how interlinked childcare, the pandemic, and food poverty were and continue to be. ONS analysis of the period leading up to the pandemic shows that 31 percent of working-age lone parents and 35 percent of their children were in “persistent poverty”, which was considerably higher than for any other group. Data<sup>18</sup> from the Understanding Society Survey Covid-19 study, has found that lone parent families were most at risk of food insecurity (at nine percent), with pensioners being the most protected.<sup>19</sup>

The interviews exposed that single parents in London faced additional difficulties in accessing food during the pandemic. Many could not get online delivery slots and some supermarkets put in place a ‘one person from each household’ or a ‘no child policy’ to reduce Covid-19 transmission. But single parents could not leave their child with anyone else, and such severe restrictions left many interviewees feeling excluded from shopping in particular stores.

In this example, their identity as a single parent – particularly those with younger children - prevented them from accessing vital services which were available to couple parents with children of all ages. For those who could get online food delivery slots, there was a mix of emotion. Positives mentioned were the reduced risk of contracting Covid-19 because they did not have to take their child food shopping, but interviewees also raised that online shopping was a much more expensive way to shop because of delivery charges and a lack of choice – they had to buy from the store that the delivery was with, making it more difficult to ‘shop around’ for cheaper food options.

**“With the cost of living going up now, it is a lot worse being back at work, more travelling, like into London. They still need money put on their Oysters and what-not. There are eight of us in the house and it is costing five pounds more a week just for the same amount of milk.”**  
**(Mike, a single parent of 7 children February 2022).**

18 ONS (2022), Household income, spending and wealth, April 2018 to March 2020.  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/dvc1802/split-bar-multiple-hhtype/datadownload.xlsx>.

19 University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research (2021), Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study, 2020-2021.

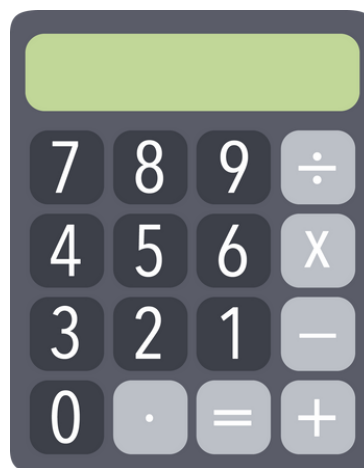


Food was not the only service that single parents struggled to access during the pandemic because of a lack of childcare options predominantly caused by legal Covid-19 restrictions. Medical, financial, leisure, and transport services all played a part in single parent's experiences of the pandemic. What people could and could not access largely depended upon where they lived in London, where they worked, and their accessibility to childcare at a price within their budgets.

## Universal Credit (UC)

In February 2019, around 132,000 single parent households in London were in receipt of UC. By August 2021, this has increased to just over 226,000 single parent households – representing around 89 percent of single parent households in the capital with dependant children.<sup>20</sup>

The government made significant changes to UC in response to the first lockdown. A loan was given for those who had lost their jobs, and the standard rate of UC was uplifted by £20 per week (often referred to as the '£20 uplift'). It is worth noting though that many single parent families on UC in London would not have seen much, if any, benefit from the uplift due to the Benefit Cap. As of May 2021, there were 30,000 single parents in London affected by the benefit cap – more than in any other English city.<sup>21</sup>



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<sup>20</sup> The estimate of the number of lone parent families in London was taken from the 2020 Families by Family Type, regions of England and UK constituent countries dataset, available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/familiesbyfamilytyperegionsofenglandandukconstituentcountries>. In practice, the denominator will be slightly higher than the ONS figure, as DWP count lone parent families with a child aged 20 or under, whereas ONS records dependent children as those aged 16 and under, or 17 or 18 and in full time education.

<sup>21</sup> GLA (2021), Socio-economic impact of Covid-19. <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/socio-economic-impact-of-covid-19>.

This said, the £20 uplift was a 'lifeline' for lots of single parent households in London, and many of the single parents interviewed in February 2022 commented that they had felt this loss in income in October 2021 acutely. This financial loss as well as the delay in introducing support bubbles, fuelled a narrative that government policy throughout the pandemic had left single parents behind, and that in terms of policy making, they were always an afterthought.

On a more positive note, some parents reported that it was because of the help they received with childcare costs through UC, that they were able to carry on working when they returned to in-person work.

**"It was a massive help to me ... it gave me a little bit more freedom and then it was taken away." –  
Eva (February 2022)**

### **Questions for further exploration:**

- 1. Other than the DWP setting a higher London-based cap for the UC childcare element, what other measures could be put in place to better support single parents on a low income in London meet the relatively higher costs of childcare in the city?**
- 2. What more could be done to build on and expand the GLA's childcare deposit scheme, to support single parents with higher incomes but little savings to afford the initial upfront costs of childcare?**



### 3. Wellbeing and mental health

Gingerbread's Caring Without Sharing project found that many single parents have had serious concerns about their own mental health and that of their children throughout the first year of the pandemic.<sup>22</sup> This project has corroborated those findings and our interviews from February reveal that these concerns continued for single parents living in London into 2022, despite a significant reduction in Covid-19 restrictions. Labour Force Survey data shows that single parents remained much more likely to report depression and were 'more vulnerable to stress and mental health problems' during the pandemic, when compared with other family types.<sup>23</sup>

Whilst there has been a considerable body of quantitative research exploring the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on adult mental health, few other studies have explored the experiences of single parent families specifically.<sup>24</sup> However, one analysis has shown that behavioural, emotional, and restlessness/attentional difficulties increased after the third lockdown was introduced in January 2021, particularly among primary aged children, those with special educational needs and disability, and those from low-income or single adult households.<sup>25</sup> These children continued to show increased mental health problems throughout the pandemic, with higher levels of behavioural, emotional, and attentional difficulties. Our research confirms this finding within London specifically, as single parents with children who have additional needs, reported that they had – and some continue to have – behavioural changes as a result of the lockdowns.

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22 Gingerbread (2021), Caring Without Sharing.

23 Taylor, Z. E., Bailey, K., Herrera, F., Nair, N., & Adams, A. (2022). 'Strengths of the heart: Stressors, gratitude, and mental health in single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic'. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 36(3), 346–357, p. 346.

24 For example, see: Daly, Michael, Angelina R. Sutin, and Eric Robinson. "Longitudinal changes in mental health and the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from the UK Household Longitudinal Study." *Psychological Medicine* (2020): 1-10.

25 Co-Space Study (2021), Changes in children's and young people's mental health symptoms: March 2020 to January 2021. [https://cospaceoxford.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Report\\_08\\_17.02.21.pdf](https://cospaceoxford.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Report_08_17.02.21.pdf).

There are no figures which 'characteristically' break down children with mental health problems in London, but the figures for adults are categorised by age and gender. In March 2021, 26 percent of Londoners aged sixteen and over reported characteristics of poor mental health. Female Londoners (28 percent) are more likely to display features of poorer mental health than male Londoners (24 percent). Crucially, fewer Londoners living with a partner had aspects of poor mental health (22 percent) compared with 31 percent of those not living with a partner.<sup>26</sup>

Our November 2020 interviews reveal that the challenges experienced by the single parents during lockdown, such as changes to employment, home-schooling, and lack of contact with others, had an impact on their wellbeing and mental health. By February 2022, there had of course been major shifts in support offered from schools in particular, and so it was the ongoing effects from financial insecurity and worries about their children which were the most prevalent reasons to affect mental health and wellbeing.



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26 University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research (2021), Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study, 2020-2021.

## Experiences and wellbeing

Our interviews found that sole responsibility for a child during a pandemic predominantly manifested itself in two forms of reduced wellbeing for single parents: career anxiety and health anxiety. In relation to the former, it was clear that the pandemic had aggravated single parent's anxieties about their employability through and beyond Covid-19.

Another strand of anxiety came from the health implications of Covid-19. As sole carers of their children, single parents we interviewed showed a heightened concern for their own physical health and that of their children. Often, this was driven by the worry about what would happen to their children if they were to fall seriously ill. That said, health anxiety was frequently in conflict with the career anxieties that were also present – with many parents forced to make difficult decisions, some of which involved forgoing the likelihood of their families being in good health for their work or vice versa.

**“There is the additional stress of my biggest fear: what if I get sick and lose my job? I can't. I don't take the bus anymore. I cycle 100 kilometres a week to take my son to and from school, go home to work and then go back to pick him up, bring him back and then go to the clinic and back again. I am not getting on a bus because I need to have control over something. My brother has long Covid, and he has had to leave his work. I can't be in that position because there is no backup.” – Abigail (November 2020)**

**“While I was in work there were several health issues with customers. At one point I was like that is like five fevers have been reported to me. So, all in all it was just really a matter of ‘is this worth it for the risks?’...I had to say, ‘Do you know what? Actually, no, this isn't the right place for me right now’. Maybe out of the Covid situation, it would have worked, but the fact that it was in the middle of the pandemic, it really freaked me out.” – Mel (November 2020)**

The single parent response to the introduction of vaccines in the UK from December 2020 further highlights the health versus financial conundrum many single parents faced during the pandemic. In the 2022 interviews, vaccines featured heavily, both as a reason for why parents felt safer returning to work and as a comment on employer policy. Some parents received a “job or job” ultimatum. Vaccines also had an impact on how parents felt about returning to work and their children returning to school.

For these parents, vaccines supplied a morale boost, positively affected well-being, and reduced their anxiety. This is quite different from how parents felt when they had to return to work before the vaccine programme was introduced.

**“I’m at the stage now where if they (his children) were to get Covid I don’t feel too worried really. I just think it’s more like getting a cold at the moment.” – Mike (February 2022)**

These differences in opinions and company policies highlight just how interlinked employment was (and continues to be) to wellbeing and how much that link affected single parents’ experiences of the pandemic in London.

**“It was ‘scary going back to work before the vaccines were announced.” – Bernie (who returned to work in September 2020, interviewed in February 2022)**

**“I do feel more confident now.” – Millie (February 2022)**

COVID-19 VACCINATION  
RECORD CARD

\_\_\_\_\_  
FIRST NAME \_\_\_\_\_ LAST NAME \_\_\_\_\_

VACCINATED

VACCINE \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_



## Ongoing concerns

It is too early to quantify or to know the full effects of the pandemic on the changing mental health of children and adults in London, or indeed across the country. However, single parents interviewed for this report expressed concerns over their child's longer term educational, social, and behavioural development, as well as their mental health. It is notable that the mental health of a child was only mentioned in the 2022 interviews, while both rounds of interviews found that single parents had concerns over their own mental health because of the pandemic.

In 2022, many parents revealed that they were struggling with their mental health but that this struggle was not as acute as it had been when they were interviewed in late 2020. The main reasons given for this included that they were no longer required to home school, schools and nurseries had reopened, they could socialise with family and friends, so they did not feel quite as lonely. There was less media coverage of the virus, and they had returned to work on a full salary.<sup>27</sup>

The interviews discovered how the stress of home-schooling had often caused a deterioration in the relationship between parent and child – though fortunately this was a temporary impact for most parents. Consequently, over one third of parents we interviewed said that they had to give up on home schooling quite early on for the sake of keeping a good relationship with their children. Some children did not like or did not respond well to having their parents teach them, and parents decided that their child's happiness, their own wellbeing, and the parent child bond was more important to them than their child's education – particularly if their child was not in an exam year. This conflict between education and welfare did not resolve and was repeatedly referenced by the interviewees in 2020 and 2022.

**“I am not one of those mums who shouts at her children, but I snapped a few times when trying to teach her. I feel awful about it.” – Katherine (February 2022)**

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<sup>27</sup> This particularly applied to interviewees who had been furloughed and received 80 percent pay, unless their employer decided to 'top up' their earnings to a full wage.



However, not continuing home-schooling led to a number of concerns, such as whether their child would be able to catch up on the education that they missed, that their child had grown too attached to them and did not want to spend time with friends as a result, that their child is withdrawn, and concerns over how to manage a child who had become overly fixated on hygiene. Only one parent mentioned that their child was receiving mental health support at school, whereas a few more commented that they had to pay for counselling or additional support.

The interviews also found a need for more support services for those who are living with 'long Covid' and/or who have developed mental health problems because of contracting Covid or their pandemic experiences. This is especially relevant within the workplace. Of those interviewed in February 2022, almost all said that they were not aware of any extra support offered by their employer or that any changes had been made to sickness policies.

The one exception was Lee, who works as a civil servant:

**“...they have a lot of wellbeing sessions at work, which are open to all the colleagues, and I'm finding it quite refreshing and I often attend them. So, they are actually doing a lot of that, and I hope a lot of other companies replicate that because I think that is the need of the hour at the moment – a lot of people are going through long Covid and also like mental health issues, and I don't think their work are providing the right support and being understanding of their situation - what they are going through, especially for single parents.” - Lee, (February 2022)**

### **Questions for further exploration:**

- 1. The particular mental health effects of the pandemic on single parents have been acute but are not widely recognised. What can be done to ensure that single parents in London are able to access tailored mental health support sooner?**
- 2. What measures would particularly support children in single parent families in London, who have struggled with their mental health?**

## Conclusion and next steps

This report shows that there are differences between these challenges at a local and national level. Locality is a crucial but overlooked theme in much of the current research assessing the impact of the pandemic. Yet, particularly for single parents living in London, their commute, access to services, whether they had a supportive employer and the availability of local and flexible jobs, have all had a direct impact on their experiences of the pandemic – and will continue to do so.

The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of childcare and mental wellbeing as social infrastructures. It has led many single parents to believe that more people can relate with the struggles single parents face every day (not least challenges with employment and childcare), because of the pressures caused by successive lockdowns. Single parents across London hope that this feeling can be mobilised and turned into positive actions for change for single parents at both a local and a national level. They do not want to be the 'invisible family' within the UK's post-pandemic recovery, as they were in many Covid-19 policy decisions.

We intend for the findings uncovered in this interim report to be a springboard for discussion with stakeholders about what London-specific solutions are needed to support single parents and to better protect them from having to ever re-experience the collective difficulties they faced during the Covid-19 crisis. These will form part of a fuller analysis and recommendations we will make in a final report due to be published later in the summer.



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