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FIRST WAVE FINDINGS: Lone Parents

May 2016

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Key points

- Policy stakeholder and practitioner interviewees are highly critical of the assumptions underpinning increased conditionality, arguing that lone parents' low levels of paid work participation are not the result of welfare dependence or resistance to work. Rather, the vast majority want to work but are prevented by structural and/or individual barriers.
- They are also critical of current implementation, arguing that the balance between sanctions and support is weighted too heavily toward the former. For many lone parents, the support provided has been insufficient to help them overcome barriers to work.
- Many lone parent interviewees do not fully understand their Claimant Commitment. This issue is most acute for vulnerable parents who are often penalised for failures of comprehension rather than deliberate non-compliance.
- Existing evidence indicates that lone parent flexibilities are insufficiently implemented by Jobcentre advisers. Support providers are very concerned that these flexibilities are to be 'diluted' under Universal Credit.
- A number of lone parent interviewees have been sanctioned for failing to meet demands that should not have been imposed given the existence of lone parent flexibilities. Some have been sanctioned inappropriately as a result of Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative errors.
- Sanctions have had a negative, and sometimes severe, impact on the financial situation of affected families. The threat of a sanction, even if not enacted, causes extreme anxiety for some lone parents.
- Lone parent interviewees report doing everything they can to minimise the impact of sanctions on their children, but concerns about damaging effects on innocent third parties are widespread.
- Most interviewees express some sympathy with the rationale used to justify conditionality. Yet, they argue that this has little traction in practice given the negative impacts of sanctions on poor families and limited evidence that conditionality helps them gain and maintain work offering income sufficient to improve material wellbeing.



Policy background

Until relatively recently, lone parents claiming social security benefits in the UK were not required to look for paid employment until their youngest child reached school leaving age (Finn and Gloster, 2010). Changes from the late 1990s onwards have however been characterised by increased expectations, such that active attempts to seek paid work have become a mandatory requirement for most lone parents' continued eligibility for social assistance (Whitworth and Griggs, 2013).

Key policy changes have included the introduction of mandatory Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) and Lone Parent Obligations (LPOs). WFIs were introduced in 2001 for lone parents on Income Support (IS) with a youngest child aged 5 or older, and their extension to all lone parents on IS with a youngest child aged 0-5 from 2004 (Knight et al., 2006). WFIs have become more intensive and frequent over time (Finn and Gloster, 2010).

The introduction of Lone Parent Obligations (LPOs) in 2008 meant that lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over were no longer entitled to IS solely on grounds of being a lone parent, and were transferred onto Jobseekers Allowance (JSA). The age threshold reduced incrementally in subsequent years. Now, lone parents deemed able to work who have a youngest child aged 5 or older are treated in broadly similar terms to other jobseekers. Those who fail to comply with required job-seeking activities may be sanctioned.

Lone parent 'flexibilities' were introduced in 2008 in recognition of the responsibilities associated with being the sole carer of a child (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011). When used, these allow lone parents to legitimately restrict their hours of work, depending on the age of their child and other circumstances – for example, to 16 hours per week, to within school hours, or to situations where appropriate and affordable childcare is available (Gingerbread, 2011).

Other developments affecting lone parents included the introduction of the Work Programme in 2011 and phasing in of Universal Credit (UC)

from 2013 (Graham and McQuaid, 2014). Lone parent flexibilities are not replicated in their entirety under UC, with many being relegated to guidance and others having been qualified so as to narrow their application (Gingerbread, 2013).

In 2014, Jobcentre personal advisers were granted discretion to determine the frequency and duration of WFIs for lone parents with a youngest child aged 1-4 who claim IS solely on the basis of being a lone parent. Advisers were also given power to require lone parents with a youngest child aged 3 or 4 to undertake mandatory work-related activity (WRA) if they are in receipt of IS, UC, or are in the Employment and Support Allowance Work-Related Activity Group (WRAG) (TSO, 2014).

Proposals under the Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015-16 represent a major step-change, as these will potentially subject lone parents of pre-school children to full work-related conditionality for the first time. Should they come into effect, these will require lone parents with children as young as three to look for work as a condition of UC receipt and place additional requirements on those with two year olds to attend work-focussed interviews and prepare for work, from April 2017 (Kennedy, 2015).

Implementation and experiences of conditionality

Misguided premises

Stakeholder interviewees were highly critical of the premises underpinning increased conditionality, most notably that lone parents' low levels of participation in paid work are the result of welfare dependence and/or resistance to engaging in paid work. They argue that the current welfare conditionality regime takes insufficient account of the personal factors (such as ill health, poor skills and/or limited work experience) and/or structural obstacles (high child care costs, limited job availability, etc.) that impede lone parents' engagement in the paid workforce.

“ The problem is a tough labour market, lack of flexible jobs, high childcare costs, the fact that work doesn’t pay, low qualifications and skills, lack of work experience, and low self-esteem... If you want to get single parents into work you have to work with them to overcome those barriers. ”

(PS26, Senior representative, lone parent charity)

“ Many single parents cannot move into employment for a vast number of reasons ... The jobs aren’t there. We don’t have family friendly employers. Childcare remains a huge barrier for many single parents. The reality is within single parent families there is a very high incidence of disability and illness either of the single parent themselves or the child and that issue will often prevent parents from moving into employment. ”

(PS39, Senior representative, lone parent charity)

These views were corroborated by lone parent interviewees, virtually all of whom expressed a desire to engage, or re-engage, with paid work.

“ If I get into employment, it’s about being a good example for my kids. It’s positive. Hopefully more money coming in the house, healthier food you can put on the table, and better clothing. Definitely I think employment is the way to go. As a whole, it’s good for the family situation, and that’s the road I want to go down. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, Scotland)

“ [I want to be] not struggling on benefits ... Just to have a better life because I don’t like sitting indoors 24/7. It drives me crazy. I need to get out of the house. If I can get out of the house and get paid then it’s just a bonus really. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, England)

Further to this, a number of policy stakeholder and lone parent interviewees questioned the premises underpinning the age threshold that means lone parents with a youngest child aged five or older are expected to be available for and actively seeking paid work. This, they noted, takes insufficient account of the variability of children’s needs.

“ It shouldn’t in any way be based on something as crude as the age of the child, it has to be based on the welfare and the needs of the child, so there will be a lot of circumstances, including when the children are teenage, where, actually, there are quite good reasons why the parent may need to be concentrating on the child at the time... ”

(PS26, Senior representative, lone parent charity)

Lone parent flexibilities

The flexibilities applicable to lone parents (exemptions intended to enable them to juggle work and childcare responsibilities) are, in the views of service providers, poorly understood and/or insufficiently implemented by many Jobcentre staff. Service providers reported being extremely concerned about the implications of the pending ‘dilution’ of lone parent flexibilities under UC, fearing that the loss of these safeguards will increase the risk of lone parents being sanctioned unfairly.

“ We get a constant stream of, ‘I’m being put under pressure to do shift work, to work weekends’. ‘I’m being put under pressure to work longer hours than I can.’ ... You know, just endless documented examples of people trying to juggle family responsibilities with jobseeking, and Jobcentre Plus just not implementing them well. ”

(PS26, Senior representative, lone parent charity)

“ What we have seen is an increase in the misinformation that comes out of Jobcentre Plus. So, single parents being told, ‘You’re going to have to look for jobs of 30, 35 hours a week’ or the single parent who was told, ‘You must apply for this job that provides employment until... ten o’clock at night and it’s all right for your nine year-old to stay at home alone while you go out and do that.’ ”

(PS39, Senior representative, lone parent charity)

Only a minority of the lone parent JSA recipients interviewed were aware that lone parent flexibilities existed. Some reported that their Jobcentre advisers or Work Programme coaches took account of their caring responsibilities; others felt that the expectations placed on them were unreasonable and disregarded their commitments as lone parents.

“ I will say that it’s down to the individual who they assign to be your [Work Programme] coach. I’m lucky enough that the person who is currently my coach is a brilliant person. He is really accommodating in the sense that he respects the fact I’m a lone parent. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, England)

“ Some of the things they were asking me to do were on until 4.30 and it’s like I’m a single mum. Where do you expect my children to go then? So they don’t even take into consideration those sorts of things. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, England)

Many lone parents reported that they had encountered inconsistency in the attitudes and competence of Jobcentre staff; so too the expectations of individual staff members.

“ I did everything to avoid sanctions, I jumped through every hoop they asked me to jump through. That’s what was so upsetting about being sanctioned, because I played to their every rule and I still got sanctioned... One person said one thing to me and another person said the opposite. As a result I was sanctioned. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, Scotland)

“ I just have no faith in the Jobcentre really... When you ask them things, they don’t really know what they’re talking about... You want to be talking to somebody that if you’re in that profession, they should know the ins and outs, so the fact that they don’t is a bit alarming. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, Scotland)

-KEY-

PS refers to policy stakeholder
 FG refers to focus group
 WSU refers to welfare service user

Provision of support

All service providers interviewed reported that the balance of sanctions and support is at present inappropriately weighted toward the former, arguing that the support offered to lone parents on JSA is generally insufficient to help them overcome the personal and structural barriers to work noted above. They note that this issue is especially problematic for lone parents who are furthest from the labour market, such as those who have been out of work for a long time or those with few or no qualifications.

“ What we have certainly seen over the years is the actual practical support being offered by job centres has diminished... now it seems to be more a question of policing. You come in, give your account, make sure you’re doing what you should be doing as part of your Claimant Commitment... Certainly people we’re seeing are saying they’re not getting any practical help to get jobs. ”

(PS39, Senior representative, lone parent charity)

“ What do sanctions do? They take very busy Jobcentre Plus advisers, and they add to the extent to which... they’re going through a lot of box-ticking, process type conversations. The whole system is putting a huge amount of time into administering conditionality and sanctions, the actual time the claimants are getting with a Jobcentre Plus adviser on active support, on job search, is absolutely tiny. ”

(PS26, Senior representative, lone parent charity)

Accordingly, many lone parents reported that they felt they were not being given the support they needed by the Jobcentre, especially in relation to things such as enhancing their employability (acquiring qualifications, for example) and accessing affordable childcare. Experiences on the Work Programme were mixed: some lone parents found the courses provided helpful, others considered them to be of little value.

“ The help I get from [provider] is outstanding. It’s the best place I’ve ever been... The tutors and management there, they understand. They’ll sit and listen to you if you’ve got a problem. ”

(WSU, lone parent, male, England)

“ There was never anyone who sat and looked at my qualifications or who gave me

any advice. I thought it should be a place that’s supposed to help you to find work and I never received any help to find work... People are very much on their own to find work. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, Scotland)

Many expressed frustration with the perceived futility of their Claimant Commitment requirements, which they saw as doing little to realistically enhance their prospects of acquiring paid work.

“ I was just sending my CV to everybody, even jobs that didn’t suit the hours. You end up doing that because you get pressured... So, you just apply for any jobs, nightshift, even though you can’t do it. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, Scotland)

“ I’m doing courses which are recognised qualifications... For someone that came from a bad upbringing, and no education, this is a big thing. Who’s going to employ me with no qualifications? But they’re telling me to stop doing what I’m doing to apply for a job. It just doesn’t make sense. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, Scotland)

Causes of sanctions

As has been widely reported for other benefit recipient groups, service provider and lone parent interviewees emphasised that many sanctions have been the direct result of administrative errors and/or poor communication on the part of the DWP.

“ [It] is often no more complicated than their kid’s ill, they phone Jobcentre to say, ‘I can’t make my work focused interview because my child’s very ill’, they get in a week later and they find they’ve been sanctioned because there’s no record of the

phone call. So we get endless streams of these kind of situations. ”

(PS26, Senior representative, lone parent charity)

“ My daughter was ill, she was very sick that morning... I tried to obtain medical help of what to do in such a situation... By the time it was over I tried to call it was too late, my advisor wasn't there. They said I'm late and they're going to sanction me. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, England)

“ [For] work-focused letters, for some reason, they still had me down as [address], even though I told them from the start I'd been evicted from there, I've now got a c/o address. So, they sanctioned me for not going to work-focused interviews [because I did not receive notification about them]. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, England)

Further to this, service provider and lone parent interviewees reported that in many cases, sanctions have resulted from welfare recipients' failure to fully comprehend what is expected of them, rather than deliberate non-compliance.

“ [My adviser] said, 'You agreed ... this and you agreed that', but to be honest with you, when your benefits change... you're naive to what's expected of you... I just kept saying, 'So what is it you want me to do? Because I'm trying my hardest to achieve where I want to go'. 'Well, you signed, you signed, you signed', and you really don't know what you're signing for. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, Scotland)

“ I didn't even know about sanctions - I didn't even know about benefits, to be honest, a wee book to fill out, whatever,

and I went up one day and she says I hadn't done something on this book and she sanctioned me. I didn't even know what she was talking about. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, Scotland)

Service provider interviewees emphasised that this problem was particularly acute for vulnerable lone parents.

“ It's the most vulnerable single parents who struggle the most. The more articulate and thriving will generally manage to get a job, or manage to at least demonstrate clearly every week that they've made proper efforts to get a job, and that they're doing what they need to do. It's always the ones who just don't understand the systems who come out worst in this kind of thing. ”

(PS26, Senior representative, lone parent charity)

Impacts of sanctions

Policy stakeholders and frontline practitioners note that sanctions can have a severely detrimental impact on the financial wellbeing of lone parent families, and that this is often associated with adverse outcomes for the physical and/or mental health of lone parents and, by extension, their children.

“ For some lone parents that don't have anyone, so they've gone to food banks because they don't have money to feed themselves or their children. There are some quite extreme situations where lone parents are surviving on very little income and so the impact's really negative for them and their children. ”

(PS31, Senior representative, lone parent campaigning organisation)

“ You absolutely see the effect [of sanctions] on their mental health over a

period of time. It's like a steady downhill trajectory as they struggle to cope with that four-week period, so massive mental health impacts. There's got to be physical effects on them. There's so much evidence that shows that parents will feed their children before they feed themselves. ”

(PS32, Senior representative, children's charity)

Experience of sanctions had led to significant financial hardship for a number of lone parent interviewees, especially those already dealing with debt.

“ [My gas and electric] fell into that much arrears... I was without heating for ages... I pawned everything I had... You're literally going, ‘Do I eat or do I have light?’ ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, Scotland)

“ I just had to cope with what I had, because I still get Child Tax [Credit], so I had to basically make that stretch, plus going to the food bank and like gas and electric was draining my money... I've got in debt with my water over it because I couldn't pay that for ages. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, England)

Strategies employed by lone parents who had been sanctioned included: using food banks, applying for hardship payments, borrowing money, reducing heating or lighting in their home, and/or restricting their own food intake.

“ I did look at payday loans, because I was really worried. But then because mum helped so much, if it weren't for mum helping so much, I probably would have had a few payday loans to help me through. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, England)

“ So, I can't afford to eat at the moment ... So, if I can't afford my food, he [my son] has that, like he'll eat my food, I don't care. He even says, ‘Why aren't you eating?’ ‘I ate earlier.’ ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, England)

Sanctions had a very negative impact on the mental health of almost all the lone parent interviewees affected. The risk of being sanctioned had caused extreme anxiety for some, even when they were doing everything in their power to adhere to their Claimant Commitments.

“ Before I was getting sanctioned I was all right, I was sorted; I had a laugh with everybody, everybody knew me. Then when the sanctions started kicking in I just changed; I couldn't be bothered, wasn't going out, I wasn't bothered about looking for a job. I just went right downhill. ”

(WSU, lone parent, male, England)

“ The night before obviously you're waiting to see if you have done enough; you don't know if you've done enough... So you have a sick feeling the night before going ‘oh no’, you dread going in to sign on because you don't know if you're going to have your money next week. ”

(WSU, Lone parent, female, Scotland)

Work-related outcomes

A number of stakeholders also noted that the positive work-related outcomes for lone parents described in policy debate are overstated given the weak financial gains generally associated with acquiring work. They explained that most jobs obtained by lone parents tend to be poorly paid, offer little prospect for career development and/or are unsustainable. It was widely agreed that this is very concerning in a context where

levels of in-work poverty are at an all-time high, and the majority of children living in poverty live in a household where one or more parents is in paid work.

“ We’re seeing a lot of unhappy parents, stressed parents and parents being forced back into employment, and I have to say with not a lot of regard to the actual employment they’re being forced into... It is well-known that yes a lot of single parents go into work but they also come out of work because it’s not sustainable. ”
(PS39, Senior representative, lone parent voluntary sector organisation)

Whilst virtually all lone parent interviewees expressed a desire to work in the future, many were also mindful of the fact that acquiring paid work would not necessarily lead to substantial income gains, in the short term at least.

“ The jobs I would be looking for... [are] minimum wage. So for the financial side of things the benefits would be pennies, and if I was having to travel to work, that would be probably swallowed up in travel costs, you know, so!... Financially, it’s not a huge difference. ”
(WSU, lone parent, male, Scotland)

“ I honestly say, hand on heart, I wish I’d never ever returned to work because I am in more debt now than I was then. ”
(WSU, lone parent, female, England)

Views on whether and when conditionality is justified

As noted in a previous briefing paper (Johnsen, 2014), proponents of work activation reforms typically justify their use with lone parents on either paternalistic grounds (i.e. involvement in

paid work is good for them and their children) or contractualistic grounds (i.e. lone parents have a duty to do what they can to prepare for and/or seek paid work).

Paternalistic stances

All policy stakeholders and most lone parents interviewed expressed at least some degree of sympathy with the sentiments underpinning a paternalistic stance, in that the many potential benefits of paid work are widely recognised. These include improving household income, enhancing parental self-esteem, offering positive role models for their children and so on.

“ The vast majority of single parents want to work, and are highly motivated to work... [They] want to be in work, or in ... training... not just as a way of getting additional income, but to be a role model for the children is something single parents talk about a great deal. ”

(PS26, Senior representative, lone parent charity)

“ I want to get a job so I can give my little ones a better life. I can give them everything they want. ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, Scotland)

That said, the majority of interviewees argued that paternalistic justifications for welfare conditionality affecting lone parents have little traction in practice given: a) the negative (financial and other) impacts of sanctions on already poor families; and/or b) limited evidence that the current conditionality regime actually helps lone parents gain and maintain paid work offering an income sufficient to improve their material wellbeing (see above).

“ If you work on the pragmatic assumption that conditionality gets people into work, therefore child poverty should be reduced by that, well again, because of the structure of the economy and because

of the cuts to benefits and because of the types of jobs that people often end up being pushed into because of conditionality that actually works counter to the objective of reducing child poverty... Two thirds of children who live in poverty have a working parent. So, work clearly is necessary probably, but not a sufficient condition for reducing child poverty. ”

(PS32, Senior representative, children’s charity)

“ If you’re reducing the income of an already impoverished family, then you... are not taking them out of poverty and improving their wellbeing, so to me it [a regime containing sanctions] is never justified, never. ”

(PS31, Senior representative, lone parent campaigning organisation)

Significantly, many questioned the justifiability of sanctions which threaten the welfare of ‘innocent’ third parties, in this case children.

“ Whatever you think of the parent’s behaviour, and however strongly you think the parent had done something that justified a sanction, its completely unclear to me how you can construct an ethical argument that says it’s therefore fair for the child in that family to suffer as a result. ”

(PS26, Senior representative, lone parent charity)

Contractualistic stances

The contractualistic rationale used to justify the conditionality affecting lone parents was also called into question by some interviewees. Most noted that it is not unreasonable to expect welfare recipients to make some kind of contribution to society. They do however object to the devaluation of unpaid care and failure of measures to view

caregiving responsibilities as a legitimate citizenship obligation.

“ The problem is there isn’t much understanding in society for the contribution that people make through caring responsibilities and through parenting. Lots of single parents talk to us about feeling ‘You’re damned if you do [work] and damned if you don’t’. If you’re on the dole you’re seen as a skiver, if you want to go to work you’re seen as a bad parent... But that sense that you have parenting responsibilities, as well as your responsibilities to try to seek work, that’s where a lot of particular tension around single parents as a claimant group has been. ”

(PS26, Senior representative, lone parent charity)

“ I’m a mother, I want to be a mother, I want to give my son his breakfast in the morning. I think it’s wrong to demand I work and a stranger gives him his breakfast... Family is more important than money. You do get people that have got big high-shot careers. I think they neglect their children to be honest. I think more people should stay at home with their children... Why’s that wrong, for me wanting to be a mother and to be there for my children? ”

(WSU, lone parent, female, Scotland)

Conclusions

Some but not all commentators believe there is a place for welfare conditionality in increasing lone parents’ participation in paid work. Many do however argue that the present system is based on misguided assumptions about lone parents’ attitudes and aspirations regarding paid work and is poorly equipped to help them overcome the barriers they face. Interviewees report that at best, current practice fails to support lone parents in the

way proposed; at worst, it potentially compounds the disadvantage they already face.

There is a strong consensus that a more constructive approach should be developed in relation to lone parents where, if used at all, conditionality is a 'last resort'. This, most stakeholders note, would place much greater emphasis on overcoming barriers to employment by targeting the greater number of lone parents who 'want to work' but cannot due to structural and/or personal barriers. It could then focus attention on the minority who could work but do not want to.

“ There’s such huge benefits for work, and most single parents we find absolutely know, you sit them down ... and they’ll tell you very quickly all the good reasons why work is a good thing. So there’s a massive amount to build on, and I think we would say as a society, let’s just start by building on some of that positive aspiration that most families have, which is to support their family to bring them up. ”

(SP26 Senior representative, lone parent charity)

Data sources

This paper draws upon data from interviews with five policy stakeholders (including representatives of national support organisations), six participants in a focus group with frontline practitioners (including welfare rights and helpline advisers), and (wave one) interviews with 53 lone parents.

Further research

These lone parents will be interviewed again for our research in 2015-16 and then for a third time in 2016-17. This will enable the research to capture the dynamics of change for these individuals and the role of sanctions and support within this. It will also enable a better understanding of the medium-term cumulative outcomes of interventions and the impacts of new legislation

and mechanisms of sanctions and support that are currently being introduced.

Further Information

This paper was written by Prof Sarah Johnsen from Heriot-Watt University. It is one of a set of nine presenting our first wave findings on different policy areas. An overview paper sets out our findings in summary.

Further information about the project may be found at: <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/>
A briefing paper on the policy context and existing research evidence on lone parents may be accessed at: <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/publications/>

For further information about our findings, please contact communications officer Janis Bright at janis.bright@york.ac.uk

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Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change is a major five-year programme of research funded under the Economic and Social Research Council's Centres and Large Grants Scheme. The project aims to create an international and interdisciplinary focal point for social science research on welfare conditionality and brings together teams of researchers working in six English and Scottish Universities.

