

Lone Parent Obligations: supporting the journey into work

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As part of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO), from November 2008 lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over were no longer entitled to receive Income Support (IS) solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. Since then the age of the youngest child has reduced to ten and over from October 2009 and seven and over from October 2010. In the June 2010 Emergency Budget statement the new coalition Government announced that the IS entitlement conditions will change to include those lone parents whose youngest child has reached five. This change is expected to be implemented in early 2012.

Lone parents who are no longer eligible for IS are able to move to other benefits, as appropriate, including Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Employment and Support Allowance. The JSA regime has been amended to include flexibilities for parents, for example, in the hours of work they are required to seek.

Key findings from this stage of the evaluation

- The lone parents in this survey, who will leave IS when their youngest child is seven or eight, showed considerable diversity in terms of characteristics and circumstances. Compared with lone parents in the population as a whole, they were distinctive, or different to other lone parents, in having:
 - worse self-reported health;
 - lower income and greater financial-related problems;
 - lower qualifications;
 - lower vehicle access; and
 - higher levels of social renting.
- Many had not worked for a considerable period of time: 28 per cent had not worked since they became a parent (at least six years previously), and a further one in four (24 per cent) had never worked. The work that lone parents were doing at the time of the survey, or had done previously, was generally part-time, low-skilled work.
- Despite this, the majority of lone parents (78 per cent) reported wanting to work and 69 per cent thought they would work in the next few years. However, respondents reported multiple barriers to employment. The most frequently cited was the need for a job where they could take time off at short notice to look after their child(ren).
- Overall, around two in five lone parents said they currently used childcare of some kind (42 per cent). They were more likely to use informal rather than formal childcare (36 per cent compared with 16 per cent). Grandparents were the most frequently used type of childcare, while breakfast or after-school clubs on school sites were by far the most commonly used type of formal childcare (reflecting the age profile of children covered by the survey).
- The majority of lone parents said that, overall, the advice they had received from Jobcentre Plus in the previous 12 months had been helpful (83 per cent). Where respondents said that there was a particular person at Jobcentre Plus that they tried to speak to, most said that this person gave them the support they needed (82 per cent). Overall, however, 27 per cent did not think that their individual circumstances had been taken into account in the advice they had received at Jobcentre Plus.

- Ten per cent of lone parents were in work at the time of the survey, and a further 38 per cent were looking for work. Those who were looking for work tended to have had recent work experience. Most respondents wanted to work 16-29 hours per week, and only a minority said that they would be prepared to work before or after school hours.

Background

A comprehensive evaluation has been conducted to assess the effects of LPO. This summary presents findings from a national, quantitative survey of lone parent customers. The findings focus on the characteristics, circumstances and attitudes of lone parents whose youngest child was approaching the LPO threshold of seven or eight. In total, 2,779 interviews were conducted in respondents' homes between May and August 2010.

Findings

Lone parent and household characteristics: There was considerable diversity in terms of characteristics and circumstances. Firstly, there was a range in terms of number of children, from just one (33 per cent) to four or more (11 per cent). Overall, 12 per cent of households contained another adult (in addition to the lone parent), including 'adult' children (six per cent), a new partner (two per cent) or parents (three per cent). One in three 'other adults' (32 per cent) were in work at the time of the survey. Overall, the analysis indicates that the presence of other adults in the household can affect lone parents in different ways: while some were in work and/or also helped with childcare, in other cases they represented an additional caring responsibility for the respondent.

The survey explored a number of characteristics which previous research has linked to worklessness or greater distance from the labour market. Lone parents in this survey were most distinctive (i.e. showed the greatest difference in comparison with other lone parents and mothers with partners in the population who were surveyed in the Families and Children Study in 2008) in relation to worse self-reported health, lower income and greater financial-related problems, lower qualifications, lower vehicle access and higher levels of social renting.

There was also evidence of multiple types of need or disadvantage. It is, however, important to bear in mind that the issues faced by lone parents were generally seen as restricting the type or amount of work they could do, rather than preventing it altogether, at least in the longer term. This reflects the high proportion of respondents who said they wanted to, and expected to, work in the future.

Working background and current employment: The work history of lone parents in this survey was varied. Ten per cent of lone parents were in work (ranging from mini-jobs to full-time employment) at the time of the survey, while 37 per cent were not in work but had worked since they first became a parent. However, 28 per cent had not worked since they became a parent (at least six years previously), and a further one in four (24 per cent) had never worked. Overall, this confirms that many of the lone parents in the survey had not worked for a considerable period of time.

Lone parents who were working while claiming IS had often been in work for some time (55 per cent for more than a year) and tended to work a small number of hours (84 per cent were working no more than ten hours per week).

The work that lone parents were doing at the time of the survey, or had done previously, was generally part-time, low-skilled work. Respondents were more likely to be in low-skilled jobs (elementary and personal service occupations), compared with the wider female working population.

The majority of working respondents were satisfied with their job (87 per cent) and found it convenient for their home and family life (84 per cent). However, one in four (23 per cent) said that their job prevented them from giving the time they wanted to their children (at least some of the time), and this was higher (42 per cent) among those working 16 or more hours per week.

Childcare: Childcare was used both by respondents who did and didn't work. Overall, around two in five lone parents said they currently used childcare of some kind (42 per cent). Those who were currently working but not using childcare mostly said that they only worked during school hours. Where lone parents were not in work, use of childcare was higher among those who were closer to the labour market, in terms of qualifications and recent work experience.

As expected, use of childcare increased with hours worked: from 39 per cent among those not in work, to 59 per cent among those working less than 16 hours per week, and 87 per cent of those working 16 hours or more per week.

In order for lone parents to move into work it is possible that they will need to consider using formal childcare. Overall, lone parents in this survey, most of whom were not working, were more likely to use informal rather than formal childcare (36 per cent compared with 16 per cent). Grandparents were the most frequently used type of childcare, with ex-partners, other relatives and friends/neighbours the other main sources of informal childcare. Breakfast or after-school clubs on school sites were by far the most commonly used type of formal childcare. This reflects the age profile of children covered by the survey – predominantly primary-school-age children, with very few pre-school children.

The use of childcare in this survey was compared with the wider lone parent population, as well as with the population of parents in couples. This confirmed the extensive use of informal childcare among lone parents. These comparisons also showed that the use of formal childcare was broadly similar between lone parents in this survey and the wider population (of both lone parents and parents in couples).

Attitudes and constraints: Lone parents were very employment focused. The majority of lone parents (78 per cent) reported wanting to work and 69 per cent thought they would work in the next few years. When asked about their attitudes to work, parenting and childcare, there were high levels of agreement to pro-work attitude statements. In particular, respondents who had claimed benefits for less than one year and those looking for work were more likely to have employment-focused attitudes and attitudes reflecting a motivation to balance work and parenting responsibilities. Overall, respondents in this survey were more employment focused than the wider population of lone parents who were surveyed in the Families and Children Study (FACS) in 2008.

Respondents reported multiple barriers to employment, with 98 per cent of those not in work reporting two or more barriers to employment. This was in line with the wider population of lone parents (FACS 2008). The most frequently cited barrier to

employment was the need for a job where they could take time off at short notice to look after their child(ren), with 64 per cent of respondents reporting this as a big barrier to employment. Once in work the factors that affect lone parents' ability to stay in work were not the same as those reported as barriers to entering employment. In particular, concern over not being financially better off in work, unanticipated in-work costs and childcare concerns were the most commonly cited big barriers affecting lone parents in work.

Relationship with Jobcentre Plus: Respondents were asked about their recent contact with Jobcentre Plus. Where lone parents had been looking for work in the previous 12 months, they gave differing views on the support they had received to find work. One in three said they had received a lot of encouragement to find a suitable job (31 per cent), but similar proportions said they had received 'some' (38 per cent) or 'little or no' encouragement (31 per cent). While 17 per cent said that Jobcentre Plus staff had advised them to hold out for a better job, 11 per cent said they were told to take the first job that came along (the remainder said they had not received advice of this nature).

Around two in five lone parents (43 per cent) said that there was a particular person at Jobcentre Plus that they tried to speak to. Where this was the case, most respondents said that this person had made a lot of effort (56 per cent) or some effort (32 per cent) to get to know them. Most respondents also said that this person gave them the support they needed (82 per cent). Overall, however, 27 per cent did not think that their individual circumstances had been taken into account in the advice they had received at Jobcentre Plus, and one in five (21 per cent) said they would have liked more time with Jobcentre Plus staff or advisers. The findings as a whole, therefore, give a mixed picture of the level of individual, personalised support provided to lone parents.

The majority of lone parents said that, overall, the advice they had received from Jobcentre Plus in the previous 12 months had been helpful (83 per cent), while 69 per cent said that they were satisfied with the overall service provided by Jobcentre Plus. When asked for their overall perceptions of the IS regime, respondents were more likely to agree than disagree that Jobcentre Plus understands their needs and

that they received the right amount of support on IS. Views were divided as to whether people on IS are pushed into things they don't want to do (approximately equal numbers agreed as disagreed).

Work aspirations and the future: As well as the ten per cent of lone parents who were in work at the time of the survey (as noted above), 38 per cent of respondents were looking for work. Those who were looking for work tended to have had recent work experience, while a number of groups were less likely to be in work or to be looking for work: those with a limiting long-standing illness or disability, those with no formal qualifications, and those with more children.

Most respondents who were not looking for work thought that they would do so in the future although the timescale varied, from the next few months (30 per cent), to a year or two (30 per cent), while others (40 per cent) were not sure when they would look for work. Overall, nine per cent did not expect to look for work (of 16 hours or more per week) at all in the future, and 40 per cent of the total sample did not expect to look for work (of 16 hours or more per week) for at least a year or so, that is, after the time their eligibility for IS was due to end and they would (typically) need to start claiming JSA.

These findings confirm that lone parents affected by LPO vary considerably in terms of their distance from the labour market and future support for these lone parents (in quarterly Work Focused Interviews and on JSA) will need to reflect these variations.

The survey examined the work preferences of those looking for work, or expecting to do so at a specified time in the future. Most wanted to work 16-29 hours per week, and 45 per cent specified exactly 16 hours (this is likely to reflect the financial incentives in the current benefit system). Only a minority of respondents said that they would be prepared to work before or after school hours (20 per cent), and only half (47 per cent) said they would work during school holidays.

The lone parents in this survey, and in other LPO cohorts, were grouped by the age of their youngest child. Overall, however, the survey showed there was still considerable diversity in their characteristics and barriers to work. This underlines the importance of recognising and responding to customers' individual needs.

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

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