

# Lone Parent Obligations: Following lone parents' journeys from benefits to work

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As part of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO), since November 2008, lone parents have progressively lost entitlement to Income Support (IS) solely on the grounds of being a lone parent, based on the age of their youngest child. By May 2012, the age of the youngest child had reduced to five. 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

- Immediately after leaving IS, lone parents were most likely to move onto JSA (55 per cent), while 12 per cent claimed Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), and 24 per cent got a job. Longer-term destinations (in the year or so since the ending of IS eligibility) showed that 45 per cent of lone parents had worked at some point since their IS claim ended.
- The work that lone parents had done since leaving IS was generally low-skilled work at around the national minimum wage. Nearly all were working part-time.
- Around three in four lone parents in work (73 per cent) used some form of childcare while they were working, and this was more likely to be informal (63 per cent) than formal childcare (30 per cent).
- On average, lone parents were closer to the labour market at wave 2, after the LPO changes, than at wave 1, when they were claiming IS. At wave 1, 59 per cent of respondents were either in work or looking for work, but this had risen to 81 per cent by wave 2. The amount of jobsearch lone parents had conducted at wave 2 (mostly on JSA) was also far higher than at wave 1 (when claiming IS).

- Lone parents looking for work had a strong preference for jobs that fit around their childcare responsibilities, but for many their attitudes had become more 'work-focused' than when they were on IS, focusing now on practical constraints (the availability of suitable jobs, etc.).
- At wave 1, two in three lone parents (67 per cent) were in material deprivation and low income, much higher than the wider population of lone parent families in the UK. Lone parents who had entered work or increased their hours between wave 1 and wave 2 were less likely to be in material deprivation and on low income, but this still applied to 39 per cent.
- There were negative attitudes to the JSA and ESA regimes, and these were more negative than corresponding attitudes to the IS regime as expressed at wave 1. Many respondents did not think that they had received help or advice while on JSA (37 per cent) or ESA (74 per cent), and respondents were more likely to agree than disagree that on JSA/ESA people are pushed into things they don't want to do. However, in the JSA sample, some respondents did feel that JSA had made them more aware of job opportunities (41 per cent).

## Background

This summary presents findings from the second and final wave of a longitudinal survey of lone parent customers. The survey covers lone parents affected by LPO, specifically those with a youngest child of seven or eight when they left IS. The first wave of the survey was conducted in 2010 while lone parents were still on IS. The second wave took place in 2012, around one year after lone parents' eligibility for IS had ended, and tracks lone parents' destinations and

experiences over time. At wave 2, 1,088 interviews were conducted in respondents' homes between February and April 2012. The analysis excludes lone parents who remained on IS (who were exempt from LPO changes).

## Findings

**Destinations after leaving IS:** Immediately after leaving IS, lone parents were most likely to say that they moved onto JSA (55 per cent), while 12 per cent claimed ESA, and 24 per cent got a job.

Longer-term destinations (in the year or so since the ending of IS eligibility) showed that 45 per cent of lone parents had worked at some point since their IS claim ended. Lone parents were more likely to have worked since leaving IS if they had recent work experience or were actively looking for work while on IS. Movement into work was also more common among lone parents with higher qualifications, those with access to a vehicle and those who lived in a rural area. In addition, those who had used informal childcare while they were not working were also more likely to have moved into work. This suggests that having informal childcare networks in place can help the transition into work.

Lone parents with a limiting long-standing illness, disability or infirmity (LLSI), especially those with mental health problems, were less likely to move into work. There were also differences in terms of attitudes to work: those who were more family-focused in their attitudes and less concerned about the stigma of being on benefits were less likely than other respondents to have worked at all.

The majority of respondents (68 per cent) had claimed JSA at some point since they left IS, and 31 per cent had only claimed JSA – they had not worked at all or claimed another benefit during this time. In total, 12 per cent of respondents had been on the Work Programme, mostly as part of a JSA claim. Longer spells on JSA were more common among lone parents without qualifications and whose first language was not English, as well as those without vehicle access.

Around one in four respondents (23 per cent) had claimed ESA since leaving IS, including 12 per cent who had claimed both JSA and ESA. There was a range of experiences on ESA, including equal proportions who were in the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG), the Support Group and found fit for work. In addition, some respondents who had made a claim for ESA had not yet had a Work Capability Assessment (WCA) or were awaiting a decision or the outcome of a tribunal. These findings indicate that many lone parents who claimed ESA had a complex journey and may not have had a smooth transition from IS to ESA.

**Is work sustained?** In the majority of cases, respondents who had worked since leaving IS were still in work at the time of the wave 2 interview (84 per cent). The survey is not able to assess whether lone parents will remain in work in the longer term, but the findings indicate that most respondents who had entered work had managed to stay in their job beyond the transitional stage from benefits to work.

Respondents were less likely to have stayed in work if they had an LLSI, and if they were less well qualified. The same groups were also less likely to have moved into work (at all). Those working less than 16 hours per week were also less likely to have stayed in work.

**Job characteristics:** The work that lone parents had done since leaving IS was generally low-skilled work (40 per cent in elementary occupations). Around one in three of those in work (33 per cent) said that they were paid less than £6 per hour (the national minimum wage at the time of the survey was £6.08 per hour).

One in eight respondents (13 per cent) were working 30 hours or more per week, while 66 per cent were working between 16 and 29 hours, and 22 per cent were working less than 16 hours per week. One in six respondents (17 per cent) who were in work at the time of the wave 2 interview said they had increased their hours since they started the job.

Respondents who were working more than 16 hours per week had greater problems balancing work and family: 60 per cent said that sometimes their job prevented them from giving their children

the time they wanted to. At the same time, some respondents said that they had tried to increase their working hours (27 per cent of current employees). This suggests that there is a group of lone parents who are able, or would like, to work more hours per week than they are working at present.

**Childcare:** Around three in four lone parents in work (73 per cent) said that they used some form of childcare while they were working. Use of childcare increased with hours worked.

Lone parents were more likely to use informal (63 per cent) than formal childcare (30 per cent) when they were working. Those working more hours per week were more likely to use a combination of both formal and informal childcare.

Grandparents were the most commonly used type of childcare (used by 52 per cent of all childcare users). Formal childcare was most likely to be breakfast or after-school clubs (27 per cent). More than half (62 per cent) of those using informal childcare said they did something in return for at least part of the childcare they received. This suggests that this type of reciprocal arrangement is an important element of childcare for working lone parents.

Among respondents who were not currently working but who planned to work in the future, there was a strong interest in using after-school or holiday clubs when they moved into work (among 45 per cent).

**Work attitudes and the future:** On average, lone parents were closer to the labour market at wave 2, after the LPO changes, than at wave 1, when they were claiming IS. At wave 1, 59 per cent of respondents were either in work or looking for work, but this had risen to 81 per cent by wave 2.

In total, 50 per cent of lone parents were looking for work. This included 92 per cent of JSA claimants.

The amount of jobsearch lone parents had conducted at wave 2 (mostly on JSA) was significantly higher than at wave 1 (when claiming IS). Over 50 per cent of lone parents looking for work had applied for 11 or more jobs in the previous year, compared to 20 per cent at wave 1.

Lone parents had a strong preference for part-time work, and for jobs that fit around their childcare responsibilities. Lone parents looking for work were often unwilling to work outside of school hours (56 per cent) or in school holidays (31 per cent).

**Attitudes and constraints to work:** Lone parents expressed a strong work focus in their attitudes, alongside a strong focus on parental childcare. In broad terms, attitudes towards work, parenting and childcare remained similar between wave 1 (when lone parents were claiming IS) and wave 2 (after the move off IS on to other destinations). However, at wave 2, respondents were more likely to agree with employment focused statements (such as 'having almost any job is better than being unemployed').

Among respondents who were not working, the most common barriers to work related to jobsearch constraints, such as there not being enough suitable job opportunities in the local area, or needing a job where they could take time off at short notice to look after children.

There was a small shift between waves 1 and 2, with barriers to work less likely to reflect negative opinions about work (e.g. being financially better off in work), but slightly more likely to reflect practical problems (e.g. a lack of suitable job opportunities in the local area).

Among respondents in work, the main barriers to staying in work were: not being sure about being financially better off in work (27 per cent); and a lack of suitable, affordable childcare (25 per cent).

**Wellbeing and material deprivation:** When asked whether they would like but could not afford a range of goods and services, lone parents were more likely to lack adult or household items, such as replacing worn out furniture and electrical goods, rather than items for children, such as having leisure equipment.

Levels of material deprivation and low income amongst the cohort of lone parents interviewed at wave 1 were high. In total, 67 per cent were in material deprivation and low income. This compares with 28 of all lone parent families in the UK, as reported in the DWP's *Households Below Average*

*Income series.* Material deprivation was particularly high among lone parents with lower qualification levels and those without access to a vehicle.

Lone parents who had entered work or increased their hours between wave 1 and wave 2 were less likely to be in material deprivation. While two in three of these lone parents had been in material deprivation and low income at wave 1, this had fallen to 39 per cent by wave two. Nevertheless, this means that two in five households in which a lone parent had entered work were still living in material deprivation and low income, suggesting that in work poverty still remains a problem for these lone parents.

**Relationship with Jobcentre Plus:** Lone parents who had been on JSA were much more likely than those who had been on ESA to have received various types of advice and support from Jobcentre Plus, such as looking at job vacancies or looking at the sort of work they might do. Around one in seven lone parents who had been on JSA said they had received financial help from Jobcentre Plus towards expenses, most commonly travel costs. The proportion who had received financial help while on ESA was lower (six per cent).

Most JSA claimants said they found it at least fairly easy to comply with the conditions for claiming JSA: signing on every two weeks (63 per cent), attending meetings (63 per cent) and actively looking for work (62 per cent). However, between 17 per cent and 21 per cent found each of these things difficult.

Less than half of respondents said that they felt their individual circumstances were taken into account on JSA or ESA (45 per cent). There were also negative attitudes towards the JSA and ESA regimes, and these were more negative than corresponding attitudes to the IS regime as expressed at wave 1. Many respondents did not think that they had received help or advice while on JSA (37 per cent) or ESA (74 per cent), and respondents were more likely to agree than disagree that on JSA/ESA people are pushed into things they don't want to do. There were also mixed views on whether lone parents' needs are taken into account on JSA/ESA and whether they were given the right amount of support. However, in the JSA sample, some respondents did feel that JSA had made them more aware of job opportunities (41 per cent).

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