

Lone Parent Obligations: work, childcare and the Jobseeker's Allowance regime

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As part of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO), since October 2010, lone parents with a youngest child aged seven and over have no longer been entitled to receive Income Support (IS) solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. Lone parents no longer eligible for IS have been able to claim other benefits, as appropriate, including Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). The JSA regime has been amended to include flexibilities for these parents, for example, in the hours of work they are required to seek.

Key Findings

- The lone parents in this study were generally very positive about work and the benefits that it would bring them and their families. Lone parents felt positive about work for both financial and non-financial reasons.
- The work readiness of lone parents depended on whether they had a 'strong work attachment', a 'high parenting orientation' or had experienced a 'critical life event'. Some in this latter group were the least work ready.
- Across the different groups of lone parents on JSA there was a strong dislike of claiming JSA. Negative attitudes to claiming JSA meant that JSA often gave lone parents a 'push' towards work. JSA seemed to have the greatest effect on attitudes to work for those with a high parenting orientation. Claiming JSA often gave these lone parents a direct push to look for work because they had to do so as part of the JSA regime.
- For lone parents who had a strong work attachment, their often recent work experience and high work orientation meant that they generally felt that being on JSA had no effect on their attitude to work. Those lone parents who had

experienced a critical life event were more varied in their opinions of whether JSA had affected their attitudes to work.

- The reluctance to use formal childcare was less strongly reported by this group of lone parents compared with lone parents with older children in previous evaluations of LPO. This appears to be because of positive experiences of free early years education. These families also reported positive experience or attitudes towards breakfast and after-school clubs.
- A small group of lone parents had moved into work of 16 hours or more per week at the time of interview. It was common for these to be low-skilled and low-paid positions. Generally, the lone parents were working part-time, often within school hours.

Background

The findings presented here are based on qualitative fieldwork in three case-study areas. Interviews were completed in June and July 2011 with 60 lone parents who made a claim for JSA when their youngest child was aged seven. The time between making their claim and interview meant that some of these children had turned eight by the time of interview. A small number of lone parents had slightly older children. These lone parents were included in order to ensure that sufficient interviews were carried out with lone parents who had experienced a sanction or disqualification.

Findings

Work readiness: The lone parents in this study varied in their work readiness. These included those:

- with a 'strong work attachment'. These lone parents were the most work ready and had recent work experience. They were out of work because of redundancy or because of inflexibility of employers or unsuitable childcare;
- with a 'strong parenting orientation'. These lone parents had often been out of work for many years, usually since becoming parents, but did not usually have complex barriers preventing them from working;
- who had experienced a 'critical life event', such as the onset or worsening of a health condition or experiencing homelessness. Some of these lone parents were the least work ready.

Some lone parents had strong social networks that provided support with childcare which could help them move into work more easily. In some cases, this included a supportive relationship with the absent parent. In many more cases, however, absent parents did not provide childcare or were seen as unreliable in their involvement with their children.

Childcare: The reluctance to use formal childcare was less strongly reported by this group of lone parents compared with lone parents with older children in previous evaluations of LPO. This appears to be because of positive experiences of free early years education, and positive experience or attitudes towards breakfast and after-school clubs.

There were some very positive attitudes about before and after-school clubs found in this research, and these were based on good previous experiences of them. The learning and activities which children undertake at these clubs were perceived as a very positive aspect.

Some lone parents did not feel that they needed to use formal childcare. This was because they only wanted to work part-time or in school hours and/or because they had a good support network of family, friends, current partners or their children's other parent who they called on for informal care.

Reflections on youngest child starting school: Previous research has shown that for many parents, particularly lone parents, the point at which their

youngest child starts school is a key point of return to the labour market. Given the planned roll out of LPO to include those with a youngest child aged five from 2012, lone parents in this study were asked to reflect back to the time when their youngest child started school.

Many of the lone parents that we spoke to did feel that the point at which their youngest child started school was relevant to their plans about work. These lone parents either thought about or moved into paid work, voluntary work or learning when their youngest child started school.

For other lone parents we spoke to, the time when their youngest child started school was not a trigger to move back into work. For some, this was because they were already in work. Others were experiencing a critical life event at the time or told us that they were not interested in working or felt that they still had too many parenting tasks to start work at that time.

Looking for work: The lone parents in this study were generally very positive about work and the benefits that it would bring them and their families, both financial and non-financial. It was common for them to believe that they would be financially better off in work. This was the case both for those with recent work experience and for those who had been on benefits for many years. Lone parents also spoke of other benefits from working, such as being a good role model to their children, interacting more with other adults and no longer having to claim benefits.

Most of the lone parents that we spoke to had been looking for work for between four and six months. This reflected the length of time that they had been claiming JSA. Some lone parents, however, reported that they had been searching for a job since before they claimed JSA, in some cases for several years.

It was common for lone parents to be primarily looking for work with part-time hours that fitted around their parenting responsibilities.

Generally, lone parents reported finding that their job search was much more difficult than they anticipated. This included those who had been in

work recently and those who had not worked for many years. Lone parents reported feeling frustrated at having applied for a large number of jobs and not being invited to interviews, or being invited to very few interviews.

Experiences of Jobseeker's Allowance: In general, lone parents found the process of claiming JSA to be unproblematic. Once the JSA claim started, claiming JSA was usually a smooth process. Lone parents were asked what they were expected to do as part of their claim and, in general, they had a good knowledge and understanding of the requirements of the JSA regime. They also generally reported understanding what they had to do and finding it easy to meet the requirements of their Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg).

Lone parents in this research commonly showed no awareness that any of the list of flexibilities were being applied to them when prompted. However, it was usual to see, when discussing their case, that Jobcentre Plus staff had in fact applied the flexibilities to them. The main example of this was lone parents restricting their availability to work to part-time and in some cases school-hours work.

Whether or not lone parents were seeing staff who were specifically trained in lone parent issues varied, and it was just as common not to be seeing such staff as to be seeing them. Whether they were seeing such staff was a key influencer of the level and quality of support that lone parents felt they had received while on the JSA regime, and their attitude to Jobcentre Plus staff. Those seeing lone parent trained staff were generally more positive about the support they received.

It was common for lone parents to feel that they were not always being made aware of the range of support available from Jobcentre Plus and that they would have liked more support, much of which is already available from Jobcentre Plus, through the Jobcentre Plus Offer.

Seven lone parents who were recorded in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative data as having been sanctioned were interviewed. A further three reported being

'sanctioned' when interviewed (they had in fact been disentitled and had subsequently made a new claim for JSA). According to administrative data, the reasons the seven lone parents were sanctioned or disentitled were for failure to attend appointments, failure to attend Back to Work sessions and for not actively seeking employment. There were sometimes differences between the reasons for sanctions recorded in the administrative data and the recollections of lone parents. Lone parent interviewees who had been sanctioned or disentitled reported struggling financially during this period.

In-work experiences: A small group of lone parents that we interviewed had moved into work of more than 16 hours per week at the time of interview, although all had been claiming JSA when their contact details were selected for this research. This meant that these lone parents had only been in work for short periods of time. The longest period that a lone parent had been in work was four months, while many had been in work for weeks or even days. This limited the amount of reflection that lone parents had on their in-work experience. Those who moved into work tended to be either in the strong work attachment group or those with high parenting orientation.

Lone parents in work at the time of interview had moved into a range of jobs. Most of these were low-skilled and low-paid positions, such as cleaning, waitressing, low-level clerical and administrative work, and retail positions. Generally, lone parents we spoke to were working between 16 and 29 hours per week, often within school hours. Some lone parents were working exactly 16 hours per week. Lone parents reported that work had a positive impact on themselves and their families beyond the financial impact of work.

Implications of this research for future LPO roll-out: Subject to the passage of the Welfare Reform Bill, the next roll-out of LPO will affect lone parents with a youngest child aged five or six. Many lone parents will have moved into work before this point without the push of JSA, so subsequent JSA claims by these lone parents are likely to be because of redundancy, inflexible employment or a lack of appropriate

childcare. There was some evidence in this study that lone parents in work needed additional flexibility at work when their youngest child started school. These lone parents may need relatively little support, or support more in line with that generally provided by Jobcentre Plus for those made redundant, than other lone parents on JSA.

Other lone parents are likely to consider work seriously for the first time in many years as a result of the JSA regime. Many of these lone parents, particularly those with a high parenting orientation, are likely to express a strong preference for school-hours work. The difficulty finding such work that lone parents in this study reported is likely to be exacerbated as more lone parents are required to look for work. The JSA flexibility allowing lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or under to restrict their availability for work to school hours is in line with the aspirations of many lone parents in this research. However, the limited availability of these jobs will also potentially undermine the ability of advisers to work with, and challenge those who do not want to move into work. Generating part-time vacancies will be key to moving many lone parents from JSA into work.

Recommendations

Recommendations arising from the research include the need to:

- promote and facilitate the increased use of staff trained in lone parent issues within Jobcentre Plus in the delivery of the JSA regime for lone parents;
- improve awareness and uptake of the Jobcentre Plus Offer among lone parent claimants;
- ensure all Jobcentre Plus staff have a leaflet which they give to parent claimants about childcare in their local area. This could be either a list of local childcare providers or a leaflet from their local Family Information Services. It would also be useful if this identified where parents should go for advice about finding childcare for children with a disability or behavioural problems.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 908523 38 9. Research Report 782. December 2011).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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