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Conditionality Briefing: Lone Parents

Sarah Johnsen

In comparison to other OECD countries, the UK has until recently employed a relatively 'light' conditionality regime as regards the welfare eligibility of lone parents. Lone parents' entitlements to UK welfare benefits have however been increasingly tied to their participation in the labour market in recent years, such that active attempts to seek paid work are now a mandatory requirement for the continued eligibility of most.

Key points

- The introduction of mandatory Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) in 2001 was a significant change, affecting lone parents on Income Support (IS) with a youngest child aged 5 or older. WFIs were extended to all lone parents on IS from 2004. WFI requirements have become more intensive over time, most notably via the incorporation of mandatory Action Plans in 2005 and introduction of Personal Adviser discretion in determining the frequency and duration of WFIs for lone parents with a youngest child aged 1-4 from April 2014.
- The implementation of Lone Parent Obligations (LPOs) in 2008 heralded further change, in that parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over were no longer entitled to IS solely on grounds of being a lone parent. The LPO age threshold as regards youngest children reduced incrementally in subsequent years, to 10 or above in 2009, 7 or above in 2010, and 5 or above in 2012.
- Under LPOs, lone parents deemed able to work are treated in broadly similar terms to other Jobseeker Allowance (JSA) claimants, that is, are required to be available for and actively seeking paid employment. Some lone parents are exempted on ground of their own or a child's ill health or disability, however, and may claim Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) or remain eligible for IS.
- Further changes introduced in April 2014 mean that lone parents with a youngest child aged 3 or 4 may be required to attend courses, volunteer or undertake other mandatory work-related activity if they receive IS solely on the basis of being a lone parent, are in receipt of Universal Credit, or are in the ESA Work-Related Activity Group.
- The 'activation' reforms affecting lone parents are typically justified on grounds that paid work benefits lone parent families financially; also that it improves parents' physical and mental health and wellbeing outcomes. Moreover, the promotion of lone parents' participation in the paid workforce is widely regarded as a critical ingredient in attempts to combat child poverty.
- Key objections to activation measures include: insufficient recognition given to personal and structural barriers restricting lone parents' participation in paid work; the devaluation of unpaid care; lack of evidence regarding long-term outcomes; the weak financial gains associated with acquisition of paid work; and the disproportionate impact of LPOs on women which are said to compound their existing labour market disadvantage.

Background

Lone parents have been a particular focus within welfare to work policies across OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) nations due to their disproportionately high poverty rates and, in several countries, low employment rates (Finn and Gloster, 2010). Lone parents comprise one quarter of all households with dependent children in the UK, proportionally more than most OECD countries (Avram et al., 2013). The UK is reported to have ‘lagged behind’ other European countries in applying work-related conditions to lone parents in receipt of benefits (Wright, 2011), but ‘activation’ reforms have been applied incrementally since the late 1990s, such that lone parents’ entitlements to social assistance benefits have been drawn ever tighter around their participation in the labour market (Tinsley, 2014; Whitworth, 2013a).

Key policy developments on conditionality

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, and the formal policy on lone parent work-related requirements within the benefit system was neutral in that it neither encouraged nor discouraged paid work (Finn and Gloster, 2010). Changes from the late 1990s onwards have however been characterised by increased expectations regarding paid employment, 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).

The early New Labour years have been described as a “time of incremental inroads into a comparatively light work-related conditionality regime” (Whitworth and Griggs, 2013, p.126). The New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP), introduced in 1998, offered lone parent Income Support (IS) claimants access to Jobcentre-based employment support to improve their job readiness and employment opportunities on a voluntary basis (Casebourne et al., 2010). The NDLP’s introduction was however preceded by cuts to lone parent benefits in 1997, via the withdrawal of the One Parent Benefit and Lone Parent Premium on Income Support (Wright, 2011).

The introduction of mandatory Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) in 2001 for lone parents on 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, represented a significant change (Knight et al., 2006). Some lone parents were exempt and attendance could be deferred for others, but participation became a condition of benefit receipt for the vast majority. Over time WFIs became more intensive and frequent, most notably through the incorporation of mandatory Action Plans after 2005, which must be agreed with a Personal Adviser and specify steps lone parents can take to prepare for work (Finn and Gloster, 2010).

A further significant change was the introduction of Lone Parent obligations (LPOs) in 2008, which meant that lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over would no longer be entitled to IS solely on grounds of being a lone parent, and were thus transferred onto Jobseekers Allowance (JSA). The age threshold as regards youngest children reduced incrementally in subsequent years: to 10 or above in October 2009, 7 or above from October 2010, and 5 or above from May 2012. Under LPOs, lone parents deemed able to work are treated in broadly similar terms to other JSA claimants, that is, are required to be available for, and actively seeking, paid employment.

Some lone parents are exempt from LPOs, however. Lone parents with a health problem or disability which limits their ability to work may be entitled to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) rather than JSA, but within the ESA scheme may also be required to engage with work-related activities if deemed capable of doing so (Avram et al., 2013). Those receiving IS for reasons other than being a lone parent, for example foster carers or parents in receipt of Carer's Allowance because their child has a disability, remain eligible to claim IS (Finn and Gloster, 2010).

Lone parent 'flexibilities' were incorporated into JSA regulations in 2008 in recognition of the responsibilities involved in caring for a child (Casebourne et al., 2010; Coleman and Lanceley, 2011). These flexibilities allow lone parents to refuse a job where no appropriate or affordable childcare is available and exempt them from requirements to seek work if their child has been excluded from school and it is not reasonably possible for them to make alternative care arrangements, for example (see Gingerbread, 2011). Existing evidence suggests that these flexibilities are often misinterpreted or poorly communicated by Jobcentre Plus advisers, however (OPFS, 2014).

Since July 2011 lone parents have also been affected by the Coalition Government's consolidation of employment activation schemes under the Work Programme (Graham and McQuaid, 2014). Early evaluations suggest that the support provided under the Work Programme is poorly suited to the needs of lone parents (Whitworth, 2013b). Job outcomes for lone parents have been particularly poor: 2.6% of lone parents moved into employment during the first 14 months of Work Programme implementation, compared with 3.5% across all groups, with disabled people being the only group with a lower success rate at 2.3% (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2013).

The introduction of Universal Credit, being phased in between 2013 and 2017, has also had an impact on lone parents (Graham and McQuaid, 2014; Lane et al., 2011). It has been noted that Universal Credit potentially offers greater flexibility for school-hours working and/or enhanced access to childcare subsidies (Davies, 2012; Whitworth and Griggs, 2013). Campaigning agencies have however expressed concern about the fact that lone parent flexibilities are not replicated in their entirety under Universal Credit proposals, with many being relegated to guidance (as opposed to regulation) and others having been qualified so as to narrow their application (Gingerbread, 2013).

Two further significant changes came into effect in April 2014 (TSO, 2014). First, 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 claimed IS solely on the basis of being a lone parent. Second, advisers were granted powers to require lone parents with a youngest child aged 3 or 4 to undertake mandatory work-related activity (WRA) (e.g. attend courses or do voluntary work) if they are in receipt of IS, Universal Credit, or are in the ESA Work-Related Activity Group (WRAG). Lone parents may restrict their availability for WRA unless this falls within their child's normal school hours or when their child is in the care of another person aged over 18.

Key arguments for and against conditionality

Proponents of work activation reforms typically justify their use with lone parents on either paternalist or contractualistic grounds (Whitworth and Griggs, 2013): the former endorses the financial and wider benefits of work for lone parents and their children and the latter emphasises requirements that everyone contribute to society via paid work wherever possible. With regard to the former, the influential Gregg Review (Gregg, 2008, p.10) for example called for greater conditionality on grounds that "more and more families were failing to enjoy the financial and non-financial benefits of paid work". Similarly, the Freud Review (Freud, 2007) discussing the future of welfare to work policies cites evidence that work is "good for physical and mental health and wellbeing" (Waddell and Burton, 2006, p.ix), and a key aim of the LPO regime was to "increase the number of lone parents moving into work, as a way of reducing child poverty among lone parent families, as well as to promote the wider benefits from a move into paid work" (Avram et al., 2013, p.18). Implicit in many such accounts is the view that lone parents have a 'duty' to work given the associations between non-engagement with paid employment and poverty, and the negative impacts of poverty on the wellbeing and long-term prospects of children (Davies, 2012). Moreover, elements of contractualism are apparent in some justifications of the use of conditionality, with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for example referring explicitly to a "new social contract with lone parents" wherein "the offer of increased help would be balanced with the responsibility of individuals to make the best use of that support or face a loss of benefit" (DWP, 2007, p.14). In the same vein, in a recent evaluation of the JSA sanctions regime, Oakley (2014, p.4) asserts that "Benefit sanctions ... ensure that in return for the support provided by the state, claimants are held accountable for doing all that they can to take on that support and move back into work".

A number of objections to activation reforms have been voiced, however. Many commentators argue that they take insufficient account of the personal factors (e.g. health, poor skills and/or work experience) and structural obstacles (e.g. high child care costs, limited job availability etc.) underpinning the low rate of lone parents' participation in paid work (Haux, 2011; Whitworth, 2013a). Some are highly critical of 'discursive misrepresentation' linking negative images of 'dependence' to

long-established messages about stigma and benefit receipt despite compelling evidence that most lone parents 'want' to work (Wright, 2011). Others object to the devaluation of unpaid care and failure of measures to accommodate caregiving responsibilities as a citizenship obligation (Burchardt, 2008; Davies, 2012). Yet other critics argue that whilst welfare-to-work programmes internationally do generally report initial positive employment outcomes for lone parents (Finn and Gloster, 2010), evidence regarding job retention and longer-term wellbeing is sparse (Graham and McQuaid, 2014; Whitworth and Griggs, 2013). There are particular concerns regarding outcomes for the approximately 15% of lone parents affected by LPOs who are not receiving any out-of-work benefits and are not in work (Avram et al., 2013) and the detrimental effect of sanctions on lone parents' financial and psychological wellbeing (Gingerbread, 2009; Joyce and Whiting, 2006); so too emerging evidence that those who face the greatest labour market disadvantage are the most likely to be sanctioned (Finn and Casebourne, 2012). Some commentators also claim that the 'positivity' of work-related outcomes may be overstated given the weak financial gains associated with acquisition of work (Coleman and Riley, 2012; Whitworth and Griggs, 2013), especially in a context where most poor children in the UK now live in 'working' households (Aldridge et al., 2011). In addition, it has been argued that LPOs affect women disproportionately and compound their existing labour market disadvantage (Davies, 2012).

Conclusions

The future stages of this study will enable the further investigation of, and collation of empirical evidence to inform, the key debates highlighted above. These will include assessments of: the balance and timing of support and sanctions experienced by lone parents; the impact of conditional welfare (and threat of sanctions) on the extent and nature of lone parents' preparation for and engagement with the paid workforce; the effects of welfare conditionality on lone parent households' financial circumstances and other aspects of wellbeing; the influence of individual and family circumstances such as the age and/or needs of children, parental education levels and health etc.; and the intersections between lone parent work activation reforms and other social policy interventions in, for example, the housing, disability, migration and/or anti-social behaviour fields.

About the Project

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, running 2013-2018. 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 i.e. University of Glasgow, Heriot-Watt University, University of Salford, Sheffield Hallam University, University of Sheffield and the University of York, which acts as the central hub for this collaborative partnership. Central to our work is a desire to

inform international policy and practice through the establishment of an original and comprehensive evidence base on the efficacy and ethicality of conditionality across a range of social policy fields and diverse groups of welfare service users.

For further information about the project please visit www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk or contact the Project Manager, Fleur Hughes on 01904 321299 or email info@welfareconditionality.ac.uk

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