

# The Single Parent Employment Challenge



**Final report, January 2023**

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and Charlotte Edney

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 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.

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

**We want  
to create  
a world  
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## Acknowledgements

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# Foreword

Most single parents want to work. They want to provide financial security and be a role model for their children. They also recognise just how important work is for their mental health and wellbeing. Yet, single-parent unemployment rates are consistently double those of couple parents. Moreover, the underemployment rates of single parents – those wanting to work more hours – are also significantly higher.



Victoria Benson  
CEO, Gingerbread

Unsurprisingly, our research found that a barrier holding back single parents is a lack of affordable childcare. Closely linked, however, is a shortfall in suitable flexible or part-time roles matching people's skill sets. As a result, they may not be in the sector where they want to work or that offers the 'right' hours to allow them to balance work with their parenting responsibilities effectively. This lack of flexible roles means that single parents frequently set their long-term career ambitions aside when their children are young, slowing their career progression and earning potential. It also means that when businesses struggle to fill vacancies – a key drag on the UK economy – employers are missing out on the skills and abilities of a significant section of the workforce.

In his autumn 2021 statement, the chancellor recognised the shortfall in needed workers, saying the government would review the barriers to workforce participation. However, any new policy initiatives resulting from this review must consider single parents' specific needs. As this report shows, achieving this means taking decisive action with employers to revolutionise the availability of flexible and part-time work across all sectors and at different levels within organisations. It means ensuring affordable childcare options, particularly for low-income single parents returning to work or retraining. It also means providing bespoke back-to-work support for single parents and not simply requiring them to meet with generalist work coaches.

With the cost-of-living crisis disproportionately impacting one-parent families, the proper support must be in place. When it is, single parents can find work that matches their abilities, pays well and sets them up for their and their children's future.

*Victoria Benson*

CEO, Gingerbread

# Executive summary

We designed the Single Parent Employment Challenge project to explore single parents' experiences of the UK labour market as the UK emerged from Covid-19 restrictions in mid-2021. It focused on those single parents who experienced unemployment during the pandemic and examined the routes that led to them becoming unemployed and re-entering the workforce.

It also explored their attitudes to and experiences of job-seeking and back-to-work support, work plans and childcare interaction, and the implications of the emerging cost-of-living crisis. Based on our findings, we have made several policy recommendations<sup>1</sup> to support single parents back into work or help those in work progress. These recommendations will ensure employers can better capitalise on the skills and experiences of the 1.8 million single parents in the UK, helping the government address a drag on our economy. The chancellor's 2021 autumn statement identified a shortage of workers, with more than 9 in 10 employers struggling to fill vacancies.

## Overall trends

- Single parents want to work, but twice as many are inactive or unemployed compared to couple parents. The contrast has been the case for a while. However, recent increases in inactivity rates across the population have not affected it.
- The proportion of single parents who left work because they were made redundant has almost doubled since 2019, increasing by a third for couple parents.
- Single parents have always been slightly more likely to experience long periods of unemployment than couple parents, but this disparity has increased.
- Single parents have always been almost twice as likely to be underemployed (wanting to work more hours) versus couple parents. However, in the latest year for which data is available, 14% of single parents in work reported being underemployed, compared to 8% of couple parents.

**These recommendations will ensure employers can better capitalise on the skills and experiences of the 1.8 million single parents in the UK, helping the government address a drag on our economy.**



<sup>1</sup> A summary of recommendations is included in the Executive summary. A full list is at the end of the report from page 53..

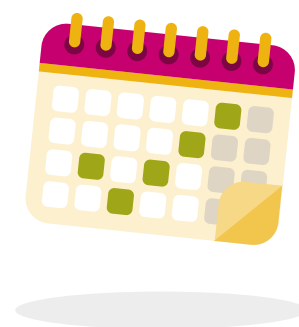
## Securing flexible work

- Flexible and part-time roles are a priority for single parents. Nearly all the parents in our research who had found work had landed part-time roles when their children were at school or in (funded) preschool childcare.
- Single parents who had found work had secured it through their networks, not through more formal recruitment processes, allowing for more straightforward discussions on flexibility from the outset.
- Single parents consistently describe a lack of suitable advertised part-time roles that can be undertaken when their children are at school or in childcare.
- They reported that flexibility might be highlighted in job adverts, but the nature of this flexibility is not made clear until well into the recruitment process. Often the onus is placed on them to raise it with the employer, impacting their chances of success, which is frequently cited as a concern.
- Timewise's broader analysis of flexible or part-time role flexibility showed that the volume of people wanting part-time roles outstripped availability by 4 to 1. In addition, the posts advertised as part-time at the point of hire were at low pay levels.



## Changing patterns of work

- A desire for flexible or part-time roles means that single parents often change sectors from previous positions.
- As a result, most single parents we spoke to secured new roles perceived as 'temporary' (in terms of sector or seniority). At the same time, they waited for their children to start primary or secondary school.
- There is considerable interest among single parents in progressing in their careers via training – sometimes within the sectors in which they work, even when these sectors are new to them.
- Other single parents feel they will only progress when they return to working full-time, sometimes in the sectors where they worked previously (currently viewed as inaccessible due to a lack of flexible working opportunities in those sectors).
- Employers are missing out on the skills and potential of thousands of single parents. Timewise estimates that around 118,000 single parents could be in a 'quality' part-time role but are currently unemployed or in a lower-paid part-time position.



## Childcare

- There is a widespread reluctance among single parents to use formal childcare, primarily due to the associated costs and the need to pay these upfront. If you are on universal credit (UC), you can claim up to 85% of your childcare costs. However, the government pays this in arrears, and it is capped at a figure set in 2005, so it is generally insufficient.
- Concerns about the availability of appropriate childcare primarily relate to after-school childcare, which is viewed as difficult to access and unreliable.
- Young teenagers are also seen as a particular problem when it comes to securing appropriate childcare. People feel there is little for children of this age.
- Holiday childcare is also concerning. Several single parents have begun new jobs without being entirely sure how to deal with school holiday periods.



## The role of Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and back-to-work support

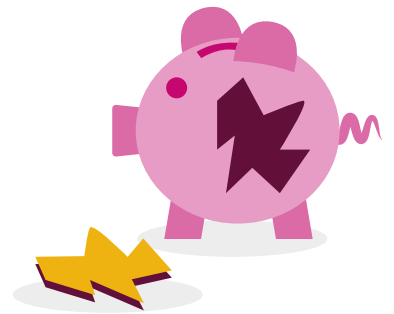
- Analysis of a longitudinal survey of benefit recipients indicates that all groups have had fewer positive experiences of JCP since mid-2021. This trend is more pronounced for single parents. They are much less likely to think JCP's requirements are reasonable than they did in the past.
- Among the parents in our research, experiences of support from work coaches are mixed. Individual work coaches are singled out as being particularly helpful and understanding of a single parent's complex situations. But they criticise other work coaches when they want to push them into any job, regardless of skill set and childcare needs.
- Single parents desire more bespoke support in matching skills and availability. Those who have participated in the government's return-to-work programmes (for example, the Job entry targeted support scheme (JETS) or the Restart scheme) felt these programmes did better in understanding their needs (although none have secured a job as a result of this participation).
- There is a perception that the support JCP provides in job-seeking and training is best suited to those with fewer skills seeking entry-level jobs. JCP is not viewed as a valuable source of guidance on self-employment.
- However, single parents not required to seek work due to their children's ages or caring responsibilities have an appetite for support with job-seeking and training.
- Some single parents demonstrate a detailed awareness of the sanctions process and expectations in hours and pay progression. However, others had much less understanding and quoted requirements inaccurately.



- Understanding requirements is inconsistent among work coaches and has not always been translated to single parents.
- JCP applying pressure on single parents to find work is widely viewed as unhelpful. Although it might speed up the process of a single parent finding a job, that job might not be one that will work long-term. It may be incompatible with their responsibilities and longer-term goals.

## Cost-of-living crisis

- Single parents are concerned and anxious about rising costs, including food and energy, and wages not increasing at an equivalent rate. They frequently describe the situation as “insane” and “a cause for anxiety.” Some say the measures they are taking to reduce their cost of living include the use of food banks and less use of heating.
- For many, the rising cost of living has made them even keener to find or sustain work; it has made some single parents more reluctant to take low-paid roles and to ‘hold on’ for better-paid opportunities.
- For others, the rising cost of living represents a barrier to finding work. For example, the increasing cost of fuel and transport can limit the ability of single parents to travel, which influences the suitability of specific roles. In addition, childcare costs lead some to question whether they would be financially better off at work.





# Key recommendations

## Flexible working

- The government should set a clear timeline for implementing the policy changes in the Employment Bill in December 2022. It would mean a duty on employers to advertise vacancies as flexible from day one unless there were sound business reasons not to do so, making flexible working the default.
- The government should also implement legal changes as soon as possible to fulfil their commitment to remove the 26-week qualifying period and make it a day-one right for employees to request flexible working.
- The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and the Flexible Working Task Force should work with single parents and organisations working with them to examine how job-sharing and term-time working can be developed as part of the post-pandemic flexible working menu.
- The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) should work with employer groups, single parents and groups representing them to develop targeted recruitment programmes for industries with skills shortages. They should redesign roles to attract and train single parents by looking at how positions can be undertaken flexibly and part-time to work for single parents.
- DWP and BEIS should work with employer groups to support small businesses in designing flexible jobs.
- Employers should review recruitment practices as well as their part-time working and flexibility policies to ensure they can attract suitable single parents to their roles and support existing staff who are single parents.

## Childcare

- DWP should introduce a national childcare non-repayable grant to meet the upfront costs of the first month of childcare fees (like the scheme in Northern Ireland) to support low-income parents entering work.
- The Department for Education (DfE) should review the childcare caps set in 2005, which do not deliver the promised childcare support of paying up to 85% under UC.



- DWP should make childcare support available to all job-seeking single parents undertaking training or improving their skills, not just those with preschool-aged children.
- The government should urgently review and invest in the childcare sector to ensure that it meets single parents' needs and is affordable, costing a household no more than 5% of their income.

## **Back-to-work support**

- Jobcentre Plus should develop specialist single parent work coaches who can offer bespoke support, particularly in helping find flexible roles.
- JCP should identify single parents as a priority group for their more tailored support programmes like JETS and Restart.
- DWP should work with organisations working with single parents to run awareness campaigns so single parents have a complete understanding of available support and to ensure they can access clear 'better off in work' calculations.

## **Cost-of-living crisis**

- The government should provide immediate financial support for low-income single parents struggling with rising costs, including ensuring that UC rises in line with the retail price index and suspending sanctions against them. It should also identify them as a priority in all programmes to help tackle the cost of living.
- Work coaches should consider rising household costs when assessing the suitability of jobs.

# Background

This report is the final one in our multi-method research project, funded by the abrdn Financial Fairness Trust (previously known as the Standard Life Foundation). We designed the project to explore the employment challenges facing single parents as the UK emerged from Covid-19 restrictions in late 2021.

It focused on single parents who experienced unemployment during the pandemic and examined how they became unemployed and, in some cases, re-entered the workforce. It also looked at their attitudes to and experiences of job-seeking and back-to-work support, work plans and childcare interactions, and the implications of the emerging cost-of-living crisis.

Based on our findings, we have made several policy recommendations to ease the process of moving back into work for single parents. These recommendations will also help the government tackle specific workforce challenges that the chancellor identified in the autumn statement to help stimulate the economy. For example, businesses struggle to fill vacancies, holding the economy back. If roles were better designed with single parents in mind, they could start to be filled, supporting the government to kickstart growth.

We acknowledge that we are publishing this report during significant political change, with uncertainty about the direction of government policy and the implications for single parents' employment prospects. In the short term, the government has announced some tax rises and planned cuts to public spending. These changes could potentially impact the lives of single parents, causing many to worry when they are already anxious about the rising cost of living. We aim to ensure that single parents are high on the political agenda as the government seeks to grow the economy and support unemployed people back into work.



# **Methodology**

The research involved 2 strands:

1. **An analysis of quantitative data** from the official Labour Force Survey (LFS) and an online (YouGov) survey of benefit recipients conducted in January 2022
2. **Qualitative interviews** from May to June 2022 with 30 single parents were drawn from a sample of 45 who were interviewed initially in autumn 2021 when they were unemployed and receiving out-of-work benefits.

Quotations from single parents are taken verbatim from these interviews, with single parents' names anonymised. Full details of the research are in the technical appendix on page 61.

# Routes out of unemployment

## Quantifying single parents' work trajectories

We used data from the government's LFS to consider how single parents' work trajectories nationally developed during the period since before the Covid-19 pandemic began. We also compared trends to those observed for couple parents who could face some of the same challenges (such as responsibility for childcare). Then we examined the work trajectories of the single parents who participated in our longitudinal qualitative research.

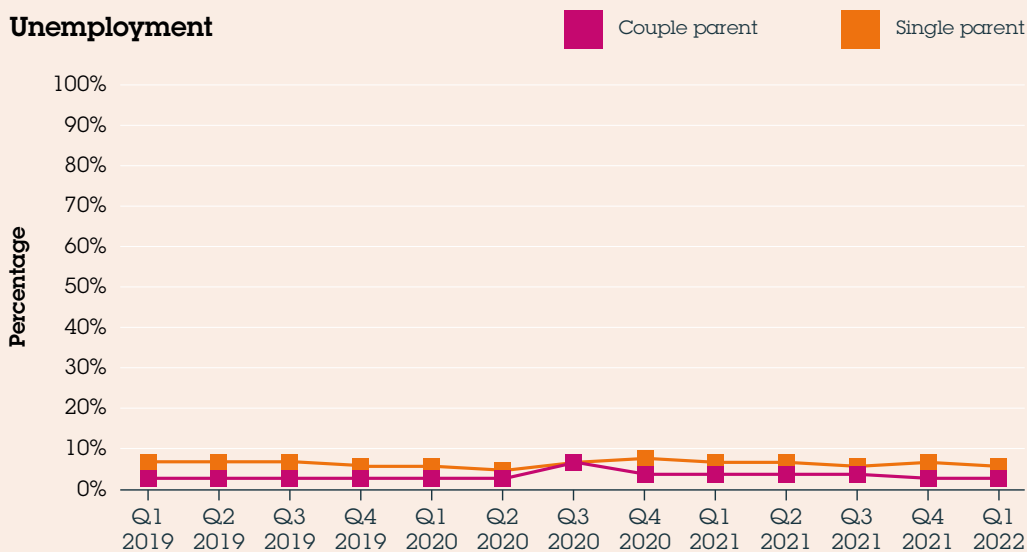
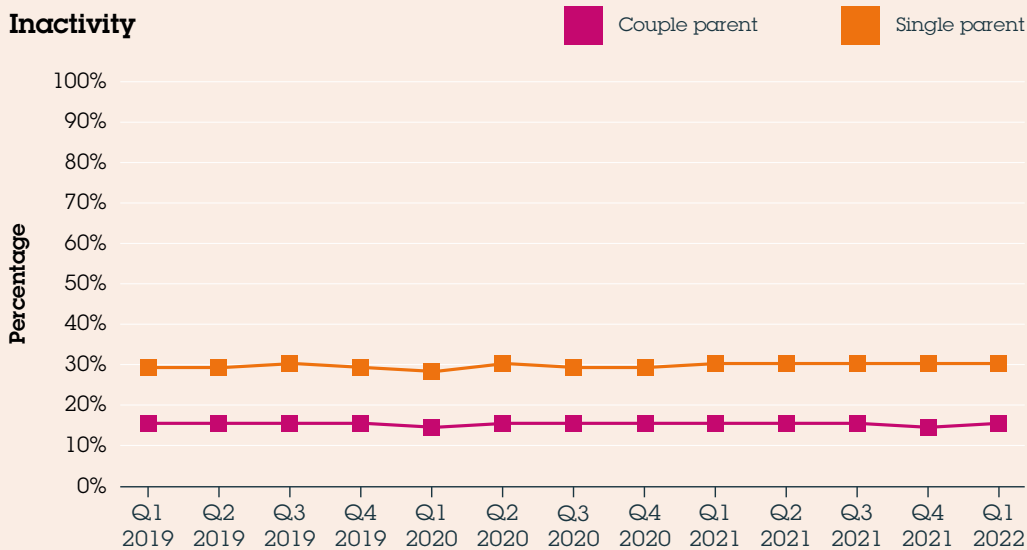
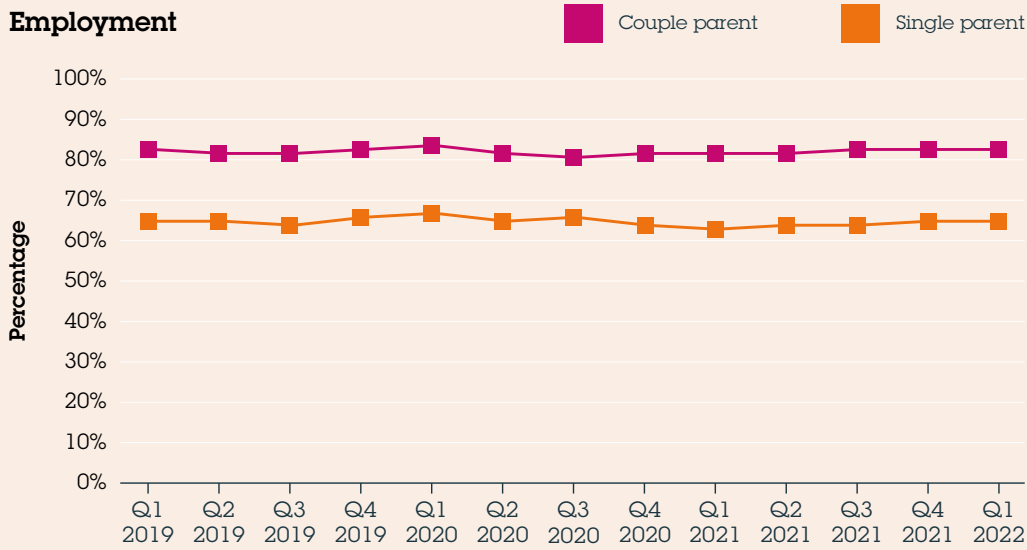
Despite expectations to the contrary, the employment, inactivity and unemployment rates of single parents and couple parents remained remarkably stable since the period before the onset of Covid-19. However, single parents have always been considerably less likely to be employed than couple parents, and inactivity and unemployment rates are about twice as high.

In the first quarter of 2022, 83% of couple parents were employed compared to 65% of single parents. Of single parents, 30% were inactive, around double the proportion of couple parents in this position (15%). At the same time, more than twice as many single parents were unemployed (5%) compared with couple parents (2%). However, despite some minor fluctuations, particularly with rising unemployment in 2020, none of these proportions is more than one percentage point different to those observed in the first quarter of 2019. This suggests that the widely cited fall in labour market participation, which is greater than has resulted from any crisis in the past 4 decades (Brewer et al., 2021), is not a phenomenon that has affected single parents or parents in general.

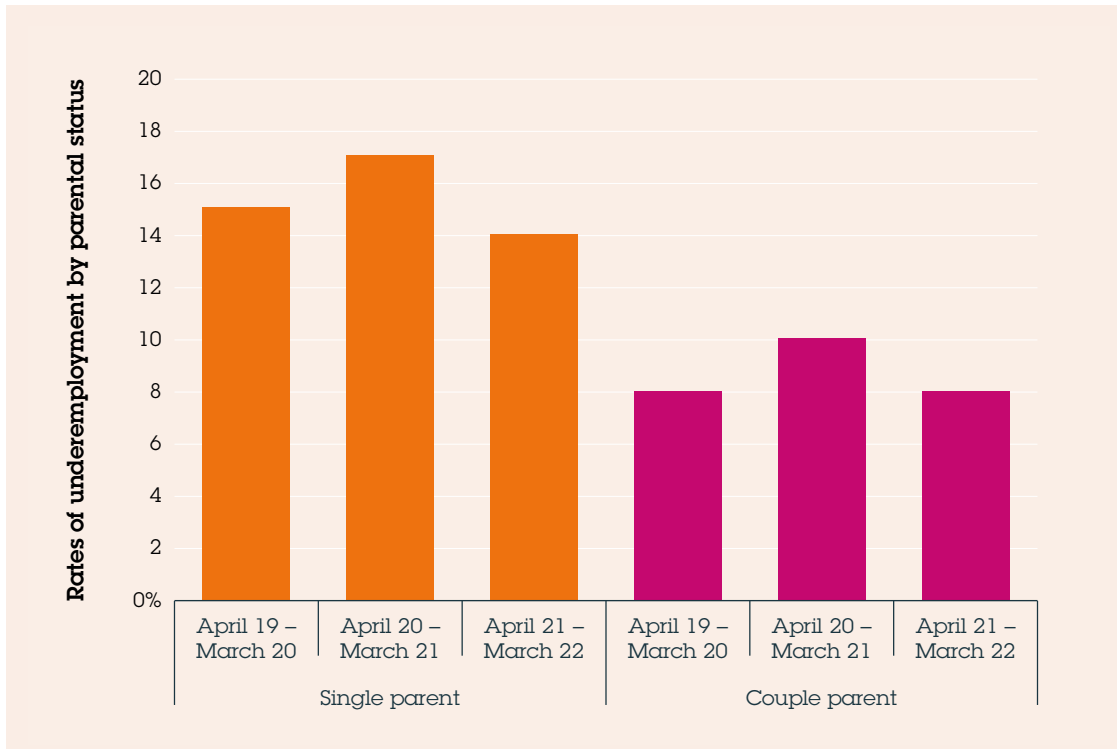
Similarly, while single parents have always been almost twice as likely to be underemployed (that is, wanting to work more hours) compared with couple parents, this pattern has not changed substantially since the period before the onset of the pandemic. However, underemployment rates rose for both groups during its first year (2020). For example, in the latest year for which data is available, 14% of single parents in work reported being underemployed versus 8% of couple parents.



**Figure 1**  
**Quarterly rates of employment, inactivity and unemployment by parental status, 2019–2022**



Source: Labour Force Survey  
 Base: all working-age 16-64



**Figure 2:**  
Rates of under-employment by parental status, 2019–2021

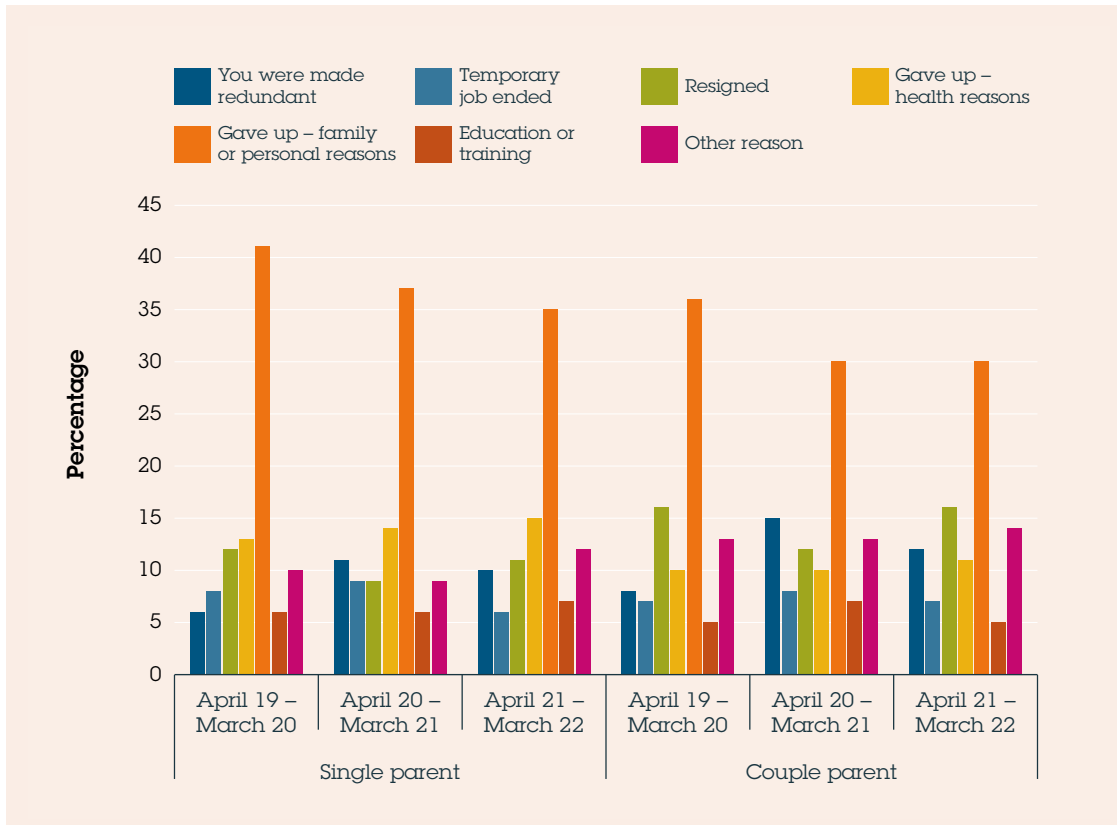
Source: Labour Force Survey.<sup>2</sup>  
Base: all working-age 16-64 who were in work at the time of the interview.

Out-of-work parents' reported reasons for leaving work had evolved since the period before Covid-19 began. 'Family or personal reasons' has always been the most commonly cited reason among parents for leaving a job. However, for both single and couple parents, the prevalence of this explanation has declined over the pandemic – by 7 percentage points for single parents and 6 points for couple parents. A reason for this decline may lie in the increase in the proportion who left work because they were made redundant – by 4 percentage points for both groups. However, despite the small proportions involved, those who left a job because they were made redundant have almost doubled for single parents since 2019 and increased by one-third for couple parents. These trends suggest that all parents are increasingly less likely to leave work 'voluntarily', which may affect their return to employment.

We noted in our interim report that the proportion of single parents being out of work for longer periods appears to have increased because of the pandemic. At the same time, this trend was not observed among other groups of workers (Clery et al., 2022).

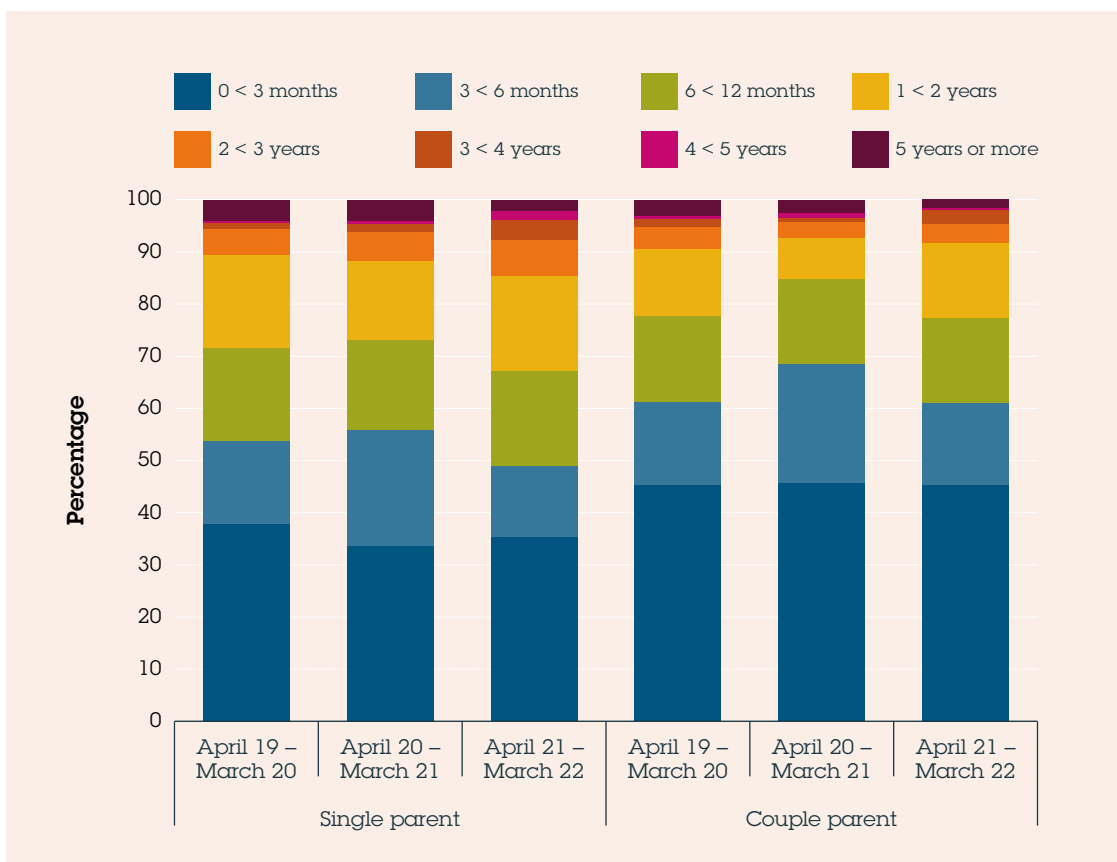
Figure 4, which incorporates more recent data, including for the first quarter of 2022, suggests that this trend remains. The proportion of single parents who stayed out of work for a year or more has increased by 4 percentage points from 28% in 2019-20 to 32% in 2021-22. The proportion of couple parents in this position remains lower and stable at 23% in 2021-22.

<sup>2</sup> Individual datasets have been combined where each year is defined as beginning in the year's second quarter to facilitate a comparison more easily between pre and post-pandemic and to allow the inclusion of data for the period immediately before our second round of qualitative interviews. For example, 2019 is defined as April 2019 to March 2020, like a financial year rather than a calendar year.



**Figure 3: Reasons for leaving work+ by parental status, 2019-2021**

Source: Labour Force Survey<sup>3</sup>  
 Base: all working age 16-64 who were in work and had left their previous job in the last 3 months or were unemployed and had left their previous employment within the previous 8 years  
 + Reasons for leaving work are only shown where they were selected by 5%+ of any group for 3 years.



**Figure 4: Duration of unemployment+ by parental status, 2019-2021**

Source: Labour Force Survey<sup>4</sup>  
 Base: those aged 16-64 and unemployed at the time of interview  
 + 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.

3.4 Individual datasets have been combined where each year is defined as beginning in the year's second quarter to facilitate a comparison more easily between pre and post-pandemic and to allow the inclusion of data for the period immediately before our second round of qualitative interviews. For example, 2019 is defined as April 2019 to March 2020, like a financial year rather than a calendar year.



Similarly, the proportion of single parents out of work for 2 years or more has increased from 11% to 15% across the same period. It declined from 10% to 8% for couple parents. This trend is concerning due to the adverse outcomes associated with more extended periods of unemployment. In addition, as noted in our interim report, this factor affected single parents, particularly those who had not worked for some time due to being furloughed (Clery et al., 2022).

In summary, at the national level, the work trajectories of single and couple parents have remained stable across the pandemic. There is little evidence that they have been affected by widely reported trends, including a decline in labour market participation. However, there are signs that the situation facing unemployed single parents is becoming more challenging. They are less likely to leave work voluntarily. Moreover, they appear distinct in that they are increasingly expected to be out of work for extended periods. In addition, specific barriers hold single parents back and need careful consideration, as we set out elsewhere in this report.

## **Single parents' work trajectories:** **qualitative findings**

Of the 30 single parents who participated in both qualitative interviews, around half (16) had started or were about to re-start work in May 2022. However, 2 of the single parents who had begun work in the interim had already resigned from their new employments. Of the remaining single parents, 9 were still seeking employment and 5 were no longer seeking work (officially termed 'inactive').

Even in the 6 months between our first and second interviews, there was a considerable movement among single parents between the 'in work', 'seeking work' and 'inactive' categories. The movement resulted from evolving caring responsibilities and physical and mental health problems (leading to job-seeking requirements being lifted) and children reaching an age at which single parents were required to seek work. They also experienced the need to care temporarily for children excluded from school or waiting to be allocated new school places. So, while single parents appear to have been out of work for a long time, they would not have spent that time job-seeking in many instances.

### **Securing work**

For 16 single parents who had secured new work, they achieved it through existing contacts. For instance, at a child's school or a previous workplace. Sara returned to a social care setting where she had worked 8 years before when her previous manager contacted her with a specific position in mind. Nicola described a particular recruitment drive for new employees at an adventure playground she attended with her son. Meanwhile, Miranda accessed a cleaning role at the shared accommodation where her brother was living. Hannah described how the head teacher at her children's school knew she was looking for work and

got in touch when a lunchtime role emerged. However, Alison secured her position in retail when someone she knew opened a shop. As we shall see, subsequently, these pre-existing personal contacts and relationships meant that employers were relatively understanding of and amenable to providing single parents with the flexibility to work the required hours around their childcare commitments. See The role of employer flexibility on page 28.

Similarly, 2 single parents were offered jobs in the settings where they were doing voluntary work – and were already known to their future employers. These were part of a broader subset of single parents working voluntarily (or planning to do so) to build up their skills and contacts and improve their CVs. Single parents were very much aware of the potential of such an approach to securing a paid role. For example, Katie explained:

“I’ve done some voluntary work anyway during the day, just gone and sorted the kids’ libraries out... I’m just trying to keep busy. Obviously, doing things like that, I think it helps you get in because you then know.”

Similarly, Eleanor, who had just begun to seek work after her child secured a new school place, said:

“I have done voluntary work in the past as well. So even if I don’t find a paid role quickly, I intend to go out into the world to do something. So, even if that’s voluntary work for the sake of getting my CV back up to date and just mixing with some adults.”

Only 4 of the 16 single parents had secured their roles by responding to published online advertisements. However, almost all had used this approach to job-seeking, having signed up for a range of websites and services. However, as we will see, many single parents could not secure roles through this route due to issues with the advertised roles’ flexibility in practice.

It is worth noting that none of the single parents had secured roles recommended by Jobcentre Plus or through the government’s back-to-work support programmes. We consider this aspect in more detail in our section on Back-to-work support programmes.

## Experiences of recruitment

As noted, most single parents who had re-entered the labour market during our second interviews had done so via pre-existing contacts. So, their experiences of the ‘formal’ aspects of the recruitment process (finding jobs to apply for, submitting applications and attending interviews) were more limited than we might have expected. However, those single parents who had been through recruitment processes identified a few difficulties and how these might be improved.

“I have done voluntary work in the past as well. So even if I don’t find a paid role quickly, I intend to go out into the world to do something”

Uppermost of these difficulties was a lack of clarity in job advertisements regarding flexibility that might be available in some jobs. We consider the nature and implications of this experience in more detail in our section on Securing flexible work on page 28.

Many single parents had sought new roles online, signing up to websites such as Indeed and Reed, along with the DWP's 'Find a job' site. Single parents described the process of applying for jobs in this way as being highly impersonal, especially for those who had not been out of work for some time and were used to developing a 'personal' relationship with recruiters and potential employers. Several single parents described having submitted many applications. However, they often received a no or an automated response indicating that the positions were closed or had been filled. People frequently described the experience as demoralising. Janice, in particular, told us:

"The most annoying part is when they don't get back to you to say you've been unsuccessful. It's just waiting and waiting, and then you don't hear anything at all."

Similarly, Debbie said:

"They'd probably say, if you apply for 50 jobs, you might get 2 or 3 responses, even with a rejection. Most of them just don't even bother responding to you... You can become quite despondent; you think, 'Is there any point sending this?' But then you have got to."

Several single parents also described how participation in recruitment had associated costs on their finances and time, which they had to cover themselves. For example, Tracy told how she had to rely on informal childcare to allow her to attend interviews, explaining:

"I was in tears with it... I'd try and make my interviews for when the other 2 were at school; then my mum would have to come over on her day off to come and babysit for [child]... it was just knock-back after knock-back all the time."

Recruitment had, to some extent, moved online during the pandemic, and several single parents outlined how this made (or could make) it easier for them to attend interviews by reducing the amount of childcare and travel costs to cover.

However, despite the success of recruitment and other work-related activities moving online during the pandemic, some employers had returned entirely to face-to-face recruitment. Linked to the costs of recruitment discussed above, this meant that single parents had to organise and commit more to each interview in travel costs, childcare, and so on. Emma spoke positively about the move to an online approach to recruitment, describing how:

"The most annoying part is when they don't get back to you to say you've been unsuccessful. It's just waiting and waiting, and then you don't hear anything at all."

“When I used to do it, we would never recruit anyone until we’d seen them face to face and built a rapport with them. Now they talk to you over the phone, you can just send everything by email, and it’s a lot easier without having to go all the way into their offices, spend 2 hours with them.”

Conversely, Tracy, who had frequently had to attend face-to-face interviews, highlighted how difficult this was for her. She explained:

“I think it would be easier for women at home to be able to do a Zoom interview, so they don’t have to have childcare... They just don’t make it easy out there. It’s really hard.”

## Work-related motivations

The single parents we interviewed described a range of motivations that impacted their job-seeking journeys. Chief among these was a strong desire to work. Single parents viewed this as beneficial for their mental health, long-term prospects and, sometimes, their finances. Some also considered it essential to act as role models for their children by being seen to work.

### Motivations relating to mental health

Those single parents who were still job-seeking (or had been doing so for a long time) described its adverse impacts on their mental health. But those who had recently started work said the effect was positive.

Negative mental health impacts were particularly marked for those who had been out of work for a considerable period. This was the case for Chrissy, who had been out of work for 3 years. She told us:

“I’m desperate to work. I just want to work. I’ve been working since I was 15, and I’ve been out of work for 3 years now, and it’s kind of getting to me a little bit.”

This was also the case for Eleanor, who said:

“Because I’ve been out of work since the start of Covid, because I was furloughed and then made redundant, and then have been out of work, it’s been a long time for me. And I’ve found that my mental health from being out of work has taken a dip. So, I’m looking forward to getting back out into the workplace and mixing with grown-ups.”

People felt that being out of work for long periods and successive Covid-19 lockdowns made attempts to re-enter the workforce more challenging. Single parents were now less accustomed to interacting with people they did not know or presenting themselves professionally. Nicola expressed this view:

“I think it would be easier for women at home to be able to do a Zoom interview, so they don’t have to have childcare... They just don’t make it easy out there. It’s really hard.”

“I’m desperate to work. I just want to work. I’ve been working since I was 15, and I’ve been out of work for 3 years now, and it’s kind of getting to me a little bit.”

“I found my anxiety this time, I don’t know if everyone is like this, but after Covid and all of that, it was a little bit challenging for me, even going to interviews and things like that. That kind of caused a challenge for me, coming back out into the world.”

But, as with Rachel, single parents already back in work found it to be positive for mental health, especially when they had struggled before. She told us:

“I find working brilliant. I found it good for me. I liked the routine. It was also good for my mental health because I suffer quite badly.”

Work benefited single parents’ mental health because it gave them a break, a routine, and a chance to interact with other adults. As Chrissy described:

“It’s like a break. It’s an adult conversation, an adult environment. Because of being a single mum full-time, it’s just a bit of a break... I’m not even doing it for money; I’m doing it for myself.”

## **Motivations regarding finances**

The impact of single parents’ financial circumstances on their motivations about returning to work was much less consistent.

A small group of single parents was keen to return to work because they felt doing so would place them in a better financial position – at least in the long term if they could progress. However, many single parents were uncertain that this would happen, which tempered their enthusiasm about returning to work. This was the case for Rachel. She said:

“I had to wait until I got my first pay packet. It was quite stressful because I was thinking, ‘Is this going to be worth my while?’ Because obviously, not working, the rent is paid for; I don’t have to pay council tax and things like that. Then suddenly, I’m working 22 hours, and everything has to be paid. So, you end up trying to figure out and doing all your workings out as to whether this is going to benefit me, which it did, by a couple of hundred pounds.”

However, a different subset of single parents had a marked reluctance to return to the labour market. They felt it would not improve (or be detrimental) to their financial positions, mainly because of childcare costs and limit the time they could spend with their children. Kerry epitomised this view. She said:

“They try and tell you to go back to work, but even the universal credit said to me the other day... you are financially better off not working. And that’s coming from a universal credit worker.”

“It’s like a break. It’s an adult conversation, an adult environment. Because of being a single mum full-time, it’s just a bit of a break... I’m not even doing it for money; I’m doing it for myself.”

In particular, the view that working more would not make them financially better off muted enthusiasm for taking on full-time roles. This view was primarily held among single parents with preschool-aged children, who were only mandated to work up to 16 hours. Eve demonstrated the mindset. She explained:

“When my son was little, I was offered a full-time job. I sat down with my mum and worked out that I would be £20 better off working than not working, and that was paying for childcare as well. My mum said, ‘You are then paying somebody else to bring up your child while you work full-time’.” Along similar lines, Nicola emphasised: “You are stuck between a rock and a hard place. You are just better off staying at your 16 hours.”

Single parents exhibited great frustration that not being better off overrode their genuine motivations to work for their sake and their children’s and to avoid relying on benefits. Hannah emphasised:

“The whole system just doesn’t work, and it’s frustrating because people want to work. Most people do that I speak to – those who get benefits but want to work, but it’s not worth it.”

Even single parents who had returned to work, knowing they would not be financially better off, expressed this frustration. For example, Sara recalled:

“Citizens Advice worked it out for us and input what my wages would be against what my hours would be. They said compared to what I get monthly now, I was only about £20 a month better off from going to work, but I wanted to go to work, so....”

As ever, the cost of childcare is a considerable challenge.

As becomes clear in our section on The implications of the cost-of-living crisis (page 51), the ongoing crisis has interacted with finance-related motivations in distinct ways. At times, it has increased single parents’ motivation to work and earn more money, but on other occasions, perceptions rose that doing so may not be financially beneficial.

“They try and tell you to go back to work, but even the universal credit said to me the other day... you are financially better off not working.”

“The whole system just doesn’t work, and it’s frustrating because people want to work. Most people do that I speak to – those who get benefits but want to work, but it’s not worth it.”

# Types of work found

Table 1 summarises the situations of the 16 single parents who had returned to work by the time of our second interviews and the job roles they had accepted. While the data collected was qualitative, numerous trends are nevertheless evident.

- Almost all the single parents had found part-time jobs they could undertake while their children were at school or in (funded) preschool childcare. Just 3 of the parents were paying for any form of formal childcare.
- These jobs involved different hours per week, ranging from 2 to 22. One single parent (of the 16) had taken on a full-time role. As noted in our section on Motivations regarding finances (page 21), there was a marked lack of motivation among single parents to work full-time. They felt it would not improve their financial situations while detrimental to other aspects of their lives.
- In many cases, the jobs the single parents had accepted were in sectors traditionally associated with middle-of-the-day work, such as education, or in industries where they could secure middle-of-the-day shift work, including domestic services and retail.
- A minority of single parents had taken on part-time evening or weekend work, where they could access informal childcare during these periods (see our section on Childcare for further discussion, page 45). These roles were primarily in hospitality.
- During the Covid-19 pandemic, it was hypothesised that many people who had become unemployed would have to find work in new sectors, as roles in specific sectors, such as hospitality and travel, would reduce. These trends have materialised to some extent (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2022b), but around half of the single parents are now working in different sectors to where their previous roles were located. However, as will become apparent in our section on Securing flexible work (page 28), the primary motivation for sectorial moves was greater flexibility and desirable hours in specific sectors, rather than trends in the number of available jobs overall.
- While many of the single parents had taken on roles that were similar to those they had undertaken before coming unemployed, those who had moved into different sectors tended to have been unemployed for a long time – and frequently had most recently worked full-time in roles involving little flexibility, before they had had their children.



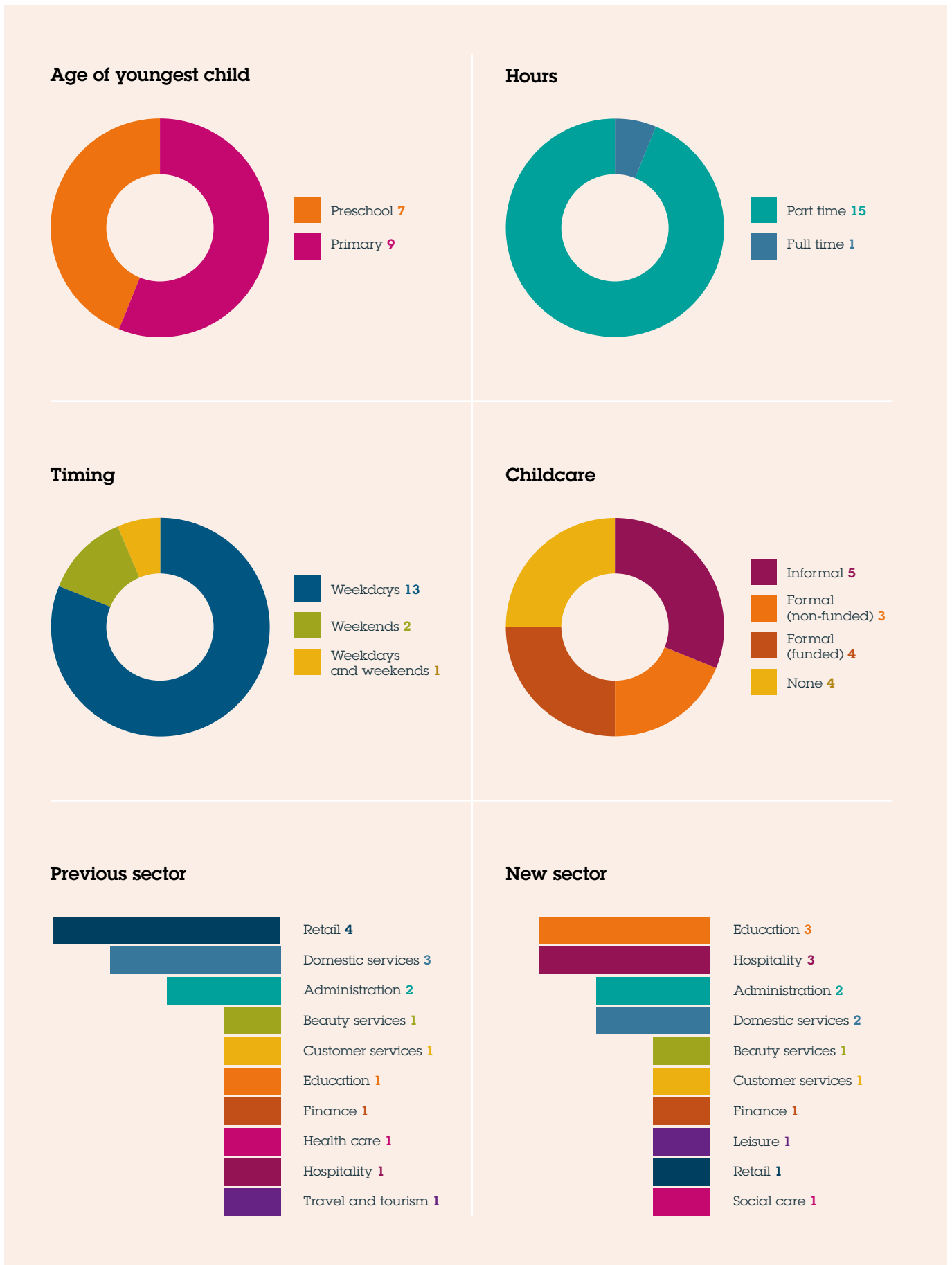
**Table 1** New job roles secured by single parents

Parent #	Age of youngest child	Previous sector <sup>5</sup>	New sector	Hours	Timing	Childcare
Parent 1	Preschool	Hospitality	Hospitality	16	Weekends	Informal
Parent 2	Preschool	Finance	Finance	16	Weekdays	Formal (non-funded)
Parent 3	Primary	Travel and tourism	Social care	Full-time	Weekdays and weekends	Informal
Parent 4	Primary	Education	Education	11	Weekdays	None
Parent 5	Primary	Domestic services	Domestic services	11	Weekday evenings	Informal
Parent 6	Preschool	Administration	Administration	15	Weekdays	Informal
Parent 7	Preschool	Beauty services	Hospitality	20	Weekend evenings	Informal
Parent 8	Preschool	Domestic services	Domestic services	2	Weekdays	Formal (funded)
Parent 9	Primary	Retail	Leisure	18	Weekdays	None
Parent 10	Preschool	Customer services	Education	7	Weekdays	Formal (funded)
Parent 11	Preschool	Healthcare	Customer services	15	Weekdays	Formal (funded)
Parent 12	Primary	Retail	Hospitality	16	Weekdays	Formal (non-funded)
Parent 13	Primary	Domestic services	Education	22	Weekdays	None
Parent 14	Primary	Administration	Administration	20	Weekdays	None
Parent 15	Preschool	Retail	Retail	20	Weekdays	Formal (non-funded)
Parent 16	Preschool	Retail	Beauty services	Varies (4-7)	Weekdays	Formal (funded)

<sup>5</sup> 'Sectors' were defined by single parent and, in some instances, relate more closely to the industries in which they were working, as officially classified. This information, given on an open-ended basis, indicates the extent to which single parents returned to the same, or different, areas of work.



**Figure 5** Characteristics of parents securing new job roles



## How current roles fit in with longer-term plans

Around half of the single parents perceived their new jobs as 'temporary' while they waited for their children to start primary or secondary school or to become more independent. They would put off their longer-term career plans until reaching a point when they could work full-time. For example, Jessica was working in hospitality at the weekends. Once her child started Reception in September, she wanted a different weekday job:

“Back in admin, so that it's more stable so I can kind of get my weekends and my life back.”

Other single parents were delaying their plans to progress by working more hours until they had more support and fewer childcare commitments. Tracy did this. She had indicated to her employer that she would like to increase her hours to 30 once her child turned 3 and she could access the free 30 hours of childcare. However, she did not view such an increase in hours as feasible now, as she was paying for a private nursery.

The single parents were considerably interested in progressing in their careers through training – sometimes within the sectors where they worked, even when these sectors were new to them. For example, Chrissy recently accepted a weekend hospitality role and told us:

“I've already planned it. If I enjoy this one, I hope to stay here, increase the hours, and then go into management.”

Meanwhile, Nicola had been discussing with her employer at a children's playground the possibility of pursuing a Level 3 qualification in childcare while working.

However, other single parents felt they would only progress in their careers when they returned to working full-time, sometimes to sectors where they had worked before but viewed as inaccessible due to a perceived lack of flexible working. Hannah, who had worked in finance before having children, exemplifies this view. She explained:

“I started in a finance career, and obviously, things changed, so I always just assumed I'd go back to it. Now I don't want to because it wouldn't fit in. I have tried it before part-time, and it just doesn't work. It's a bit more of a pressurised environment. But at some point, yes, I would like to, when the time's right, which is why I've done the course to prep myself and give myself something for when it is the right time.”

“I started in a finance career, and obviously, things changed, so I always just assumed I'd go back to it. Now I don't want to because it wouldn't fit in. I have tried it before part-time, and it just doesn't work. It's a bit more of a pressurised environment.”

The perception that full-time work is necessary to ensure progression in earnings is supported by research from Timewise. It shows that people who work flexibly, mainly part-time, often get 'stuck' in their roles because there aren't suitable flexible jobs for them. Career progression is complex even with their current employer, as roles they might move up to seem closed to flexibility – cited as one of the leading causes of gender inequality (Timewise, 2022). A recent analysis of data from Understanding Society bears this out. It shows that working part-time relative to full-time decreases the likelihood of progression from low pay, defined as earning below two-thirds of the median hourly wage. The tendency is eliminated once part-time workers move to full-time work (Nightingale, 2020). In addition, other research by Timewise (Timewise 2022b) indicates that as many as 118,000 single parents could move into 'quality' part-time roles if available. Some of them are unemployed. Others are in lower-paid part-time positions. As a result, employers are missing out on their skills and potential. In the next section, we consider the challenges around securing suitable flexible work.

# Securing flexible work

Securing flexible work that fits in with single parents' available hours was the major challenge described by those still seeking employment and those who had successfully found new jobs.

## The role of employer flexibility

In most instances, where a single parent had begun a new role, they could do this because their employer was flexible from the outset – either regarding the number or timing of hours worked or the management of childcare.

Tracy's employer allowed her to work through her lunch break to get her 16 hours done while her son was at nursery. Tracy said it made a difference. She said:

"Being able to drop my son off at nursery at 7:30 and get to work for 8 and then working the 16 hours. But where I work now, I can do it because I get paid... well, I don't do my lunch break, so I work through, so I get paid for the hour. So, I sit at my desk, eat dinner and carry on."

Nicola, who works in a children's playground, described how her employer allowed her child to play in the playground after school, explaining that:

"My boss gives me 10 minutes to go and get [my child] from school and come back, which is brilliant."

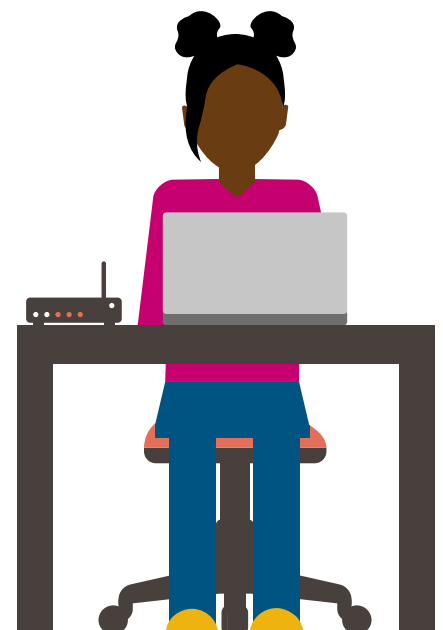
Katie, who works as a cleaner in a school, described how:

"It's Monday to Friday, but if Friday I've got a struggle for the childcare, or I've got something planned, some birthdays with family or whatever. Then I go in over the weekend to do it before Monday, and I have the keys and stuff to lock up and set the alarm, so I don't have to go when the teachers are there."

Hannah, who works in her child's school, emphasised the advantage of having a pre-existing relationship with her employer. She said:

"If anything comes up with my son, like when he's been ill, and he's had Covid and I've had Covid, they're just a little bit more understanding because they know it is because he's ill."

"My boss gives me 10 minutes to go and get [my child] from school and come back, which is brilliant."



Hannah's employer rejigged her hours to enable her to work 3 longer days to fulfil her caring responsibilities for another family member on her days off.

Alison had taken a role working in a shop owned by a friend. She said:

“He does give me a bit of flexibility because he knows I have the little one to get from school. So, he is kind of understanding in that sense. The shop opens from 11.30am until 6.30pm, so I try and fit my hours in around school hours if possible.”

These single parents had primarily secured such arrangements from the outset due to their pre-existing relationships with employers. While this is positive individually, it limits the flexibility in job roles available to single parents who do not have existing contacts in an organisation or sector of interest.

“So, he is kind of understanding in that sense. The shop opens from 11.30am until 6.30pm, so I try and fit my hours in around school hours if possible.”

## Lack of flexible roles

Single parents consistently described a lack of **suitable** part-time, flexible roles, making re-entering the workforce extremely challenging. Data from Timewise indicates that while there has been some increase in jobs being advertised with flexible working, it is only around 30%. Or as Timewise puts it, if you are searching for flexible work, 7 out of 10 jobs will not be suitable. The situation is even more challenging for those seeking part-time work, which is the case for a large proportion of single parents. Just 12% of jobs are advertised as part-time.

Meanwhile, the number of people wanting part-time work is outstripping availability by 4 to 1 when employers struggle to fill full-time vacancies. Moreover, there is a high concentration of part-time roles in low pay brackets – just 1 in 10 vacancies are advertised as part-time and have a salary of over £20,000 full-time equivalent (Timewise, 2022).

Our research shows that an additional challenge for single parents is a further lack of roles that could be undertaken when they were available for work – primarily when their children were in school or childcare. Lesley summarised this problem by referring to “fewer part-time jobs at reasonable times.” The issue particularly affects those single parents with children in funded preschool childcare (of 15 hours), who tended to have the least availability. For example, Jessica, explained:

“I was looking for admin roles during the week, but the hours don't fit in with my daughter's schedule. So, from September when [she] can go to breakfast and after-school club, I'm able to work longer hours or do a shift during the week because she is there between 9 and 3. She's 10 to 2, and no one is really hiring 10 to 2 right now.”

“I was looking for admin roles during the week, but the hours don't fit in with my daughter's schedule.”

A lack of part-time jobs that could be undertaken when single parents were available was identified as a problem in certain sectors. For example, most hospitality jobs required some weekend or evening work, meaning they were only accessible to the small number of single parents who could arrange primarily informal childcare during those times. Single parents such as Peter and Miranda did not have such flexibility available. Peter told us:

“It has been quite a problem because... some places they’ll offer just a few hours or not enough weekend hours and stuff like that. Weekends would be tricky for me. So yes, I have been finding it quite tricky.” Similarly, Miranda said, “Trying to get a 9 until 2 job is a nightmare around here because you just can’t do it. You either have to rotate your hours or do weekends, which I can’t do because I’ve got the children.”

What was available in flexible roles appeared to vary by sector. In beauty services, Joanna explained that:

“A lot of hairdressing jobs that are part-time are 2 or 3 days and a weekend... Most salons don’t want school hours... So, I’m yes, stuck.”

Some single parents felt that cleaning or self-employed roles offered more potential, as there was often greater flexibility regarding when work could be undertaken. However, even single parents who had successfully secured flexible positions that fit in with their schedules regarded this as a favourable outcome and in no way guaranteed. Emma, who secured a part-time job working from home, told us:

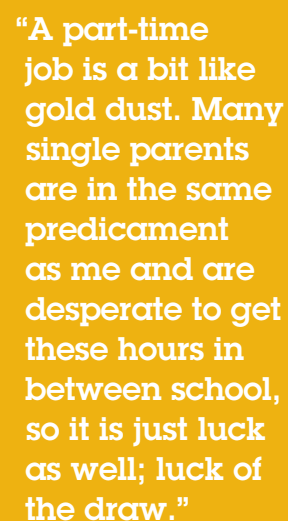
“A part-time job is a bit like gold dust. Many single parents are in the same predicament as me and are desperate to get these hours in between school, so it is just luck as well; luck of the draw.”

The single parents also described a trend towards ‘fully flexible’ working and zero-hours contracts. The trend was highly problematic given the lack of clarity regarding the times when work was required and the financial implications of working different hours each week. As summarised by Orla:

“All jobs seem to want fully flexible. I’m not fully flexible.”

In zero-hours contracts, Janice explained:

“A lot of opportunities are temporary only, and... zero-hours contract jobs. There’s no security at all with them... I wouldn’t go for zero hours again, not when I’ve got rent and stuff to pay.”



“A part-time job is a bit like gold dust. Many single parents are in the same predicament as me and are desperate to get these hours in between school, so it is just luck as well; luck of the draw.”

In other words, the rise in ‘flexible’ roles reported by Timewise over the past decade has not necessarily benefited single parents, whose ultimate requirement is for job roles that can be undertaken within their available flexibility. Indeed, the Chartered Institute for Professional Development (CIPD) analysis supports this finding. Over the past decade, it found low uptake or a decline in specific flexible working arrangements that could benefit single parents – including job-shares, flexitime, compressed hours, part-time hours, term-time working and annualised hours (CIPD, 2022).

## **Lack of clarity in what flexibility is available**

Single parents did not perceive many part-time jobs with the flexibility that matched their schedules (typically involving working during school hours). But they also saw a lack of clarity regarding the ‘flexibility’ employers and recruiters offered in job advertisements. Single parents did not think that ‘flexibility’ in specific roles was evident at the point of advertisement. Often, what flexibility would be permitted emerged late in the recruitment process. This presented several problems for single parents. First, it meant they frequently invested time and resources applying for jobs only to find later that the roles were incompatible with their other responsibilities. As Orla told us:

“Jobs should make it easier. Like if you knew what you were going in for... waited for the interview, asked at the interview, and then maybe not even found out [about the hours] until they offered you the job. It’s a long time, a long, drawn-out process, and you are putting in the time.”

Although her outcome had been positive, Emma also experienced this trend when she applied for a role in the NHS. Emma said:

“It did say in the advert that there was flexibility. So, when I had the interview, they talked about how they are flexible and don’t mind working from home once you are fully trained. They clarified what they were looking for, and I was like, tick, tick, I hope I get this job.”

Lack of clarity about flexibility could also put the onus on single parents to decide when to raise the subject. Single parents were frequently concerned about the impact of doing so on their chances of securing job roles. Eleanor explained:

“If you do that at the interview stage, it’s whether it will affect your chances of getting the job. So, it’s difficult to balance that because, in an ideal world, I would much prefer to work school hours, and I’m sure a lot of parents would. But it’s how you go about getting there, if that makes sense.”

“In an ideal world, I would much prefer to work school hours, and I’m sure a lot of parents would.”

This reflects the findings 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).

The government has recently made a welcome commitment to change the law so that the right to request flexible working will apply from the first day of employment. This replaces the current position where the right to request flexible working is only possible once an employee has worked for the same employer for at least 26 weeks, which is often a challenge for single parents looking to return to work. It is unclear when this change will come in. We urge the government to fulfil this commitment as soon as possible and introduce this much-needed change.

It should also be recognised, however, that there will still be challenges for single parents, as employers will have 2 months<sup>6</sup> to respond to the request and may still turn it down. However, the change is a clear step forward, both as a practical measure and in normalising flexible working. We are also waiting for the employment bill, which is expected to put a duty on employers to advertise all roles as flexible unless there is a business reason not to, which has genuine potential to transform how employers structure their roles.

## **The impact of the move to home/hybrid working**

One form of flexible working that has received particular attention because of Covid-19 is home-working and hybrid working. Timewise analysis indicated that the proportion of job advertisements mentioning home-working has settled at around 8% since April 2021 (Timewise, 2021). However, we know that far more jobs are now worked this way in practice, with 38% of workers reporting doing work from home from April to May 2022 and 14% exclusively doing this (ONS, 2022a).

While single parents felt that the shift to home and hybrid working during the pandemic offered them potentially more opportunities, few had managed to apply for or secure jobs involving home-working. Just one single parent had been successful in applying for a home-working role. Emma said:

“I was lucky because I was looking for something that I could mainly work from home, and there were loads of jobs going working for the NHS. So, I applied for lots of different things, and the NHS came back, and I got interviewed for a job. They give you your phone, laptop and everything, but just sometimes you have to go into the office. There’s like meetings you need to attend. So, you’ve got to have that flexibility. And it’s just worked out brilliantly.”

“I was lucky because I was looking for something that I could mainly work from home, and there were loads of jobs going working for the NHS.”

<sup>6</sup> The government is supporting a private member’s bill, Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Bill, which will reduce the time employers have to respond to a flexible working request from 3 months to 2 months.



Henry said that the availability of hybrid working allowed him to apply for more roles outside his immediate geographic area. However, he had not been successful in securing one to date. Meanwhile, Rachel, who had been keen to find a home-working customer services role, had been told that such positions were only available full-time in the companies in which she was interested. Single parents perceived that home and hybrid working were often only offered to employees at higher levels who had worked for their employers for a long time. The data endorsed this perception to some extent. It showed that home-working remains more prevalent among those already established with an employer. It was more commonly advertised at higher levels, appearing in 3% of advertisements for jobs earning less than £20,000 p/a (Timewise, 2021).

Furthermore, single parents identified specific challenges with undertaking hybrid working. As Henry noted, it enabled single parents to apply for jobs in a broader range of geographic locations, as they would not be required to travel to offices full-time. However, as Eleanor explained, this made travelling to offices more problematic when it was needed.

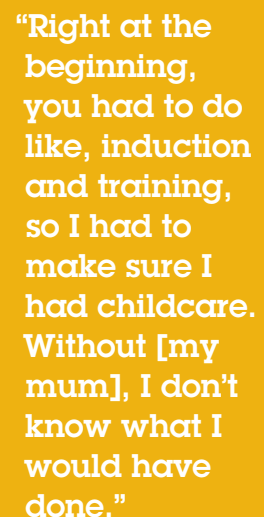
“It seems like there are a lot of jobs out there that are 80% or 90% work from home, but then when that little bit of time is required in the office. The office is then a very long way from me, so it’s frustrating in those situations because you think, ‘Aha, work from home, but...’.”

This trend would require more from single parents in travel time, costs, and associated ad hoc childcare.

Similarly, Emma, who was now working from home, explained:

“Right at the beginning, you had to do like, induction and training, so I had to make sure I had childcare. My mum said she’d come and help me while I got trained. So, she knew it was just a temporary thing. Without her, I don’t know what I would have done.”

Then, hybrid working roles present problems for single parents without ready access to occasional informal childcare.



“Right at the beginning, you had to do like, induction and training, so I had to make sure I had childcare. Without [my mum], I don’t know what I would have done.”

# The role of Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and back-to-work support

Single parents' perceptions and experiences of JCP continue to be diverse. However, there is evidence of experiences evolving, reflecting the progression of the pandemic and policy development around back-to-work support.

## Contact with JCP: a return to face-to-face appointments

In the 6 months between our 2 sets of interviews, many single parents were required to attend face-to-face appointments at JCP, either weekly or fortnightly. Views on this development were mixed. Some preferred the more personable approach. Carla, for example, had found phone appointments difficult. She said:

"I found that was hard as well because when you have telephone calls – you know, when you go to the jobcentre, they can give you some leaflets, [tell you] what's going on, what job fairs are on and things like that. And the phone call, I just find it quick – a 5-minute call, and that was it, and they released your money. It wasn't really helping me."

However, other single parents resented the additional travel time and costs necessitated by face-to-face appointments and the associated need to find childcare, especially when the scheduled meetings were so short. So, Rachel had asked her JCP:

"Am I able to continue doing phone appointments?', because it is a 5-minute appointment, you have to get yourself fuel to get there, park, for them to just sit there for 5 minutes and then tell you to leave. So, again, that's more money."

Similarly, Janice explained:

"You've got to pay for travel there and I'm in and out within minutes."



This was particularly frustrating when there was a more local or convenient JCP that the single parent could have attended. This was the case for Alison. She explained that she:

“[Had] to go to the [location] one, which I have to catch a taxi because there’s no bus route. The other one I can walk to, but they said I can’t go to that one because it’s not in my area.”

A quantitative survey of benefit recipients was undertaken as part of the Welfare at a Social Distance project, discussed in our interim report. Interestingly, it showed that single parents were more likely to have a preference versus other groups for receiving JCP on the phone, rather than online or face to face (Clery et al., 2022).

## Work coaches: a lack of continuity

Single parents continued to express diverse views about their work coaches. There is evident inconsistency in how single parents see the same work coach. Nicola said:

“A bit of a bounce around; I was always speaking to somebody different.”

Similarly, Chrissy told us:

“I’ve had a work coach. I’ve seen her about 2 or 3 times, like when [child] was born and then obviously the last time I went, it was with somebody different, and that was the person that was putting pressure on me. And he wasn’t my work coach; he was just somebody that interviewed me at the jobcentre. I don’t know who my work coach is; it’s changed that many times.”

Joanna also explained:

“You don’t see a regular work coach; it’s just whoever gets your name in the section of the alphabet they have.”

This diversity in experiences translated into assessments of JCP’s help in finding jobs and accessing training.

“I’ve had a work coach. I’ve seen her about 2 or 3 times, like when [child] was born and then obviously the last time I went, it was with somebody different, and that was the person that was putting pressure on me.”

“You don’t see a regular work coach; it’s just whoever gets your name in the section of the alphabet they have.”

## Help with finding jobs

As noted previously, none of the single parents who had re-entered work had accepted a job referred to them by JCP. However, individual work coaches were singled out as having clarified and responded to the complexities of single parents' circumstances to help them to secure work – and for their recognition that this might be a lengthy journey. This was the case for Sara:

“I feel like... I don't know if all work advisers are the same, but the 2 work advisers I had through universal credit were lovely and so helpful... I was lucky, and I feel like if they had pushed us into work earlier... I would have taken a part-time job, probably in a shop or just anywhere, without waiting for a job I wanted to do or where I felt comfortable.”

Similarly, Megan told us:

“In my place I have a really good work coach. She's very understanding and understands that certain jobs just to tick a box wouldn't work. Because then, half a year later, I'll be back again.”

Single parents also reported that JCP work coaches had provided specific bespoke help with their job-seeking, which they found helpful. For example, Peter said:

“They've helped me make a new CV and stuff like that, talking about possible courses I could take. They have been good.”

Meanwhile, Lucy complimented her work coach, who frequently turned up at appointments having printed out application forms for jobs that fit in with her availability and skillset, several of which she had subsequently applied for.

Single parents were more critical of work coaches when they appeared to be trying to push them into any available job without reference to their skillset, availability or wider lives. Linked to this was a view that JCP's support was best suited to entry-level jobseekers. For example, Eleanor, who had been made redundant from a legal career, said:

“They seem to be looking at more entry-level basic admin, supermarket, those types of jobs. So, I don't know that they would have any vacancies on their books that would be what I would be hoping to get.”

Similarly, Megan recounted how, apart from the helpful work coach described above:

“They update me every time with entries of the journal, or of new types of job coming up, but they're not suitable. For example, hospitality, or public transport work, it just doesn't make sense for the children and me.”

“In my place I have a really good work coach. She's very understanding and understands that certain jobs just to tick a box wouldn't work. Because then, half a year later, I'll be back again.”

In addition, there was a perception that JCP does not offer useful guidance to single parents who wish to investigate self-employment. Eve wanted to pursue a career in hairdressing and was keen to explore becoming a self-employed remote hairdresser. Her work coach could not offer any useful guidance about it.

Finally, the single parents who were not required to seek work due to their children's ages or caring responsibilities but who wished to do so wanted JCP to provide them with support. Joanna explained:

"It would be nice every few months to have a personal adviser like they used to, to... phone and check in and say, 'How are you doing? How is the job search going?' Someone will get to know me and my circumstances and help me."

Kerry also stated:

"The jobcentre hasn't been supportive of me whatsoever if I'm completely honest. They just say I don't have to work until I believe it's until [the children are] 5. So obviously, because they know they're young, they're not bothered. But I feel like I want to work. All they ever say is, 'you don't need to work, don't worry about it'."

Similarly, Hannah described how:

"Because I'm aware one day, I won't be a carer, and I will need to have something to do. So, I think there could still be help and guidance, or even like I said, for courses and stuff that they offer, but because I don't have to, they don't want to be bothered."

## Help with training

Regarding the help with training offered by JCP, several themes emerged comparable to those discussed about help with job-seeking above. A few single parents had found JCP to be helpful in terms of training. Lucy, for example, described how it had suggested and funded a health and social care qualification at Level 3, a development she had found to be "really helpful." Megan also described a practical Civil Service course that her JCP had directed her towards. It increased her knowledge about opportunities in that area and how to apply for them.

However, once again, people thought the training was geared towards lower-skilled jobseekers and entry-level jobs. Debbie said:

"They are good. If somebody has absolutely no work experience, for example, and nothing to put on their CV, they can help translate transferable life skills onto a CV, for example. I am already quite au fait with all of that, all the processes. The qualifications and courses, again, I am more qualified than they are than they have available."

"The jobcentre hasn't been supportive of me whatsoever if I'm completely honest... I feel like I want to work. All they ever say is, 'you don't need to work, don't worry about it'."

"They are good. If somebody has absolutely no work experience, for example, and nothing to put on their CV, they can help translate transferable life skills onto a CV, for example."

Similarly, Lesley, who had expressed interest in a higher-level accounting course, told us:

“They offered courses... like, I did say about the accounting, and they offered me a Level 1 accounting course. I’ve got a Level 3 already, so why should I do that?”

## **An increase in pressure from JCP?**

Since 2020, the government has started various initiatives to get people back into work. The Plan for Jobs, launched in July 2020, was followed by the Skills for Jobs White Paper, alongside various budget commitments and specific campaigns. The most recent ‘Way to Work’ campaign, announced in January 2022, included a change in conditions for UC claimants capable of work. Single parents claiming UC are now expected to search more widely for available jobs from the 4th week of their claim rather than from 3 months, as previously. If they do not, sanctions that reduce or stop benefit payments can be introduced for a period.

Benefit sanctions, suspended during the pandemic, were reintroduced in July 2020 following the reopening of Jobcentre Plus (JCP) branches. During the suspension, single parents were not expected to look for work as a condition of their benefits. However, reintroducing these sanctions alongside the Way to Work campaign means that single parents can now face penalties if they do not apply for jobs, irrespective of experience or qualification level.

Some parents we spoke to said they felt JCP was now putting them under more pressure than before. Others hadn’t noticed a change. The return to face-to-face appointments has also meant that single parents have felt more under pressure to attend and under greater scrutiny than a short phone call would entail. Some demonstrated detailed awareness of the sanctions process and when this might occur. A couple of the single parents we interviewed had experienced sanctions because of not attending arranged appointments (although these decisions were eventually reversed, as the non-attendance had resulted from children’s illnesses). This reflects a recent data analysis on sanctions up to the start of May 2022. It showed a continued rapid increase in UC sanctions – with the number in the last quarter almost 3 times the average seen in the 3 months before the start of Covid-19 (to February 2020). UC claimants seeking work were considerably more likely to be sanctioned than other groups, with 1 in 14 under sanction in May 2022. ‘Failure to participate in a work-focused interview’ became even more dominant as the reason for sanctioning (Webster, 2022, unpublished).

Interestingly, none of the single parents we interviewed in May 2022 had been told about the Way to Work campaign specifically or its implications for their job-seeking, such as only being able to job-see within their field of interest for a limited length of time. Moreover, no impact of the Way to Work campaign has been identified in the latest analysis of sanctions data (Ibid.).

As has been found in other research, JCP's application of pressure on single parents to find work was widely viewed as being unhelpful. It might speed up the process of a single parent finding a job, but that job may not work long-term if it's incompatible with their broader responsibilities and longer-term goals, so they would be unlikely to remain in it. Chrissy said:

*"They're a constant pressure. It makes you not want to work when they do that because you feel it's a chore. You are not doing it for your benefit."*

As noted, JCP's support was viewed most positively when it considered single parents' unique sets of circumstances and allowed extra time to find jobs that would work long-term within this context.

**"They're a constant pressure. It makes you not want to work when they do that because you feel it's a chore. You are not doing it for your benefit."**

## **Confusion around hours and progression requirements**

Claimant commitments set out expectations about how many hours an individual is expected to work or to search for work. They can also include other in-work requirements, such as expectations around earnings progression. This in-work condition means that some UC recipients must look for opportunities to increase their earnings, typically by talking to employers about increasing their hours or chances for better-paid work. However, the main information page for families contains no information about in-work progression expectations (GOV.UK, 2020).

In the autumn statement of 2022, the government announced plans to bring forward its in-work progression offer, which was initially expected to start in September 2023 (GOV.UK, 2022). As a result, around 600,000 UC claimants whose household income is equivalent to 15-35 hours a week will be expected to meet with a JCP work coach to increase their hours or earnings. However, it is unclear what this will mean for the many single parents likely to fall into this group.

There were mixed levels of awareness among single parents as to what was required of them in hours and pay progression, both now and in the future.

While some single parents were well-informed about this area, others did not know which rules applied to them. A number quoted technically inaccurate requirements. Kerry, for example, thought she did not need to seek any work until her youngest child turned 4 or 5. On the other hand, Lesley had been told she had to work slightly more hours than was the case. She said:

*"I think until he's 5, it's 16 to 20 hours that you have to work, and then when they are 5, it has to be 25 or something."*

Meanwhile, Rachel reported that the JCP was unclear on this point, recounting that:

“The guy that was my case worker said that because I was only part-time, I was still expected to do these visits until I got up to full-time. So, when I went into the jobcentre for my appointment, the lady told me that was absolute rubbish, and I didn't need to come back and forth to the jobcentre.”

While what is required of single parents and other jobseekers in terms of hours and progression is clearly documented (GOV.UK, updated 2020), understanding these requirements is inconsistent among work coaches. Therefore, it has not always been translated to single parents. This may result from evolving approaches to enforcing job-seeking requirements throughout the Covid-19 period.

“[My] case worker said... I was still expected to do these visits... when I went into the jobcentre... the lady told me that was absolute rubbish, and I didn't need to come back and forth to the jobcentre.”

## Quantifying experiences of JCP support

Analysis of a longitudinal quantitative online survey of benefit recipients was undertaken from May to June 2021 and again in January 2022 as part of the Welfare at a Social Distance project.<sup>7</sup> It allows us to quantify some of the experiences of JCP support by the single parents we interviewed and to explore whether these differ from other groups' experiences and how they may have changed over time.

Our interim report found that in summer 2021, single parents expressed mixed views about the support they had received from JCP work coaches<sup>8</sup> or from other individuals JCP had referred them in the past 6 months. They were sometimes significantly less favourable than couple parents (Clery et al., 2022). As shown in Figure 6 by the start of 2022, all groups defined by parental status were somewhat less optimistic about JCP than they had been in the summer of 2021. Also, the proportions of single parents who were positive had declined markedly.

Most notably, at the start of 2022, just one-third (34%) of single parents agreed that contact with JCP was personalised and relevant to their specific situations. It marks a decline of 21 percentage points since the summer of 2021 (the proportions of couple parents and non-parents expressing this view had declined by 4 and 13 points, respectively). A similar proportion of single parents (29%) said contact with JCP had been useful in helping them to prepare for or look for work. It represents a decline of 14 percentage points since the previous occasion on which this question was asked.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> Survey participants were asked about JCP employment advisers or work coaches, as the term work coach is not universally understood.



Only 1 in 5 single parents reported that JCP contact had helped them to identify a specific job or work area in which they were interested. The statistic reflects the finding from our qualitative data that none of the single parents who had been successful in re-entering the labour market had accepted a job that JCP had suggested. It is worth noting that the proportion expressing this view is low among other groups – although almost twice as many couple parents had this view. When taken together, this data suggests that benefit recipients across the board, but single parents especially, are less satisfied with JCP support than they were in the middle of 2021 – perhaps because of some of the changes highlighted in our qualitative data. The changes include a return to face-to-face appointments and, for some, a perceived increase in pressure.



**Figure 6:** Experience of JCP support in the past 6 months, by parental status – Wave 2 (May to June 2021) and Wave 3 (Jan 2022)

Source: Welfare at a Social Distance claimant survey, Wave 2 and Wave 3  
 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 6 months<sup>9</sup>

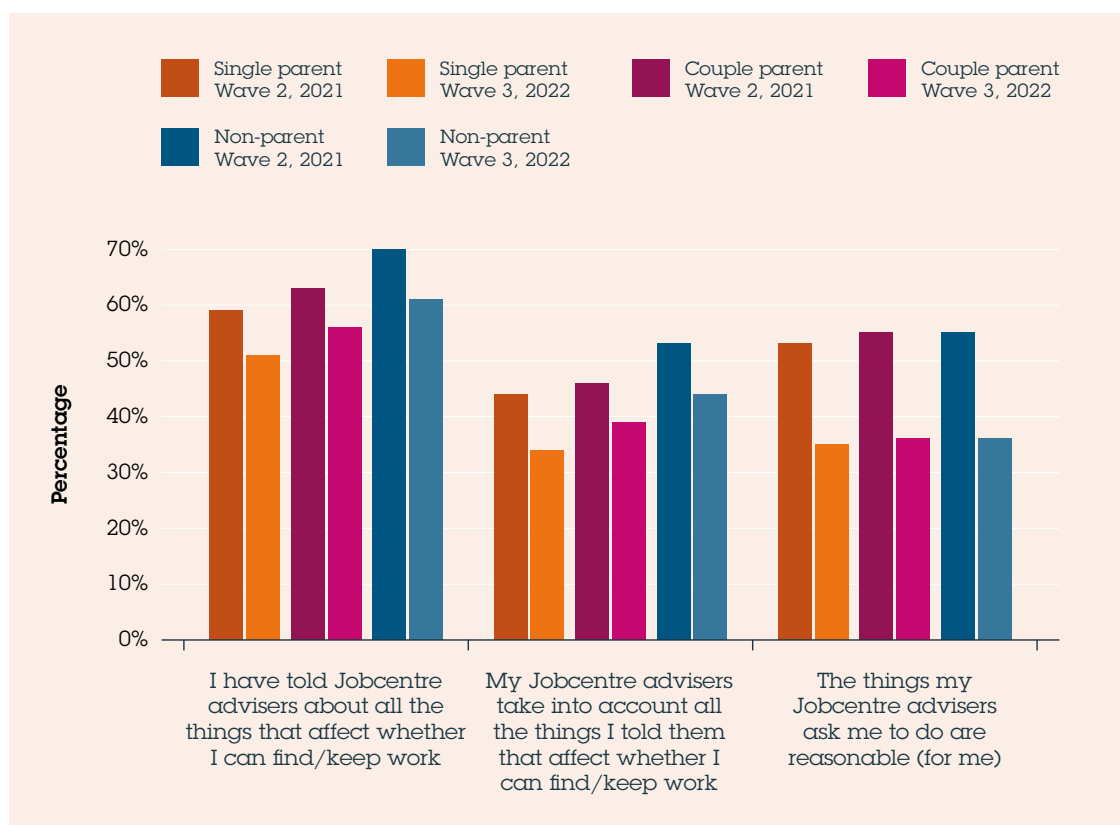
Our interim report also highlighted that single parents were slightly less likely than other groups defined by parental status to feel that JCP's support considered their circumstances (Clery et al., 2022).

By the start of 2022, all groups defined by parental status had become less positive on this matter, as illustrated in Figure 7, with single parents' views changing to a similar degree to those of other groups. Around half of single parents reported that they had told JCP about everything that affected whether they could find or keep work, a decline of 8 percentage points since the summer of 2021. Around a third of single parents (35%) felt that what the JCP asked them to do was reasonable. Here, the change since the summer of 2021 was most marked for each group defined by parental status, with the proportion expressing

<sup>9</sup> Wave 2: single parents = 150; couple parents = 284; non-parents = 1170. Wave 3: single parents = 141; couple parents = 268; non-parents = 998.

this view declining by 18 percentage points among single parents (compared with a 19-point and 20-point decline among couple parents and non-parents, respectively). Perhaps the perceived increase in pressure experienced by some single parents who participated in our qualitative interviews, and the return to regular face-to-face appointments, had led them (and others) to shift their view regarding the reasonableness of JCP's requirements.

A similar proportion of single parents (34%) felt that JCP advisers considered all they had told them about finding and keeping work, a decline of 10 percentage points since the summer of 2021, like the decline experienced by other groups defined by parental status. The relatively low proportion of single parents expressing this view reflects the experience prevalent among the single parents we interviewed. Even where they had set out the specific constraints on their availability, these were not necessarily considered in their work coaches' recommended jobs and areas of work.



**Figure 7:**  
Views about JCP work coaches among those who had received support in the past 6 months by parental status – Wave 2 and Wave 3

Source: Welfare at a Social Distance claimant survey, Wave 2 and Wave 3  
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) or had received any other support from them in the past 6 months<sup>10</sup>

In summary, this data suggests, between the summer of 2021 and the start of 2022, JCP's evolved approaches resulted in its support being seen less positively by all benefit recipients with, in some instances, an increase in negativity particularly marked among single parents. In this sense, they reflect the prevailing theme to emerge from our qualitative interviews that, in many instances, single parents have not found JCP support to be helpful, tailored and, ultimately, setting them on a path towards re-entering the labour market.

<sup>10</sup> Wave 2: single parents = 326; couple parents = 592; not a parent = 2,125. Wave 3: single parents = 501; couple parents = 642; not a parent = 2,733

# Back-to-work support programmes

The government launched the JETS scheme during the pandemic in October 2020 to support those left jobless due to Covid. It was one of the key pillars of its Plan for Jobs (GOV.UK, online). JETS was targeted at helping people who have been out of work for 3 months to get back into work quickly by giving them access to tailored, flexible support. The help included specialist advice on how to use their existing skills or how to build new ones and move into other sectors, as well as support for those interested in becoming self-employed. The scheme is now being phased out.

The £2.9bn Restart Scheme, announced as part of the spending review in November 2020, is also part of the government's Plan for Jobs. It gives UC claimants who have been out of work for at least 9 months enhanced support to find jobs in their locality. A JCP work coach makes referrals to the scheme, which local providers deliver. Providers are expected to work with employers, local government and other partners to deliver tailored support for individuals to get back into work.

As well as the JETS and Restart Scheme, the November 2020 budget announced £1.4bn to increase JCP's capacity. The government also launched the Lifetime Skills Guarantee in April 2021, providing adults with free training opportunities and the ability to obtain new qualifications.

Of the single parents we re-interviewed in early 2022, 6 had participated in the JETS or Restart programmes at some point, while one single parent had participated in both. While none of these single parents had secured employment because of their involvement in these programmes (or through other avenues), this is not surprising. Single parents had been involved with the programmes for differing lengths of time. The National Audit Office (NAO 2022) recently reported that 36% of Restart participants had achieved a 'job outcome' earning the equivalent of 16 hours a week on the National Living Wage for 6 months, which was higher than the 31% DWP expected of the scheme. As of September 2022, DWP estimates that Restart providers were on course to deliver this for 36% of participants. Nevertheless, the reflections of single parents who participated in Restart and JETS provide some insights as to how these schemes are working in practice and might be improved.

The single parents participating in Restart described the support provided in job opportunities and openings as generally more appropriate and bespoke (in matching the single parents' skills and availability) than JCP provided. As Peter, who has been involved in Restart for the past 6 months, described:

"They have been really good. I've been with them for a while. They send me emails about jobs and stuff to apply for. I've been applying for the jobs that they have been recommending."

"They have been really good. I've been with them for a while. They send me emails about jobs and stuff to apply for. I've been applying for the jobs that they have been recommending."

Individual participants also described other types of support they had received. Henry spoke positively about the interview skills course provided by Restart, explaining how he received interview practice with “positive feedback”, which had significantly increased his confidence. Other types of support provided included help to improve CVs and specific job applications. In addition, Janice described how the Restart programme gave her bespoke support that was particularly helpful for her as a single parent. She explained:

“They say little things like if I need help towards smart clothes for an interview, they can provide them. Or temporary, emergency childcare, just for an interview. They’ll look into that for me.”

However, despite positive perceptions of such support, which was generally compared favourably with what JCP provided, single parents highlighted several ways involvement with back-to-work programmes had been of limited use. For example, Megan said she was disappointed with the range of jobs that Restart had access to, describing how she was consistently sent jobs in hospitality, despite having emphasised that a role in administration would fit in more easily with her childcare arrangements. Similarly, Henry, who had participated in both JETS and Restart, reported that the latter appeared primarily geared towards low-paid entry-level jobs. In contrast, he was looking to return to a more senior-level role. For instance, when he attended a CV writing workshop, he only remained there for a few minutes, as all the coverage was fundamental.

A few single parents felt that the relationship between government return-to-work programmes and JCP was unclear. For example, they recounted how both organisations sent links to the same jobs. The implications of this lack of clarity were more extreme for Alison, who said:

“They were expecting me to go there and to the jobcentre, and I just don’t understand what the point is. I was having to go to both. At one period, they gave me an appointment for both places within 10 minutes of each other on the same day.”

Finally, those single parents who had recently enrolled with Restart were often unclear about what it would involve, with longer-term participants unsure how long the support provision would last. More broadly, among non-participants, there was minimal awareness of these programmes’ existence. Single parents described a need for bespoke tailored support with job-seeking on which they are based, which they often felt JCP was not providing. This perception is interesting, given that the analysis of Restart discussed above also highlighted a problem with the scheme securing the required participants, with the number enrolled by April 2022 being 40% below the caseload that had originally been predicted (The Guardian, 5 June 2022). There is a mismatch between the perception of policymakers and single parents. Policymakers see fewer individuals than expected requiring Restart support (perhaps because the anticipated rise in unemployment when the furlough scheme ended did not materialise). Meanwhile, many single parents believe they would benefit from such individualised bespoke support.

“They were expecting me to go there and to the jobcentre, and I just don’t understand what the point is. I was having to go to both. At one period, they gave me an appointment for both places within 10 minutes of each other on the same day.”

# Childcare

Securing suitable childcare is challenging for single parents looking to re-enter the workforce. Perceptions about its costs and availability significantly impacted single parents' work-related motivations and plans. It also created extra obstacles to securing suitable roles, resulting in many avoiding (or seeking to avoid) using formal childcare altogether.

## Widespread reliance on informal childcare

As detailed in Table 1, many single parents had deliberately taken jobs they could undertake when their children were in school or funded (preschool) childcare, eliminating the need to secure additional paid childcare. Meanwhile, almost all the single parents who did require other childcare to do their jobs had arranged this on an informal (and unpaid) basis. These arrangements were often precarious and relied on continued personal relationships and the goodwill of others. For instance, they were involving new partners, relatives and neighbours, or the goodwill of employers (allowing a child to accompany their parent to work, for example – see our section on The role of employer flexibility on page 28).

Frequently, single parents accepted jobs that could be done in the evenings and weekends to enable them to draw upon such informal childcare – when those providing it were not working. This was Katie's situation. She had taken on a cleaning job on weekday evenings and said:

"I'm doing it in the evenings, so once the kids are sorted, I get them ready for bed, put them to bed, and my neighbour comes round and sits with them, so she's there while they're asleep. So, she's right next door."

Single parents with new resident partners (who we would no longer officially classify as single parents) emphasised the extent to which this allowed them additional options in the work roles they could apply for. Sara explained:

"My new partner helps quite a lot, [with] football and being in the house when I'm not in from work yet to see to the children. So, it's helping a lot. It's different."

Similarly, Chrissy said that having a new partner had allowed her to take on work in hospitality at the weekend. She explained:

"My new partner helps quite a lot, [with] football and being in the house when I'm not in from work yet to see to the children. So, it's helping a lot. It's different."



“Why don’t you get a bar job because then that way he’s not at work. I would have put her to bed, and I can do what I need to do and come back in the early hours of the morning, sleep for a few hours and be back to being a full-time mum again.”

While positive individually, these accounts emphasise the limits placed on the options of parents who remained single or did not have access to informal childcare by the absence of a second or additional person to provide support in this area.

Just 3 of the 16 single parents who had re-entered the workforce were using any form of paid childcare – involving after-school clubs in 2 cases and a private nursery in the third.

## **A reluctance to use formal childcare – cost and availability**

Underlying the patterns in childcare use reported above was a widespread reluctance among single parents to consider using formal paid childcare, primarily due to the associated costs and the need to pay these up front. As discussed in our section on Work-related motivations, it was widely perceived that the financial impact of taking on roles requiring paid childcare, or full-time positions, would be negative, neutral or only marginally beneficial financially. Childcare costs were the major single factor influencing this assessment.

While single parents can claim back up to 85% of their childcare costs under UC rules, they must pay the first month’s fees up front before submitting their first claim. Many regarded the requirement as problematic and it dissuaded them from attempting to find formal childcare in the first place. As Janice explained:

“They said they could pay I think it was up to 80%, but I’ve got to find the monthly fee myself first, up front, and then they back-pay it. I told them that’s what I’m struggling with because I can put them in nursery now, but I haven’t got £800 to pay it up front.”

Single parents who were using formal childcare also found the need to pay fees up front challenging, as was the case for Lesley. She said:

“I took out a budgeting loan to pay the initial costs for the first month, and then I sent the receipts to universal credit, and they gave me £80 to send to them. After that, it wasn’t hard to pay. But the first initial payment was quite hard because it was like, ‘oh, where am I going to get that?’”

“I took out a budgeting loan to pay the initial costs for the first month... After that, it wasn’t hard to pay. But the first initial payment was quite hard because it was like, ‘oh, where am I going to get that?’”

As well as the need to pay the first month's fees up front, single parents were put off using formal childcare because of the overall longer-term costs involved. Hannah said:

"It's too expensive and it's not worth it."

A view echoed by Tracy who stated:

"Nursery fees are extortionate."

This perception also extended to after-school childcare. For instance, N, whose employer let her bring her child to work, said:

"I could never afford to do after-school club. I find after-school clubs are very expensive. It all adds up, and now, with the cost of living, there's no way I could do that."

Findings from Coram Family and Childcare's 2022 annual Childcare Survey support these perceptions. It reported that parents are now paying 2.5% more for childcare for children under 2, 2% more for children aged 2, and 3.5% more for 3 to 4-year-olds than they were a year ago. Furthermore, it concluded that the steep increase in the cost of living and the pandemic's economic impact means Britain's parents are struggling even more with rising childcare costs (Coram, 2022).

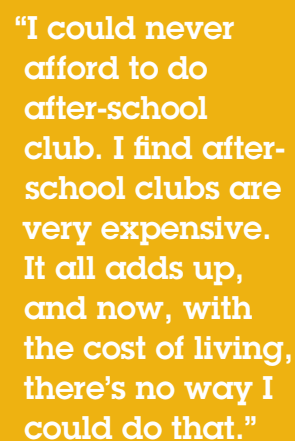
In addition to childcare costs, single parents expressed concerns about childcare availability. Many related to after-school childcare, which was perceived as competitive to access and not 100% reliable. Both Debbie and Janice described how such childcare was difficult to guarantee. Regarding the after-school club at her children's school, Debbie said:

"There are no spaces. They get filled. They release them at the beginning of each term and are gone within 30 minutes. It is literally, first come, first served."

Meanwhile, in after-school provision, Janice informed us:

"There are 2 that are local – only 2 that do a school run for my children's school. All the rest are for the other schools. And they can only take 8 children at a time, so they're fully booked."

Single parents viewed such limited availability as problematic. They might need to accept a job offer without being sure that after-school childcare is accessible. Also, some single parents like Eleanor said there was no after-school childcare available. She told us:



"I could never afford to do after-school club. I find after-school clubs are very expensive. It all adds up, and now, with the cost of living, there's no way I could do that."



“I have an ongoing concern that working full-time means finding a reliable childminder, and my experience of childminders hasn’t been brilliant in the past... My daughter’s school doesn’t have an after-school club, so there isn’t any help there.”

After-school childcare was also viewed as not being entirely reliable. It would be necessary for a single parent looking to commit to work during those hours. Joanna explained:

“They do homework club and things like that, but they are often cancelled because there’s a teacher off or... it’s not 100% guaranteed that I could go to work and do a 9 to 5 in a salon every Tuesday because my son will be at homework club.”

Data from the Coram Family and Childcare Survey 2022 also reflects these concerns. The survey reports a decrease in the number of childcare providers, with available places remaining broadly stable – most of the closures involve childminders who tend to offer cheaper and more flexible provision. Compared to before Covid, between 11% and 31% of local authorities report reductions in the availability of various aspects of childcare. For example, 31% report reduced wraparound childcare places for school-age children.

As well as these generic concerns about childcare’s cost and availability, there were concerns about finding suitable childcare in the following 2 scenarios.

## Childcare for young teenagers

Young teenagers were seen as a particular problem when it came to securing appropriate childcare. People felt there was little geared towards children of that age and that the children were reluctant to be ‘looked after’ in the way younger children would be. Joanna explained that it is:

“Very difficult because of my son’s age. Obviously, he can’t go to a childminder, but he’s too young to be left on his own.”

Similarly, Carla told us:

“There must be childcare for that age as well. But I don’t know if there is. I know they have for younger children.”

“I have an ongoing concern that working full-time means finding a reliable childminder, and my experience of childminders hasn’t been brilliant in the past.”

“Obviously, he can’t go to a childminder, but he’s too young to be left on his own.”



# Holiday childcare

Holiday childcare was also identified as concerning for those who had school-aged children. A few single parents had accepted and begun new work roles without being sure how they would deal with school holiday periods. Alison, who had taken on a position working in a shop, said:

“That’s another thing I don’t know. Hopefully, the school has some sort of holiday club. I probably won’t be able to send her there every day, but even if I could just send her a couple of days a week, at least I can still do a bit of work during the holidays.”

Once again, there were concerns about the cost and availability of holiday childcare. Regarding costs, Jessica said:

“Holiday childcare: their school runs a play scheme, but even that is ridiculous. It’s about £25 to £30 a day. It’s absolutely insane. So, I’d be more reliant on family, seeing if there’s any room to manoeuvre there.”

As with regular childcare, there was a marked reluctance among single parents regarding using paid holiday childcare and a strong preference to draw on informal support networks or ‘muddle along’. Emma, who had taken a working-from-home role, said:

“Because I’m working from home, I’ll have just to juggle it... I can still take care of the kids and work at the same time. And, if need be, if I have to go to a meeting, my mum said she can come over and look after them.”

Similarly, Lesley described how she hoped to send her children to various siblings’ homes over the holidays, as they were off at the same time.

For the few single parents who had managed to secure term-time work, holiday childcare was a concern they were relieved not to have to address. For Hannah, who had taken on a role in a school, she said:

“It fits in well because all our holidays match up and everything else. So, I’m quite pleased with that.”

As noted previously, concerns about holiday childcare had influenced single parents’ preferences for the sectors where they would be willing to work – primarily to avoid relying on such childcare if possible.

Single parents’ concerns about the cost and availability of holiday childcare reflect the results of a survey of 27,000 parents by the organisation Pregnant Then Screwed. In it, 35% reported the cost of summer childcare as the same or more than they earned while working during that period (Pregnant Then Screwed, 2022).

“Hopefully, the school has some sort of holiday club. I probably won’t be able to send her there every day, but even if I could just send her a couple of days a week, at least I can still do a bit of work during the holidays.”

Furthermore, the Coram Family and Childcare's 2018 annual Holiday Childcare Survey found that only 27% of English local authorities have enough holiday childcare available for parents in their area who work full-time – down 6% from last year. Also, holiday childcare costs have jumped by 5% since 2021 (Coram Family and Childcare, 2022).

## **The impact of Covid-19**

Some single parents felt the Covid-19 pandemic had exacerbated the problems regarding childcare discussed above, such as its costs and availability. Joanna explained:

“Even making gentle queries about breakfast clubs, after-school clubs or anything like that, childminders in the area are so over-subscribed. So many childcare facilities have closed locally. It is a struggle.”

There was also a perception that childcare costs had increased, even for funded childcare. Chrissy, who used the free 15 hours of childcare, said:

“I still have to pay for food, which has only been a recent thing since December. They sent a letter saying everybody has to pay for lunch, dinners, and snacks now, and I thought, ‘oh gosh’.”

Finally, a subset of single parents expressed concerns about putting their children in childcare, as they had become used to being at home with them for so long because of successive lockdowns. For example, Kerry told us:

“Because he’s a lockdown baby, I know it’s not an excuse, but he doesn’t go to anybody. That would be a big concern.”

Such concerns seem to have contributed to a reluctance among single parents to use childcare for very young children or to put older children in childcare for long periods.

**“Childminders in the area are so over-subscribed. So many childcare facilities have closed locally. It is a struggle.”**

# The implications of the cost-of-living crisis

Single parents felt widespread concern and anxiety about rises in the cost of living, including the cost of food and energy, and wages were not rising at an equivalent rate. They frequently described the situation as “insane” and “a cause for anxiety.” However, a few described measures they were taking to reduce their cost of living, including using food banks and reduced use of heating.

The cost-of-living crisis will inevitably disproportionately impact single-parent families. Recent research by the abrdn Financial Fairness Trust found that 1 in 6 UK households are now in “serious financial difficulties”, compared with 1 in 10 in October 2021, a proportion that is higher than at any point during Covid. In addition, recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation identified an average gap of £800 between the overall rise in the cost of living and the government support package for families on means-tested benefits (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022).

Meanwhile, single parents have seen the most significant decline in financial wellbeing, with those in serious financial difficulties rising from 23% to 37% since October 2021 (abrdn Financial Fairness Trust, 2022). Any negative impacts from the cost-of-living crisis will exacerbate the difficult financial situations already faced by many single-parent families – with almost half (48%) of children of lone parents being in relative poverty in the year before the pandemic – almost double the rate of children living in 2-parent families (25%) (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2022).

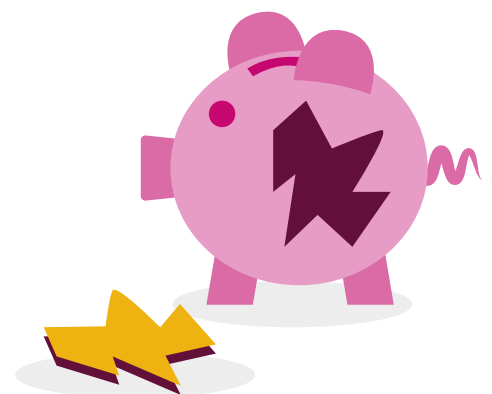
Single parents fell into 2 distinct camps regarding the implications of the rising cost of living on their plans for work. The first recounted how the rising costs had made them even keener to find or sustain employment. For some single parents, it made them more reluctant to take low-paid roles and to ‘hold on’ for better-paid opportunities. For Jessica, the rising cost of living made her keener to re-enter the workforce quickly. She said:

“(It’s) absolutely insane. So, I’m going to have to jump back into something as soon as possible, ideally now, but obviously, with the kids, it’s difficult.”

On the other hand, Louise said:

“I want the highest paid job I can get, so I can afford to pay my bills. I wouldn’t be able to afford it on minimum wage.”

“(It’s) absolutely insane. So, I’m going to have to jump back into something as soon as possible, ideally now, but obviously, with the kids, it’s difficult.”



Similarly, Henry indicated that the rising cost of living had made him even more determined not to take low-paid work, which JCP was pressuring him to do.

However, a second set of single parents regarded themselves as having little agency in their ability to address the rising cost of living by re-entering the workforce or taking on more or different work. This was because, as discussed previously, many felt they would not be any better off financially in employment. For example, Lisa said:

“Food’s gone up; diesel’s up. It is worrying. But sometimes, when you look at the work side, I might even be worse off working.”

Hannah also explained:

“If you got to keep a bit more of that money, then yes, I probably would think at some point I’d need to (return to work) because I don’t know how anyone’s going to afford electric when it goes up again in the winter.”

In addition, several single parents indicated that the rise in fuel prices specifically might make working a less viable option financially due to the increased use of fuel involved. Eve explained:

“I think I would be better off, but then you’ve got to factor in getting to and from work. The bus prices have gone up again. Is it worth running the car in and out of town or to a salon? If it’s a town centre, if you are taking the car, then it’s car parking, petrol.”

On the other side of the coin, Michele, who had managed to secure a working-from-home job, felt relieved to have avoided such costs. She stated:

“I’m glad I managed to get a job while I did because it’s all gone off, hasn’t it now, with the prices? And working from home, I’m saving on petrol as well.”

“I think I would be better off, but then you’ve got to factor in getting to and from work. The bus prices have gone up again. Is it worth running the car in and out of town or to a salon? If it’s a town centre, if you are taking the car, then it’s car parking, petrol.”

# Recommendations

From this report's findings, we have drawn a set of recommendations targeted at government policymakers and employers. Our recommendations are geared towards making it easier for single parents to find and stay in work and enabling the government to capitalise on single parents' skills and experience in the future. In addition, we aim to ensure that single parents are high on the political agenda, as the government seeks to 'level up' and support unemployed people back into work.

## 1. Flexible working to become the norm



Our research shows that the overriding requirement of single parents seeking new jobs was for flexibility and part-time roles. Yet there are still far too few flexible jobs open to them, especially part-time jobs and jobs during school hours. Single parents also need to know the precise nature of the flexibility on offer. Some of the uncertainty about fully flexible working and zero-hours contracts concerns single parents, who are worried about the financial implications and practicalities of working different numbers of hours each week. The government made a welcome commitment to changing the law to make it a day-one right to request flexible working. This change needs to be brought forward rapidly. We also await the progression of the employment bill and the expected inclusion of a duty on employers to advertise all vacancies as flexible unless there are good reasons not to.

### Recommendations for policymakers

- The government should set out a clear timeline for implementing the policy changes set out in the Employment Bill in December 2022 so that there is a duty on employers to advertise vacancies as flexible from day one unless there are good business reasons not to do so, making flexible working the default.
- The government should implement legislation as soon as possible to fulfil its commitment to remove the 26-week qualifying period and make it a day-one right for employees to make a flexible working request.
- The government should work with employers and employer bodies to emphasise the business case for greater flexibility in job roles and consider financially incentivising employers to divide full-time positions into job-shares.



- The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the Flexible Working Task Force should work with single parents and organisations working with them to look at how job-sharing and term-time working can be developed as part of the post-pandemic flexible working menu.
- The DWP and the BEIS should work with employer groups, single parents and groups that represent single parents to develop targeted recruitment programmes with industries with skills shortages. They could do this by redesigning roles to attract and train single parents, looking at how roles can be undertaken flexibly or part-time in a way that works for single parents.
- DWP and BEIS should work with employer groups to support small businesses in designing flexible jobs.
- The DWP should develop its ‘find a job’ site to make it much more transparent and easier to search which jobs are part-time and during school hours. This should include developing the website to include a search for parents looking for 16 or 25 hours of work.

## Recommendations for employers

- Employers should review recruitment practices and their part-time working and flexibility policies to ensure they can attract suitable single parents to their roles, as well as support existing staff members who are single parents. This would include the following:
  - » Making it clear in job adverts that flexible working is supported and what sort of flexible working arrangements are available.
  - » Talking to people about flexible working arrangements as part of the recruitment process so that single parents have the information they need and do not have to bring it up themselves.

## **2. Improve access to quality and affordable childcare and reduce the upfront costs for single parents**



The cost and availability of childcare were significant barriers for single parents moving into work. Single parents with young teenagers described how difficult it is to secure appropriate childcare. Childcare costs were challenging for those parents with preschool-aged children and for those that need childcare during the school holidays.

Single parents find meeting the upfront costs of childcare especially hard – with a current legal case challenging the payment of childcare costs in arrears. While we await the legal case results, we suggest several other measures.

## Recommendations for policymakers

- **DWP should:**
  - » Introduce a national childcare non-repayable grant to meet the upfront costs for the first month of childcare fees (like the scheme in Northern Ireland), supporting low-income parents entering work. This should be universally available and paid from a specific fund rather than drawn from the Flexible Support Fund on a discretionary basis.
  - » Extend the eligibility for the free 30-hour childcare provision (for children aged 3 and 4) to all jobseekers.
  - » Create a Childcare Infrastructure Support Fund to help stabilise the childcare market and prevent providers from closing. This might involve the government making direct payments to childcare providers to cover staff salaries and essential overheads.
  - » Urgently review and invest in the childcare sector to ensure that it meets the needs of single parents and is affordable, costing a household no more than 5% of their income.
- The DfE should review the childcare caps set in 2005, which do not deliver the promised childcare support of paying up to 85% under UC.

## 3. Tailored back-to-work support



Single parents are unclear about what support is available and how ‘back-to-work’ support can be tailored to their needs. As a result, many find themselves ‘parked’ on an out-of-work benefit with little help to get back to work, and single parents interested in self-employment struggle to access the information they need.

Previous schemes to help single parents to work, for example, the New Deal for Lone Parents, included specialist support from lone parent advisers.<sup>11</sup> However, since the introduction of ‘lone parent obligations’, support for single parents from Jobcentres has been mainly through generalist work coaches.

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<sup>11</sup> JCP adviser became work coach in 2013.

Our findings highlight that single parents face some unique challenges returning to work and need consistent, focused, and bespoke support to help them move into work. This should include more explicit information about their rights and responsibilities.

## Recommendations for policymakers

- **DWP should develop a campaign with single parent organisations to ensure they understand the support available. This could include developing new written guidance and reviewing current GOV.UK guidance on universal credit: further information for families. The campaign should include the following information for single parents receiving UC:**
  - » 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
  - » Help with childcare when they move into work
  - » Different return-to-work programmes like JETS and Restart and how to access them
- **JCP should identify single parents as a priority group in the JETS and Restart back-to-work programme guidance. In addition, automated alerts should appear in work journals when single parents become eligible for schemes, so they can discuss moving onto them with their work coaches.**
- **JCP should develop its work coach role, creating specialist single-parent work coaches who can offer bespoke support, particularly on finding flexible or part-time positions. The government must ensure it provides tailored, high-quality employment support for single parents through JCP.**
- **DWP should provide more guidance on self-employment for single parents and ensure JCP work coaches are trained to support single parents with self-employment. The existing information is basic, and more in-depth guidance could be integrated into the GOV.UK guidance on universal credit: further information for families.**
- **The UK government should press ahead with reviewing the effectiveness of benefit sanctions. Previous Gingerbread research has shown that sanctions and the threat of sanctions do little to help single parents looking for work (Gingerbread, 2018).**



## Recommendations for employers

- Advertise jobs through JCP so single parents can find them easily.
- Use JCP for recruitment advice and support and discuss how you can target roles for single parents.
- Sign up for one of the schemes helping people get back into work – view the complete list of Restart providers available.

## 4. Support single parents in retraining



Many thousands of single parents have worked in sectors that the pandemic severely impacted, in jobs that do not exist to the same extent post-pandemic. Our research shows that although many single parents are finding new roles, these are primarily part-time and could require single parents to move sectors. In addition, single parents with preschool-aged children are known to have lower qualifications and to be furthest from the job market. With the change in conditions introduced as part of the Way to Work campaign, it is vital that JCP supports and encourages a broad range of training, including opportunities to retrain in new sectors, where relevant. This support should also include help with childcare to enable single parents to access training. Single parents must not be left behind in opportunities to retrain.

## Recommendations for policymakers

- JCP should provide 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 those who need to change their work area) to receive support about using their transferable skills. Single parents should be informed about available training and work experience and it should be recorded in their UC journal.
- DWP should ensure the 'lifetime skills guarantee' reflects the needs of single parents, including matching access to courses with free childcare available through UC.
- DWP should ensure that childcare support is available to all job-seeking single parents who are undertaking training or improving their skills, not just those who have preschool-aged children.
- JCP should target support for single parents with preschool-aged children who can train for up to a year, so they can make the most of

gaining new skills when their children are young. Single parents with preschool-aged children must be alerted through their UC journal to this flexibility to train.

- In designing and reviewing their employment support offers, DWP should ensure its targets are longer-term job outcomes rather than short-term 'work first' objectives. For single parents, this should mean specialist advice and training programmes encourage them to return to roles that match their skillset or retrain for new industries.

## Recommendations for employers

- When creating job descriptions:
  - » Distinguish between essential and desirable requirements
  - » Encourage people to apply even if they don't tick all the boxes
  - » State whether on-the-job training can be provided
- When reviewing applications, consider applicants' transferable skills, which may have been gained in other sectors or other areas of their lives.

## 5. Clearer 'better off in work' calculations and information about in-work conditionality for single parents



Almost all single parents are in work or want to work. But single parents can be fearful about not being better off moving into work, which can be a barrier to them accepting a job or applying for roles. Successive Conservative governments have prioritised 'making work pay', including reducing the UC taper rate in November 2021. Nevertheless, single parents find it hard to access a straightforward back-to-work calculation that includes the benefits they will lose if they were to move into work, or the implications of being self-employed. Single parents need a clearer understanding of how much they will earn if they accept a job offer or move into self-employment.

In the autumn statement 2022, the government announced plans to bring forward its 'in-work progression offer', which was expected to start in September 2023 (GOV.UK, 2022). Some 600,000 UC claimants will be expected to meet a JCP work coach to increase their hours or earnings. It is not yet clear what this will mean for single parents in part-time roles.

## Recommendations for policymakers

- Specialist single parent work coaches 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
  - » The benefits they will lose
- JCP should advise single parents to 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.
- DWP should update current GOV.UK guidance on universal credit: further information for families, including an explanation of the increased work allowance and taper rate, so the implications of moving into work are clear for single parents.
- DWP should ensure that any in-work progression conditions are tailored to the needs of single parents.
- Following the 2022 autumn statement, update GOV.UK guidance on universal credit: further information for families, including more information about in-work conditionality and what this means for single parents.

## 6. Ensure single parents aren't left behind in efforts to manage the rising cost of living



Single-parent families were hit hard during the pandemic and are now worried about the rising cost of living and wages not rising at an equivalent rate. We welcome government commitments to increase UC in line with inflation and direct government support to help low-income families through cost-of-living payments (GOV.UK, 2022). However, it is likely that rising costs will have a disproportionate impact on single-parent families and their ability to find suitable work.

Financial worries can significantly affect the mental health and wellbeing of single parents, which in turn influences their ability to find and sustain work.

Additionally, rising fuel and transport costs can limit their ability to travel, and therefore influences the suitability of certain roles. To recognise these connections, this final set of recommendations focuses on supporting single parents through the cost-of-living crisis so they can look for and secure work.

## **Recommendations for policymakers**

- **Jobcentre work coaches should take into consideration rising household costs when assessing the suitability of jobs.**
- **The government should provide immediate financial support for low-income single parents struggling with rising costs and make sure they are prioritised in all programmes to help tackle the cost of living, including support with energy bills.**
- **DWP should suspend sanctions during the current cost-of-living crisis, as they did during the first part of the pandemic.**
- **UC to rise in line with the retail price index, which includes housing costs, and is deemed to be a more accurate measure of inflation than the consumer price index.**
- **As part of its Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan, the Department for Health and Social care should improve access to mental health services for single parents and their children so they are a priority group to receive support.**

# Technical appendix

We undertook 2 sets of retrospective qualitative interviews with single parents in England and Wales. The single parents selected for our sample were unemployed and on job-seeking benefits at the point of the first interviews (in September-October 2021). Our sample was designed to ensure diversity in the characteristics associated with single parents' experiences of unemployment and job-seeking.

The original sample involved contacting every single parent 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 join in our new project. From Caring without Sharing, 6 single parents had lost their jobs during the pandemic and agreed to participate. We employed a sampling company, Criteria Fieldwork Ltd, to recruit the remaining single parents to be interviewed.

In May 2022, we contacted all 45 single parents to invite them to participate in the follow-up stage of the project. Of these, 30 agreed to be re-interviewed in May 2022.

The process of securing interviews with the original sample was challenging. Many single parents were busy with work and caring responsibilities, with little free time. In some cases, ongoing issues occupied much of their headspace, including custody cases, upcoming evictions and mental and physical health issues.

We attempted to contact all the single parents by email and mobile phone, although, in several instances, the original phone numbers were no longer valid. Interviews were offered during the day, evenings and weekends, and a few were re-scheduled on several occasions when unexpected issues arose for the interviewees.

As was the case for the baseline interviews, the single parents who agreed to participate were provided with information in advance about the study's purpose and assured anonymity. They were interviewed at pre-agreed times on the telephone in May-June 2022 by a team of 2 researchers. Interviews took between 15 and 30 minutes on average. As with the baseline interviews, participants were given a £20 incentive in the form of an Amazon voucher to thank them for their time.

Baseline and follow-up interviews were transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach, using Taguette software (Rampin et al., 2020).<sup>11</sup>



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<sup>11</sup> Taguette (Version 0.9.2). Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4002742>

Codes and themes were developed iteratively around the overriding themes on which the interviews focused. In the baseline interviews, these were routes into unemployment, aspirations for future work, job-seeking experiences, availability and experiences of Jobcentre Plus and other support. In the follow-up interviews, we also focused on participants' experiences of the roles they had secured and their longer-term aspirations about work, along with the implications of the emerging cost-of-living crisis.

## Quantitative analysis of the Labour Force Survey

We used the last 3 years of LFS data to understand how employment trends changed before and during Covid-19. We focused on working-age individuals (aged 16 to 64). Usually, all first interviews in the LFS are conducted face-to-face. However, in-person interviewing was suspended at the start of the pandemic, and we switched to telephone-only interviews. Unfortunately, this led to a fall in the response rate, which meant increasing the number of people selected for interviews. In turn, this increase in sample and move to telephone interviews introduced increased non-response bias into the survey. Specifically, this was evident in a change in housing tenure of the Household Reference Person, 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 ONS introduced tenure-based weights into the LFS in October 2020. However, this was a short-term fix and more recently the ONS used HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) Real-Time Information to provide estimated population weights, which were applied from July 2021. See more detailed information on the weighting methodology and how the changes have affected employment statistics [here](#).

## Quantitative analysis of Welfare at a Social Distance data

Data from the second and third waves of a longitudinal survey of benefit claimants were analysed. We aimed to explore single parents' attitudes to and experiences of work coaches and Jobcentre Plus, how these compared with those of couple parents and non-parents, and how they may have changed over time. 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). It focused on the benefits that provide income to people who lose their job or whose earnings reduce, namely 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, the second wave between May and June 2021 and the third wave in January 2022. The analysis used weights to ensure that the results were 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).

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