



University of the  
West of England



## RESEARCH SUMMARY

# A Longitudinal Qualitative Study of the Journeys of Single Parents on Jobseeker's Allowance

Since 2008 single parents have been required to look for work initially when their youngest child reached 12 years old, reduced to 10 in 2009, seven in 2010 and five in 2012 leading to an estimated 424,000 single parents moving onto Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA). Over 90% of them are women, many experiencing multiple disadvantages. Single Parent Action Network in partnership with the University of the West of England, undertook participatory research to find out how single parents on JSA experienced the support and training opportunities in place to facilitate their learning, well-being and advancement into sustainable employment.

## Key findings

- The research found a strong sense that single parents involved in the study wanted to work. Their motives included being better off financially, being a role model for their children, gaining social contacts and building a career.
- Of those single parents who gained employment during the study, none did so through their contact with Jobcentre Plus (JCP). Instead they relied on existing networks such as friends or previous employers, or set up their own businesses.
- There was evidence that JCP did not address the needs of single parents and help them into quality work that could lift them out of poverty. They often saw a different advisor, and missed the continuity and understanding of Lone Parent Advisors. There was a perception that JCP staff wanted them to go for any job, regardless of their qualifications, skills or parental responsibilities. Some parents found that JCP advisors were dismissive of their plans for self-employment.
- Most parents who found employment did so in low-paid jobs such as catering, cleaning and childcare, which did not use their skills or offer opportunities to advance their careers. Of four parents who found work in supermarkets, three were over-qualified, including an English teacher, a photographer and an administrator who had run her own business.
- Single parents were most likely to take up employment if they were: already close to the labour market; could access part-time work; had access to social networks and extended family able to support them with childcare; found employment near to home; did not have significant worries about their health or the health/well-being of their children; were able to find flexible employers/sympathetic line managers.
- Among those parents who found employment, including self-employment, their health, well-being and self-esteem improved. Despite anxieties about job security, they felt more optimistic about the future than parents on JSA or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).
- The lack of quality childcare was a significant problem for many parents in finding employment. Some felt that their responsibility for their children's safety and well-being was not taken seriously enough. The care of secondary school age children emerged as especially important for parents.

## Background

There are currently 1.8 million single parents in the UK. Their relatively low employment rate and link to the risk of poverty means they remain high on the political agenda. In 2008 when the Labour government introduced policy changes requiring single parents with older children to look for work, they had to be parents of children at an increasingly younger age to qualify for Income Support (IS). The age of the youngest child was initially set at 12 years but was gradually brought down to ten, then seven years. The current Coalition Government reduced this further to five years in May 2012. These changes, requiring single parents to move from IS to JSA and secure work of at least 16 hours, have been set in the context of a recession that has been forecast to have long-lasting consequences, particularly in terms of increasing intensification of labour market competition.

## What did we do?

This research project aimed to explore the journeys of single parents on JSA, in particular how they experienced the support and training opportunities provided to facilitate their learning, possible advancement into sustainable employment and the implications for their well-being subsequent to recent welfare reform. The research is based on longitudinal, qualitative research with fifty single parents, which took place between 2009 and 2012. The participatory nature of the research meant that single parent peer researchers undertook the fieldwork. Support and research training was provided throughout the study to underpin their personal development. Fifty single parents were recruited from a range of organisations to take part in the study. The age range of participants was from 25 to 60 years, from a diverse range of social and cultural backgrounds. The length of time participants had claimed IS ranged from six months to more than ten years. The research methods included semi-structured interviews on three separate occasions to follow participants over time and explored the longer-term outcomes for single parents. In total 135 interviews were completed. The research was funded by the Big Lottery Research Programme, led by the Single Parent Action Network in collaboration with academics at the University of the West of England.

## What did we find?

### Jobseeker's Allowance: transition and advisors

Overall, the experience of the new policy implementation was mixed. Single parents seemed well informed about the transition from IS to JSA and less well informed about how claiming JSA would differ in practice from claiming IS. No longer being able to speak to a lone parent advisor was commented on as a loss, as meeting a different advisor each visit could feel unsettling. Single parents felt that they had to repeat often personal experiences, as each advisor could initiate sanctions against them.

### Wanting to work

There are a number of key themes coming out of this research.

1. There was a strong sense that single parents in this study wanted to work. The motivations for wanting ranged from wanting to be better off financially, being a role model for their children, gaining social contacts at work, building a career as well as coming off JSA.
2. Suitable, part-time jobs were difficult to find as a result of the recent recession and JCP was not perceived to be helpful when it came to finding jobs or liaising with potential employers. In this study, none of those interviewed who found work reported doing so through their Jobcentre contact, but through existing networks such as friends and previous employers. JCP failed to signpost single parents to jobs that were appropriate to their skills and caring responsibilities.

3. Single parents felt on the whole that JCP was not seen to be helpful with regard to the caring needs of their children, in particular older children, given that parents with older children were in the majority in this cohort. For example, being there when children set off to school and when they came home was seen as very important, particularly at this age; this was a particular concern for mothers of teenage boys.
4. Single parents had expectations that they would be able to do training to move into jobs they wanted to do and that had a career trajectory. This clashed with the requirements of JSA to be available for work immediately. Training opportunities were not necessarily discussed by JCP staff and the quality and usefulness of the courses single parents were able to access varied.

### Following single parents' journeys over time

All single parents in the sample were in the target group of single parents to be transferred to JSA, i.e. all had children over seven. 18 months on, single parents in this study had gone on journeys with four destinations: employment, self-employment, on ESA or remaining on JSA. The key factors determining which direction the single parents took seemed to be:

- How close they were to the labour market – some who went into work were already in small part-time jobs;
- Whether they could access part-time work more generally;
- The level of access to social networks and extended family able to support them with childcare;
- Travel times to work (most of those who found employment found it near to their home);
- Their health and the health/well-being of their children;
- Finding flexible employers/sympathetic line managers;
- Whether they had a strong desire to come off JSA and take any job in the process, in which case their previous qualifications and skills were likely not to be utilised. Of those who found jobs and whatever their qualifications, all went into low paid work, mostly care work, childcare, supermarkets, and cleaning;
- In contrast, the main motivation of those moving into self-employment was to be able to do the kind of job they wanted and were able to do, as well as being able to combine it with looking after their children.

For those single parents who moved to ESA, their main issue was to manage their illness while looking after their children. The single parents who had not been able to find a job and were still receiving JSA at the end of the study seemed quite diverse in terms of their characteristics. They were not dissimilar to the group that found employment in that all were keen to work but they were also keen to combine that with looking after their children and to work part-time. Some had had experience of the pressure of shift work, for example and the ensuing impact on their families. On the whole, single parents in employment and self-employment felt more optimistic about the future than those on JSA and ESA. However, uncertainty about employment lasting, about the lack of jobs and impending changes to the tax and benefit system emerged as key worries.

### Health and well-being

Single parents in employment, including those who were self-employed, often identified a sense of well-being and enjoyment connected to feeling part of the world of work, with improved self esteem and confidence. This was also associated with improvements in family life that additional income brought.

Feeling part of a team gave single parents a sense of connectedness to colleagues and the organisations they were part of, which made them feel purposeful and optimistic. Those who became self-employed had sometimes seen this as a way of managing their long term conditions, having more control over the timing and nature of their work. However, this is not to suggest there were no negative impacts. For those who had taken up work perceived as menial, there was frustration and a sense of resignation, as the opportunities for training to improve their position were withdrawn.

This was often in contrast to those in the 'not in work' groups supported by ESA and JSA. Single parents supported by benefits suffered greater ill health than the general population. Those on JSA most often reported experiencing 'depression and stress' and for some this became severe enough to move onto ESA. For others, symptoms tended to be in a state of flux, demanding intermittent visits to their doctor for treatment, or resignation that given their life circumstances 'it was to be expected'. An additional aspect of health and well-being was associated with the significant number of parents reporting having children with longstanding health problems: respiratory illness, developmental and behavioural difficulties and mental illness. Similar to other work in the field, this study confirms that single parents with older children who are not themselves in work often had children with serious health difficulties.

## Policy Recommendations

- For the Work and Pensions Select Committee to review the treatment of single parents in the benefit system with regard to advancing equality of opportunity in welfare to work policies and practices.
- For Jobcentre Plus, and contractors providing employment support to play a proactive role in both complying with the equality duty and in preventing the erosion of single parents' gender equality opportunities as both workers and parents.
- Reinstate the role of Lone Parent Advisors.
- Improve training structures for Jobcentre Plus staff with regard to single parents advancement opportunities and their responsibilities as parents and as workers.
- Provide transparent information about training and childcare opportunities at all Jobcentres.
- Earlier and better signposting and support by Jobcentre Plus and training providers for single parents wanting to start their own business.
- Support for new training programmes that would further single parents' future advancement in the labour market.
- Jobcentre Plus and work training providers to develop initiatives that encourage employers to design quality jobs with part-time hours.
- The embedding of children's well-being into the ethos of Jobcentre Plus service delivery by government as this is already a legislative requirement in supporting parents into work.
- A government review of childcare for older children as a policy priority.

You can find the full report at [http://issuu.com/spanbristol/docs/span\\_\\_jsa\\_report\\_web](http://issuu.com/spanbristol/docs/span__jsa_report_web)

**Authors:** Tina Haux, Debra Salmon, Lucy Taylor, Toity Deave, Sue Cohen, Laura Dewar, Tove Samzelius

**Peer Researchers:** Charmaine Brown, Miriela Dhillon, Fadumo Dualeh, Amina Jama, Jackie Jarrett, Lucille Smith, Ellie Stacey, Sarah Westlake, Anisa V

**Acknowledgments:** Isobel Birden, Sally Cosgrove, Susy Guillari, Lyn James, Elly Sinclair, Helen Stone

Published by SPAN and the University of the West of England. ISBN: 1-86043-501-7