

Gingerbread

Single parents, equal families

They said I **wasn't doing enough** to do the job search...The hours are **not suitable** for someone in my predicament. The job coach does **not offer any official advice** for me because I am a single parent...it's really **horrible**...it's **demoralizing**. You are putting me in an **uncompromising situation** where I have to take my daughter out of nursery and **stop my job**. I've been left sanctioned. I've been left **destitute**. I am a single parent. He has got no one else except for me to look after him. **I was told it was my problem** to sort out childcare so I can attend...**they ignored me**. If you leave this job, you will be sanctioned for six months...or up to three years. **The process was hard**...I waited about six weeks for any sort of acknowledgement of my appeal. I didn't find it particularly easy...I **didn't have any legal advice** about what to include or exclude. It is a bit **daunting** if you don't know [to] whom you are writing or what you should write. I literally had a sandwich a day just to save food for the children...But I couldn't have seen them **go without or go hungry**. My daughter asked for money from her friends at school and they gave her money. **I can't pay any bills** and I need to because **I am getting more into debt**. I have anxiety and they **made my condition worse**. They [work coaches] often put threatening messages in my journal on a Friday. Total and utter **fear, shock and worry**. Panic about how to manage. Would have been homeless but for family and friends. How can I come to the appointments? How can I pay my bills? I still need to pay bills. When they sanctioned me, it **really made me angry**... **My little boy is not a burden**. The government is making out he is a burden. I want to go to work. **I don't think the children should be punished**...still need to be fed and clothed and live in a warm home...sanctions undermine the purpose of the benefit system in our country to protect the **poorest and most vulnerable** from poverty.

Unhelpful and unfair?

The impact of single parent sanctions

About this report

This report is the second from a project looking at the impact of sanctions on single parent families, and follows a briefing on the quantitative data available on sanctions imposed on single parents.

The report focuses on qualitative research on the impact of sanctions on single parents and their families, and how benefit conditions affect job-seeking behaviour. The report also presents the first findings on the impact of sanctions under Universal Credit since job-seeking rules were tightened for single parents.

Stay up to date with the project:
www.gingerbread.org.uk/sanctions

About Gingerbread

Gingerbread is the leading national charity working with single parent families. Our mission is to champion and enable single parent families to live secure, happy and fulfilling lives.

Since 1918 we've been supporting, advising and campaigning with single parents to help them meet their family's needs and achieve their goals.

We want to create a world in which diverse families can thrive. We won't stop working until we achieve this vision. Whatever success means for a single parent – a healthy family, a flexible job, stable finances or a chance to study – we work with them to make it happen.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the single parents who shared their often difficult experiences; without them, this report would not have been possible. We would also like to thank Trust for London for their support with this project.

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Summary

Over the past 20 years, job-seeking single parents have been exposed to increasingly strict ‘conditionality’ (the system of work preparation and job-seeking rules with which they must comply to receive state support). As a result, many more single parents than a decade ago are at risk of sanctions, imposed for ‘non-compliance’ with conditions. Single parents also face a higher risk of unfair sanctions than other claimants, raising questions about how well this approach works.

Under Universal Credit, the system is changing yet again. For the first time, parents of pre-school aged children and claimants in work will be subject to conditions and exposed to sanctions. With policy at a turning point, and criticisms from the National Audit Office and others that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) knows little of the actual impact of its sanctions policy and results in questionable value for money, this report reviews the effect of sanctions policy on single parent families – in terms of both warnings and sanctions imposed.

Trapped between conditions and circumstances

Single parents’ experiences illustrate how job-seeking expectations continue to take a tick-box approach, informed by inflexible numerical targets rather than actual intentions to seek work. For single parents, this presents a particular problem. The lack of personalisation means there is a failure to understand and respond to the barriers to work (eg lack of childcare, part-time/flexible jobs, training) and changing circumstances facing single parent families. As a result, single parents are often caught out by unrealistic job-seeking expectations – for example, sanctioned for not applying for enough jobs, despite there being few part-time or flexible jobs available locally.

The new claimant commitments introduced in 2013 have not helped to reverse these longstanding trends – despite high profile promises to increase tailored and flexible support. Claimant commitments are often far from the personalised job-seeking ‘contract’ intended, with conditions imposed on single parents without negotiation – and sometimes failing to recognise even the available allowances that work coaches can make for single parents. As a result, sanctions arise from the rigidity of a system that does not reflect single parents’ needs.

A new approach under Universal Credit?

There seems to be no sign of change under Universal Credit. The same issues are leading to warnings or sanctions, despite further promises of a different approach. Furthermore, working single parents are affected for the first time under Universal Credit, increasing the reach and risk of sanctions.

Calls to Gingerbread’s helpline suggest many single parents experience perverse incentives around managing work under Universal Credit. Single parents receiving Universal Credit have voiced concerns about entering work, in case they are liable for a sanction should work prove unsustainable due to inaccessible childcare or inflexible hours. As Universal Credit deals with working claimants, working parents are now reporting similar concerns about leaving their job when it becomes unmanageable – leaving them trapped in work they cannot sustain in case it leads to a sanction. This undermines the policy intention of Universal Credit to smooth the entry into work and ensure work always pays.

Universal Credit has also made it more difficult to sustain work in some cases. In particular, problems with administering support for childcare have led to some single parents being forced to give up work. This is not just a problem for Universal Credit’s policy intention to ‘make work pay’, but places single parents at further risk of a sanction for giving up work without good reason.

An immediate and longer-term toll

The immediate impact of sanctions is clear – financially, for single parents already on a low income, they throw family finances into disarray and can lead to long-term problems of debt and rent

arrears. Even for those parents who had their sanction overturned, the long delays often mean incurring debts which are difficult to repay.

Benefit sanctions also take a significant toll on single parents' mental and emotional health – both as a result of warnings and those imposed. Most parents described the increased stress after sanction warnings and the emotional toll of worrying about how to manage to care for their children in the event of a sanction.

Any savings the DWP makes from sanctions comes at the expense of not just single parents' well-being, but wider networks which pick up the responsibility of supporting single parents who have been sanctioned – including family and friends, and support services such as food banks, local authorities and housing associations.

Crucially, single parents felt that sanctions – and the threat of them – did little to help job-seeking. Sanctions led to both practical and personal barriers to finding work. The financial impact can move single parents further from work, as they are in a less secure position to manage the costs of job-seeking (eg travelling to interviews) or entering work. The strain on households resulting from a sanction means single parents are focused on making ends meet for their children, rather than job-seeking. Others found conditions interfered with longer term plans to find sustainable work, eg retraining. Finally, sanctions – particularly unfair warnings or sanctions – can disrupt the vital relationship between claimants and work coaches, leaving single parents less engaged with jobcentre support.

Urgency to act

The experiences in this report illustrate how benefit sanctions are fundamentally a problematic way of supporting single parents – one of the government's key target groups in achieving full employment and targeting so-called 'worklessness'. Instead of using sanctions solely in cases of clear wilful non-compliance, they are being used to police a tick-box approach that allows little flexibility to recognise claimants' wider needs and barriers to work. Far from encouraging single parents to look for or enter work, they create financial and emotional stress which can move them further from work – and inhibit parents from taking work in case they cannot sustain it and get sanctioned as a result. While this is described as 'fairness for the taxpayer', single parents and their children are caught in the wide gap between policy intention and reality.

This report adds to the evidence which suggests the benefit sanctions system for single parents is inappropriate and outdated, and should be radically overhauled or ended if the government is serious about enabling single parents to enter and sustain work. Of course, this would be a fundamental reform for any government and, with the departure from the EU dominating the political and legislative agenda, perhaps even less feasible in the current climate.

Notwithstanding a long-term vision to seek radical alternatives to the current sanctions system, we outline four key areas to address urgently in the short-term, to ensure a fairer approach to administering benefits:

Minimise financial penalties to limit the impact of sanctions on claimants and their children:

- Introduce a 'yellow card' warning system before a first sanction
- Reduce, rather than fully suspend, benefit payments for parents if sanctioning

Suspend unrealistic conditions to ensure single parents' circumstances are recognised:

- Suspend job-seeking requirements for parents of three and four year olds, until affordable and good quality childcare and flexible work is available locally
- End the mandatory use of Universal Jobmatch for job-seeking, allowing wider job search options for claimants

Overhaul claimant commitments to embed appropriate and flexible conditionality:

- Publish a parents' guide on the full range of possible single parent flexibilities which allow them to adjust work search requirements to meet their needs
- Introduce a clear process for revising claimant commitments to accommodate changes in circumstances and recognise additional needs
- Increase scrutiny and evaluation of single parents' claimant commitments

Rebalance employment support away from penalising single parents:

- Introduce single parent training for work coaches
- Strengthen into-work support provision, eg for childcare costs
- Pilot alternatives to financial penalties to enable job-seeking.

Benefit sanctions may have reduced in number of late, but Universal Credit reforms will mean many more parents will come within their scope – not just through job-seeking requirements for parents with pre-school aged children, but conditions to seek higher pay or more hours for working claimants. The apparent move towards a more holistic system of support for low-income families, whether in or out of work, suggests the narrow 'work-first' pressure of the legacy benefit sanctions has run its course. It also presents the government with an ideal window of opportunity to ensure the social security system supports families rather than setting them up to fail. Without action from the government, however, single parents and their children will continue to be caught in the middle of a misguided and failing policy – and the significant financial and emotional burden that this entails.

1 Single parent sanctions - what has happened?

Over the past 20 years, job-seeking single parents have experienced increasingly strict ‘conditionality’ (the system of work preparation and job-seeking rules with which they must comply to receive state support). Many more are at risk of sanctions, imposed for ‘non-compliance’ with conditions, than a decade ago. At the same time, single parents face a higher risk of unfair sanctions than other claimants, raising questions about how well this approach works. Under Universal Credit, the system is changing yet again – for the first time, parents of pre-school children and claimants in work will be subject to conditions and exposed to sanctions. With policy at a turning point, this report reviews the impact of sanctions policy.

For people out of work, benefit sanctions underpin the system of conditions attached to receiving state support. Sanctions – the reduction or suspension of payments – enforce this system of ‘conditionality’. In other words, if conditions are not followed, sanctions are applied.

This idea of conditionality has a long history in unemployment benefits in the UK. However, it was largely designed around single jobseekers who were expected to work; single parents were instead viewed primarily as carers for their children and mostly exempt from job-seeking conditions. At the same time, this meant single parents who wanted or needed to earn an income had little support, caught between ‘carer’ and ‘worker’ roles (Whitworth & Griggs, 2013).

This approach has changed significantly over the past 20 years. With conscious moves to increase single parent employment, the idea that conditions and sanctions are a necessary ‘stick’ alongside support to seek work has now been largely accepted across the political spectrum – as indicated by the rapid change in work requirements for single parents. In under a decade, single parents’ requirement to comply with full job-seeking obligations has changed from when their youngest child was sixteen to when their youngest child is aged just three – the first time parents of pre-school children will be affected (Box 1).

Alongside these shifts in conditionality for single parents, the 2010-15 government introduced a stricter sanctions regime, reducing the variety in sanction lengths and introducing more severe sanctions. This shift underpinned the broader changes to conditions and jobseekers’ responsibilities, embedding yet further the rationale of sanctions being a necessity to discourage non-compliance with benefit rules (Rabindrakumar, 2017a).

What has happened to single parent sanctions?

Sanctions for job-seeking single parents have been on the rise over the past decade or more. Under Jobseeker’s Allowance, while a little over 1,000 single parents were sanctioned in 2005/06, nearly 4,000 single parents were sanctioned in 2016/17. This alone represents a three-fold increase; it also overlooks the rapid escalation of sanctions from around 2010 to 2014 in the wake of a new government and stricter sanctions regime (see Figure 1). At an annual peak, nearly 50,000 single parents received a sanction in 2013/14.

Box 1 Changing conditionality for single parents

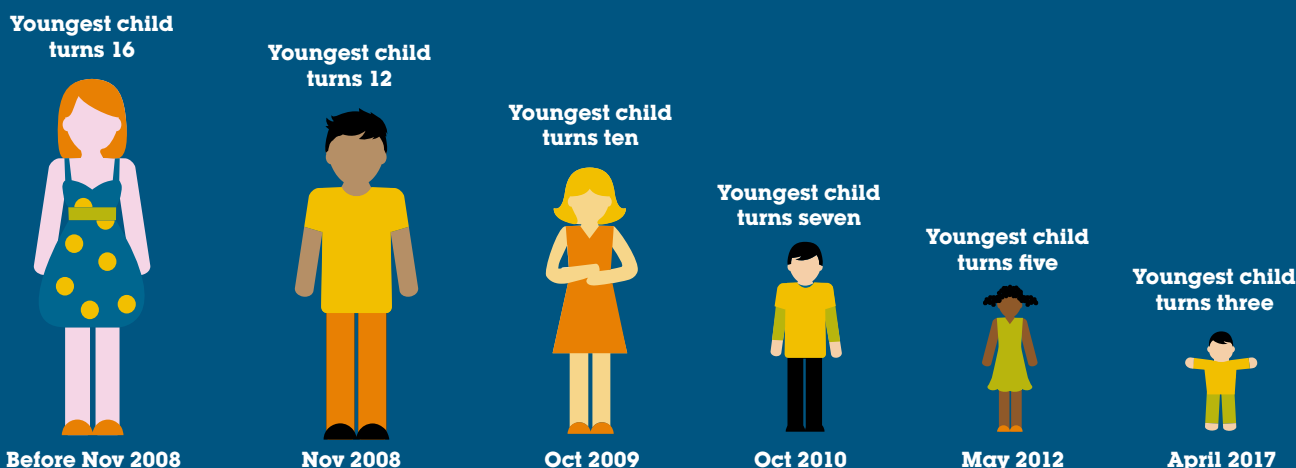
Job-seeking requirements – changing goalposts

In 2001, the government introduced compulsory work-focused interviews for single parents on Income Support, previously exempt from any work preparation. Beyond this, non-working single parents with a child aged up to 16 could receive Income Support and were not obliged to look for work. From 2008, ‘Lone Parent Obligations’ (LPO) reforms gradually removed entitlement to Income Support – therefore requiring many non-working single parents to claim Jobseeker’s Allowance and comply with full job-seeking conditions instead. Initially, single parents lost Income Support eligibility when their youngest child turned 12. Through successive waves, by 2012, this changed to when their youngest child turned five.

This trend has continued under subsequent governments. From April 2017, under Universal Credit, parents whose youngest child is:

- Aged three or four: must look for work (instead of five or older under Income Support)
- Aged two: must take “active steps” to prepare for work (eg regular work-focused interviews and can be obliged to undertake training; instead of aged three or four under Jobseeker’s Allowance)
- Aged one: must attend work-focused interviews (instead of aged two under Jobseeker’s Allowance).

Changing age at which single parents must comply with full job-seeking requirements



NB There are still ‘work preparation’ requirements that single parents must comply with when their children are younger

Flexibilities for single parents – recognising needs

Single parents’ constraints in looking for and entering work – as a result of caring responsibilities – are reflected in restrictions to job-seeking requirements. These ‘flexibilities’ were protected in law under Jobseeker’s Allowance (Gingerbread, 2016); under Universal Credit, they have largely been removed from legislation, and downgraded to adviser guidance.

Claimant commitments – embedding flexibilities

The government introduced ‘claimant commitments’ in 2013, as part of a “cultural transformation” for job-seekers (DWP, 2013). This is intended to introduce a more detailed statement of claimant’s job-seeking activities than used previously, signed by the claimant and their work coach. They are especially significant under Universal Credit, as a claimant must sign one in order to get their first payment.

In theory, a claimant commitment should be jointly agreed between the claimant and their adviser, and should recognise any allowances to adjust job-seeking requirements. Claimant commitments are therefore a particularly critical formal record for single parents.

Box 2 A new sanctions regime

Under Jobseeker's Allowance, the full weekly payment is sanctioned (£73.10 for single parents in 2017/18). Sanctions currently fall under three levels:

- Low level:
 - Four weeks' Jobseeker's Allowance lost for first sanction
 - 13 weeks' lost for second or further sanctions
- Intermediate level:
 - Jobseeker's Allowance claim stopped as deemed no longer eligible
 - Followed by up to four weeks' loss for first sanction and up to 13 weeks for second or further sanctions
- High level:
 - 13 weeks' Jobseeker's Allowance lost for first sanction
 - 26 weeks' (six months) lost for second sanction
 - 156 weeks' (three years) lost for third or further sanctions.

Under Universal Credit, the sanctions regime changed to four levels. As Universal Credit combines different benefits, it is the 'standard allowance' element that gets sanctioned (100 per cent for a single claimant, 50 per cent for a couple). In 2017/18, this was £251.77 a month for a single parent under 25, and £317.82 for a single parent aged 25 or more.

- Lowest level: Only for those required to complete work-focused interviews; sanctioned until claimant complies
- Low level: Sanctioned until claimant complies plus:
 - 7 days for first low level sanction
 - 14 days for second low level sanction
 - 28 days for third or further sanctions
- Medium level: Same rules as the Jobseeker's Allowance 'low level' sanction
- High level: Same rules as the Jobseeker's Allowance 'high level' sanction.

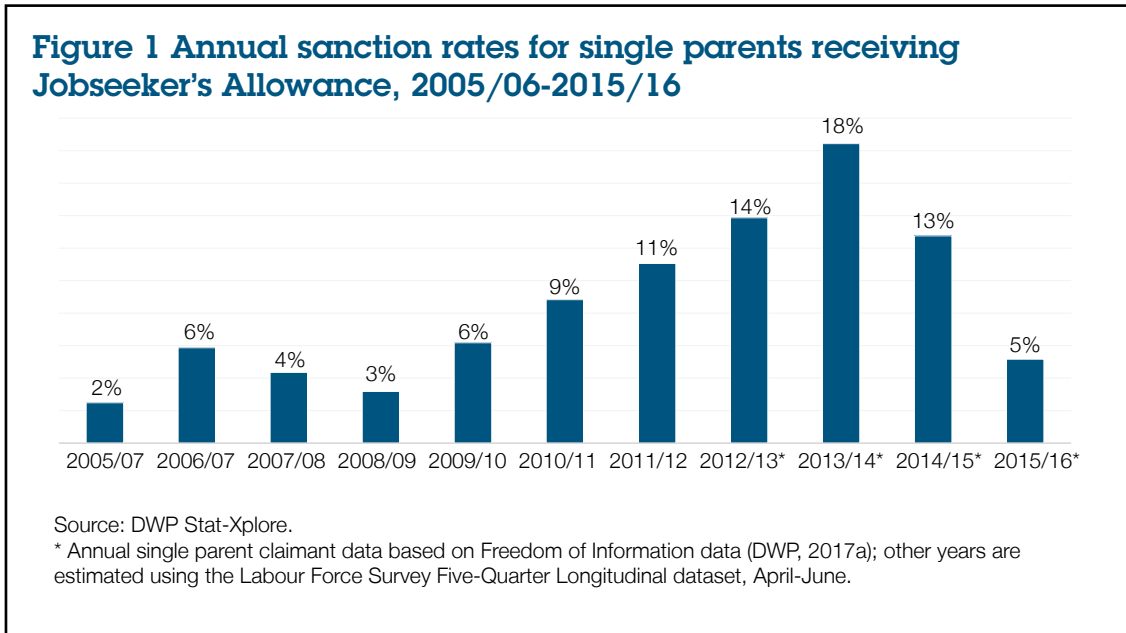
Sanctioned Jobseeker's Allowance claimants can claim hardship payments; those classed as part of a 'vulnerable' group (including those responsible for a dependent child) can claim from the first day of a sanction. Payments are paid at 60 per cent of the normal award, or 80 per cent if a claimant or family member is pregnant or seriously ill. This effectively reduces a sanction to 40 per cent (or 20 per cent if receiving the higher level) of a claim.

Hardship payments under Universal Credit are less generous. Claimants must also demonstrate compliance with all work requirements for seven days before applying, so they are not available from the first day of a sanction.

They are still worth roughly 60 per cent of a sanction but are now loans, so future Universal Credit payments continue to be reduced to repay the debt – effectively continuing the financial impact beyond the actual sanction. Claimants should be able to show they have reduced spending on what the jobcentre considers 'non-essential' items and made efforts to seek help elsewhere first. Claimants must also reapply each month.

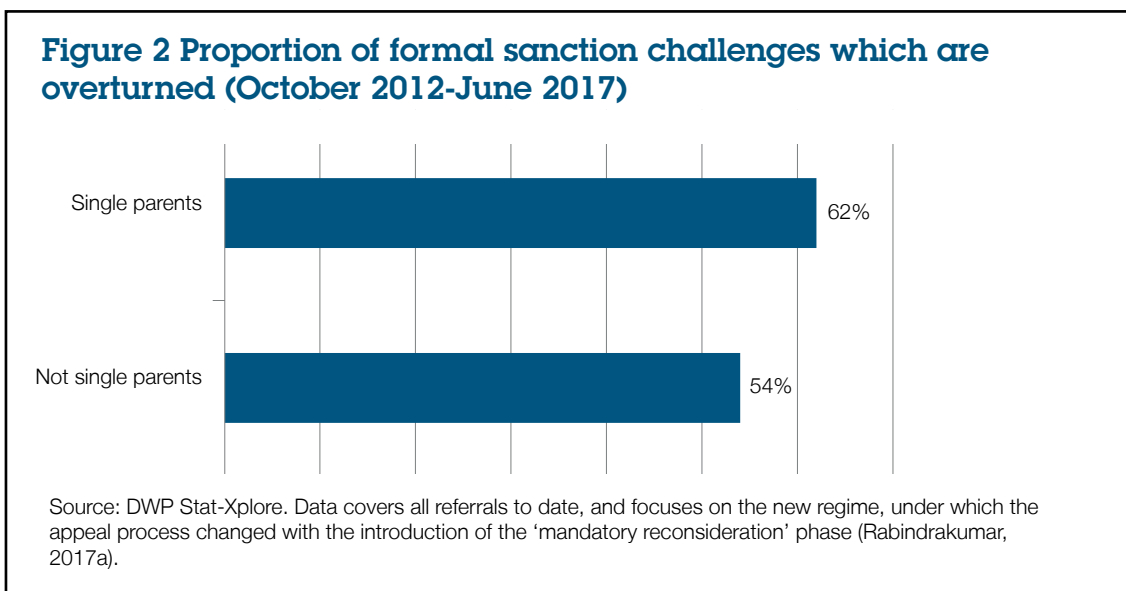
Finally, while hardship payments are available, single parents are often not told of them and not all applications are successful (see section 4).

As analysis has previously shown, this increase in single parent sanctions partly reflects the growing number of single parents moving onto Jobseeker’s Allowance due to LPO reforms (and therefore having to look for work – Box 1; Rabindrakumar, 2017a). Even so, the data shows that the rate of sanctions for single parents also increased alongside the surge in referrals – in other words, the sanctions risk increased alongside the numbers (see Figure 1).



The data also clearly shows that the risk of sanctions has significantly fluctuated. While the latest figures suggests the sanction risk remains higher than ten years ago, we have seen a marked fall in both the number and rate of sanctions over the past year. These sharp changes over time raise questions about sanctioning practice – with no evidence of any notable change in claimant behaviour, there should be no significant changes to sanction rates.

Moreover, for single parents, this does not paint the full picture of their experience of benefit sanctions. Single parents do not just face an increased risk of sanctions, they also face a persistently higher risk of unfair sanctions than other claimants. Previous analysis showed that single parent sanctions were more likely to be overturned once formally challenged than other sanctions (see Figure 2). This suggests single parents are particularly at risk of either unreasonable conditions from work coaches which are later overturned, or poor administration of sanction rules.



These trends point towards a sanctions policy that does not reflect an objective arbiter of job-seeking claimants, but reflects the pressures on, and fallibility of, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administration. This is particularly worrying given the extension of job-seeking conditions under Universal Credit to parents with pre-school children for the first time – the main carers whose youngest child is aged three or four must now comply with full job-seeking requirements. As a result, around 165,000 more single parents will be subject to job-seeking rules and potentially affected by unfair sanctions. Recent evidence already suggests that these additional conditions are being undermined by the lack of available and affordable childcare and flexible work (Dewar and Ben-Galim, 2017).

Not only this, but new conditions are also being piloted under Universal Credit for working claimants for the first time. The government argues this will be a way to encourage claimants to ‘progress’ in work – to either more hours or higher earnings. However, this system of ‘in-work conditionality’ is largely untested internationally, beyond limited schemes in Canada and the Netherlands (Work and Pensions Committee, 2016). The risk for working single parents is a cause for concern, given the experience of those subject to job-seeking conditions. Caught between policy demands to ‘seek (more) work or be sanctioned’ and a lack of options, there is potential for single parents to end up penalised for a situation outside their control.

New data obtained through a Freedom of Information request shows that there were already around 1,000 sanctions a month for single parents under Universal Credit in the last quarter of 2016/17 – before new conditionality rules for parents of pre-school aged children came into force. It is difficult to calculate an accurate rate (ie risk) of sanctions under Universal Credit at the moment, as data is not published on how many single parents are subject to conditions. Even so, these figures show significant numbers of single parents are already being affected by Universal Credit sanctions, and make up the vast majority of sanctions for parents – three-quarters of sanctions for households with children in March 2016 were imposed on single parents (DWP, 2018).

As a result, it is critical that we do not lose focus on the scrutiny of sanctions policy – even with the recent decline in rates. Sanctions have serious implications for claimants; in the case of parents, it is not just the individual who is punished – rightly or wrongly – but their children too. At the same time, as the National Audit Office (NAO; 2017) warned, the DWP knows little about the longer term impact of its sanctions policy and therefore delivers questionable value for money.

This report aims to fill this gap and explores the impact of sanctions in more detail to understand how sanctions arise, the outcomes for single parents both in terms of job-seeking and for their families and lessons for the future regime under Universal Credit. It seeks to understand the widespread concern that the sanctions system is flawed – that sanctions are not being applied as intended, and that they are far from filling the policy intention of encouraging benefit claimants to seek work.

2 Single parents caught in the middle

Looking at in-depth case studies reveals the impact of benefit sanctions – both warnings and those imposed. Single parents’ experiences illustrate the far-reaching impact of the loss of money as a result of sanctions. Their stories also expose the first evidence of how conditionality is working under Universal Credit, and the continued – and potentially increased – risk placed on single parents through the new benefit system.

To examine the impact of benefit sanctions for job-seeking single parents, we look at in-depth case studies gathered from interviews (November 2017) to understand how single parent sanctions arise, whether as a warning or an actual sanction. We also draw on Gingerbread’s helpline calls (January-December 2017) and anonymous feedback through an online survey (23 October – 4 December 2017) for supporting evidence.

For the first time, we examine sanctions not just under Jobseeker’s Allowance, but Universal Credit too. These examples give the first indications of the treatment of single parents under Universal Credit conditions, including both those seeking work as well as those who are in work. These experiences suggest that the risk of sanctions for single parents will not only continue, but potentially increase. This is not only as a result of the increased numbers affected by conditionality under Universal Credit (see previous section), but also due to the way in which Universal Credit puts pressure on single parents’ finances (eg through difficulties in getting support with childcare costs). For single parents who need support to enter or sustain employment, or who need a supportive social security system which allows them to move in and out of work when necessary without being penalised, Universal Credit presents serious concerns.

The boxes below summarise the situations these parents faced.

Box 3 Rani’s story

“[T]hey said I wasn’t doing enough to do the job search...The hours [available] are not suitable for someone in my predicament.”

Rani lives in west London with her primary school aged child. She has been on Jobseeker’s Allowance for a year and a half. In the last month she has been warned that she may get a sanction because her work coach does not think that she is doing enough to look for a job. In particular, she was told that she was not applying for enough jobs on the DWP’s job search website Universal Jobmatch. However, she has not found jobs on the site that fit around her caring responsibilities.

Rani is keen to move into care work or work at a school such as a dinner lady. She knows there are vacancies in her area during times when her son is at school. She was disappointed that the jobcentre would not pay for her to have a DBS check to help move into this work. Rani is still unemployed.

Box 4 Mary-Anne's story

“The job coach does not offer any official advice for me because I am a single parent. They treat me like any other claimant.”

Mary-Anne lives in north London with her three children; one at secondary school and two at primary school. She is on Jobseeker's Allowance and has been sanctioned twice; once for missing an appointment (when she was on a training course) and one where her job coach considered she was not doing enough to look for work. On both occasions her appeal against the sanctions were successful but due to the time taken to appeal she was left short of money and went into debt.

She found the appeals process daunting and is still paying back the money for the hardship payments she received during the appeals. She thinks that the unfair sanctions have soured her relationship with her work coach and this has not helped her move into work.

Box 5 Sara's story

“I begged a lot of support from my mum. My mum is on the verge of losing her job as well...it's really horrible...it's demoralizing”

Sara and her primary school aged child live in south London. She was working full-time and received tax credits, but struggled with the cost of childcare (particularly over the summer holiday) and the practicalities of working full-time, including a pressure to work at weekends. She explained to the jobcentre that she wanted to leave the job and look for part-time work instead, and was informed this was reasonable. However, when she was subsequently moved onto Universal Credit, she was sanctioned for a month for leaving full-time work.

There was a delay of nine months between her change in hours and her sanction. She unsuccessfully appealed the decision. Sara did not have enough money to pay her rent and she got into debt as a result. While sanctioned, she had one hardship payment and had to use a foodbank.

Since being on Universal Credit, Sara has also struggled with the inconsistent levels of payments each month and paying for childcare in advance. She has recently moved into another full-time job, but this is not a permanent role and she fears she may not be able to maintain the position.

Box 6 Fay's story

“You are putting me in an uncompromising situation where I have to take my daughter out of nursery and stop my job”

Fay lives in south London with her two children, one child is pre-school and one is at primary school. She has been on Universal Credit for 18 months. She was warned about a sanction six months into her claim. Her youngest child was aged three at the time.

Fay found a part-time job and notified the jobcentre. However, she could not afford the up-front cost of nursery fees until she got her first pay cheque. She was not given any help; instead, the jobcentre warned her that she would be sanctioned if she left the job. Although her nursery was initially patient, this was not sustainable and after two months without Universal Credit support for childcare costs, Fay reluctantly was forced to leave an “amazing job” that she enjoyed and had prospects. After making a formal complaint, the sanction warning was lifted but it was too late for Fay as she had already left her job. Fay is now studying full-time.

Box 7 Sasha's story

“I've been left sanctioned. I've been left destitute.”

Sasha has one child at primary school and is heavily pregnant. She lives in north London and is a survivor of domestic abuse. She is on Universal Credit and has received more than one sanction. Her latest sanction was given for not attending an appointment; the sanction has already lasted six months and is ongoing. She has been unsuccessful at overturning the decision.

Sasha is very short of money and feels very vulnerable. She has taken out two crisis loans, and has used a foodbank. She owes money to friends, and is behind on her bills including her phone and on her heating bill. She has resorted to borrowing money from her grandparents with help from their pension.

Box 8 Kelly's story

“I think it is unfair to put [single parents] in a desperate situation because then you are sanctioning the children.”

Kelly lives in south London with her two pre-school aged children. When she first applied for Universal Credit, she did not need to attend the jobcentre as her youngest child was a baby. When her younger child turned one, Kelly was sanctioned for missing a jobcentre appointment. She had not read her online journal that week, where the appointment was logged (she was not routinely asked to look at her journal when her child was under one). She had not received any other contact about the appointment.

The impact of Kelly's lost income was acute. She had to sell household items, borrow money from family and friends and rely on food vouchers. She got into debt and could not pay her gas or electricity bills.

Kelly successfully appealed her sanction and her payments were backdated, but this took a long time. She is currently undertaking part-time study, but she will need to become a job-seeker when her youngest child turns three.

The case studies above summarise examples of single parents' situations when they are warned about a sanction, or have one imposed. Next, we explore how these situations unfold and some of the common issues that lead to single parent warnings or sanctions.

3 How sanctions arise

Job-seeking expectations continue to take a tick-box approach, informed by inflexible numerical targets rather than actual intentions to seek work. For single parents, this presents a particular problem – the flexibility needed to accommodate barriers to work (eg shortages of suitable childcare, part-time/flexible jobs and training) and changing circumstances facing single parent families means they are often caught out by unrealistic job-seeking expectations. Neither the new claimant commitments introduced in 2013 nor Universal Credit have helped reverse these trends – despite high profile promises of more tailored and flexible support. As a result, sanctions arise from the rigidity of a system which does not reflect single parents’ needs; furthermore, this is now experienced by working single parents for the first time under Universal Credit.

As explored previously, under the current sanctions system, the most common reasons for a single parent sanction are failing to participate in the Work Programme ‘without good reason’, not actively seeking employment and failing to attend/participate in an adviser interview ‘without good reason’ (Rabindrakumar, 2017a). Since the new sanction rules were introduced in 2012, around nine in ten (88 per cent) of sanctions resulted from these three reasons alone.¹ The case studies in this report reveal the detail behind this data, illustrating how sanctions arise due to falling foul of job-seeking requirements and expected attendance.

**1 Stat-Xplore.
Gingerbread analysis
of data to June 2017**

Tick-box approach to job-seeking

By far the clearest theme from the cases examined is the way in which sanctions underpin and encourage a tick-box approach to assessing job-seeking. The expectations set for job-seeking are often rigid, determined by numerical targets. Any deviation from these – even with good reason – places single parents at risk of warnings or sanctions imposed.

One single parent reported how she received a Jobseeker’s Allowance sanction for not applying for enough jobs – despite applying for five jobs in a fortnight. In Rani’s case, she was told she had to use Universal Jobmatch for her job search. Despite frustrations with the system – echoed by many other claimants (Rabindrakumar, 2014) – and a willingness to seek work by other means, failing to use the system as frequently as her work coach deemed necessary meant she was judged to not be doing enough to seek work.

“That Jobmatch thing is rubbish. A waste of time...I’d rather go out there, look for a job where there is a vacancy and apply for it...I’ll go there and I’ll give my CV – hand it in.”

Rani, single parent case study (Box 3)

Similarly, after receiving support from Gingerbread, Mary-Anne was able to limit the work she sought to 16 hours a week. However, her claimant commitment also applied this threshold to her job-seeking ‘hours’ – she was expected to go on Universal Jobmatch for 16 hours a week. As a result, the DWP measured her ‘compliance’ by hours logged onto a site rather than her intention to seek work. She was subsequently sanctioned (later overturned) for not doing enough to seek work, as she did not meet the full 16 hours spent on the Universal Jobmatch site.

Unrealistic claimant commitments

The rigidity of the rules set by work coaches for job-seeking which can easily lead to sanctions has been a longstanding issue, and can affect all claimants. However, for single parents, unrealistic expectations that fail to recognise their circumstances compound the problem. Again, this is not a new phenomenon (Newis, 2014). However, it fails to match up to government promises for a new system of conditionality and personalised support introduced by the 2010-2015 coalition

government and under Universal Credit. The new claimant commitment was supposed to create more transparency in job-seeking requirements through a more personalised approach (Box 1). As recently as October 2017, the Secretary of State for the DWP at the time lauded the “flexible, clear and tailored claimant commitment” (HC Deb, 2017). Yet the reality presented in this report shows that many single parents’ claimant commitments still do not properly reflect the constraints on their ability to seek and find work.

“The only thing we ask is that claimants meet reasonable and agreed requirements that take into account their individual circumstances and capability, including mental health conditions, disability and caring responsibilities.”

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (HC Deb, 2017)

Inappropriate conditionality

Single parents are often restricted in the jobs for which they can apply due to a lack of flexible or part-time work, or a lack of suitable childcare (Dewar and Ben-Galim, 2017). Rani illustrates a typical example of single parents caught between job-seeking requirements and her needs as a single parent.

“I am seeking a job that fits around my son while he is attending primary school... I am a single parent. He has got no one else except for me to look after him.”

Rani, single parent case study (Box 3)

Fay’s case illustrates how claimant commitments can take a one-way approach to agreeing job-seeking requirements. Her claimant commitment stipulated she had to apply for five jobs a week when her youngest child was not yet at school, but had notable gaps when it came to recognising flexibilities within this requirement. For instance, under Universal Credit she was entitled to undertake training (if it will improve her work prospects) while her youngest child was three, yet she was not informed of her eligibility. There were no restrictions on the hours she was expected to work, nor were maximum commute times discussed or stated – despite guidance to the contrary (Box 1).

As a Gingerbread helpline caller’s case illustrates, single parents often find there is little of the promised flexibility with regard to job-seeking hours, making it difficult to comply with the conditions set by their commitments:

Helpline call: A single parent receives Universal Credit and has a six year old child. She has been told she has to look for work for 25 hours a week. However, there are no allowances for school holidays. When she raised the difficulty of meeting her job-seeking hours while her child was home from school with her work coach, the caller was told that she can put her child in a holiday club. However, she is unable to afford childcare and will receive no state support for childcare costs while she is not in work.

These are not isolated cases. As the DWP’s own Universal Credit evaluation shows, three in five family claimants did not think all the terms of their claimant commitment took account of their personal circumstances (DWP, 2017b). Family claimants generally felt there were unrealistic expectations of job-seeking and/or working hours. The research found parents felt they had largely been given a ‘one size fits all’ claimant commitment, which they were “struggling to meet”. Notably, single parent claimants were less likely to feel all their claimant commitment requirements

took account of their circumstances once they were subject to full job-seeking requirements under Universal Credit. This is particularly concerning, as the research was undertaken when parents with pre-school children were not yet subject to new job-seeking rules introduced in April 2017 – there will now be more single parents with an arguably even greater need to recognise caring responsibilities.²

2 The research was carried out before rules changed in April 2017; at the time of the research, single parents were subject to full job-seeking conditions when their youngest child turned five, rather than three.

Practical and personal barriers to compliance

Beyond the difficulties in seeking or finding work in itself, single parents often find there are practical barriers to compliance with conditions. Caring for children throws up unexpected changes in routine such as sickness and emergency appointments. For single parents, unable to shift-parent and juggle other responsibilities in the same way a couple parent might, these situations can be particularly difficult to manage. As a result, warnings and sanctions often arise from situations such as a missed jobcentre appointment, despite the lack of wilful non-compliance. For example, one single parent reported receiving a warning for a Jobseeker's Allowance sanction for not attending the jobcentre when her child was off sick from school:

“I was told there are plenty of other single parents who manage. I was told it was my problem to sort out childcare so I can attend.”

Single parent, one child at secondary school

Rani's experience also illustrates how wider circumstances which may impede job-seeking can lead to potential sanctions. With rent arrears and under threat of losing her home, Rani was also spending time trying to resolve her precarious housing situation alongside searching for jobs. While she did continue with her job search without success (Box 3), her time was also constrained by these other pressures. With no flexibility around her job-seeking conditions in light of her housing situation or a clear process to amend her claimant commitment to take account of her wider circumstances, she risked contravening the conditions placed her by the DWP.

Single parents are particularly at risk from a number of other pressures as a result of separation and low incomes. For example, they are more likely to have faced domestic abuse in the last year than other household types (ONS, 2017), make up around half of households in temporary accommodation (DHCLG, 2017) and are often managing debts (Rabindrakumar, 2017b). These pressures make the inflexibility of claimant commitments a particular risk as a route into the sanctions system.

Barriers to negotiating claimant commitments

Underpinning the above problems with unrealistic claimant commitments is an imbalance of power between the work coach and claimant, which prevents the issue being resolved before a sanction is applied. Mary-Anne described finding it difficult to negotiate her claimant commitment because she was worried about whether this would be recorded as a “refusal to cooperate” – as a result, she felt her claimant commitment did not suit her needs as a single parent.

In some cases, it is understandable as to why single parents might be concerned about how voicing their concerns would be perceived, given the tone of DWP communications. For example, when Fay found a job, she was informed in her journal that “if you leave this job you will be sanctioned for six months or up to three years”. This approach to managing claimant relationships firmly places an emphasis on conditions and compliance, rather than support.

Sasha's experience illustrated this conflict more starkly, where – despite attempting to discuss making some allowances in her claimant commitment – she was ignored by her work coach. This sits in direct contrast to the DWP promise of claimant commitments which are to be negotiated and mutually agreed, and which can be revised as circumstances change.

“The commitment is imposed on you and you have no choice but to sign...There is no way I could fit [the claimant commitment requirements] around my care needs and when I tried to address this with the adviser they ignored me.”

Sasha, single parent case study (Box 7)

Problems under Universal Credit

There seems to be no sign of change under Universal Credit. The same issues are leading to warnings or sanctions, despite further promises of a different approach.

“With Universal Credit, you will experience a different type of relationship with your work coach than you may have expected. They will focus on mentoring and coaching you, to help you meet the requirements recorded in your claimant commitment.”

DWP (2016) ‘Universal Credit and your claimant commitment’

There are continued calls to Gingerbread’s helpline from single parents who are concerned about taking up a new job that they might need to leave in the event that they cannot manage due to inaccessible childcare or inflexible hours, in case they are liable for a sanction – this time under Universal Credit. As Universal Credit now deals with working claimants, working parents are now reporting similar concerns about leaving their job when it becomes unmanageable – leaving them trapped in work they cannot sustain in case it leads to a sanction.

These concerns are not without foundation. While DWP rules state that personal or domestic reasons (such as a lack of childcare) qualify as ‘good reason’ to give up work, this does not necessarily translate into work coach advice. One single parent receiving Universal Credit reported she had been sanctioned because she had to leave her job. Even though this was eventually overturned, this is not guaranteed – as Sara found (Box 5). Another recent caller to Gingerbread’s helpline caller illustrates a similar concern, trapped between a lack of suitable childcare and the risk of a sanction:

Helpline call: A single parent with a five year old had started work while receiving Universal Credit, but needed to find childcare from 6am to 8pm to cover her working hours (7am-7.15pm). She could not find registered childcare to cover before and after school hours, and had to rely on unregistered childcare instead. However, this meant she was not eligible for any support from the DWP for childcare costs and could no longer afford to work. When discussing this with the jobcentre, she was told they could not provide any financial support and was warned that she would receive a sanction if she gave up her job.

Worryingly, the problems under Universal Credit are not simply ‘more of the same’. Pressures on the sustainability of jobs have in some cases been made worse by Universal Credit. In particular, problems with administering support for childcare have led to some single parents being forced to give up work (DWP, 2017a). This is not just a problem for Universal Credit’s policy intention to ‘make work pay’, but places single parents at further risk of a sanction as a result of giving up work ‘without good reason’ as noted above. Fay found herself in exactly this position, when her new job was impossible to maintain due to a lack of childcare support that should have been provided under Universal Credit. When she explained her position, she received a warning of a potential sanction.

“If you leave this job, you will be sanctioned for six months...or up to three years”

Fay, single parent case study (Box 6)

Errors and a difficult appeals process

Of course, some warnings and sanctions arise out of mistakes from DWP staff. In some cases, referrals for sanctions are a result of administrative errors. Previous analysis shows that the rate of cancelled referrals – an indication of administrative error – increased markedly over the last decade (Rabindrakumar, 2017a).

Moreover, some warnings and sanctions remain in place due to an often long and difficult appeals process. Only around a third (32 per cent) of single parent sanctions reach any kind of formal challenge stage – whether that’s a decision review, mandatory reconsideration or appeal.³ Yet, once single parent sanctions do reach these stages, there is a high rate of success – nearly two-thirds (62 per cent) of sanctions imposed on single parent are successfully overturned when formally challenged. Of course, this high rate of success might mean that decisions that are most likely to succeed go forward to be challenged. Alternatively, this indicates that far more sanctions would not continue to stand if challenged.

3 For more on the sanctions process, see Rabindrakumar (2017a).

It is perhaps not surprising that so few decisions are challenged, given the experiences of those single parents who do attempt to appeal. For example, Sara found there was a long delay – many months – between the apparent transgression and an actual sanction, making evidence gathering more difficult. She was not told how to appeal, and needed support from a friend to do so. As Mary-Anne explained, the process can be daunting and can leave claimants at a disadvantage when presenting their case.

“The process was hard...I waited about six weeks for any sort of acknowledgement of my appeal”

Sara, single parent case study (Box 5)

“I didn’t find it particularly easy...I didn’t have any legal advice about what to include or exclude. It is a bit daunting if you don’t know [to] whom you are writing or what you should write.”

Mary-Anne, single parent case study (Box 4)

4 The impact of sanctions

The immediate impact of sanctions is clear – financially, for single parents already on a low income, they throw family finances into disarray and can lead to long-term problems of debt and rent arrears. Benefit sanctions also take a significant toll on single parents’ mental and emotional health – both through warnings and those imposed. Any savings the DWP makes from sanctions comes at the expense of not just single parents’ well-being, but wider support networks too – including family and friends, and support services such as food banks, local authorities and housing associations. Crucially, single parents felt that sanctions – and the threat of them – did little to help job-seeking. Sanctions led to both practical and personal barriers to finding work, raising questions over the suitability of this approach for single parents.

The evidence collected for this report demonstrates how the impact of sanctions is widespread and damaging for single parents, even for ‘low level’ sanctions and where they are eventually overturned. The effect is not just limited to the parents themselves, but their children as well.

Financial consequences

The financial impact for individual single parents is often stark. Around £40 million in single parents’ Jobseeker’s Allowance payments has been stopped since the new sanctions regime was introduced – or around £31 million once hardship payments are taken into account.⁴ Single parents describe being pushed to the limits of their finances. After being sanctioned, Kelly had to sell household items to try to get by; even then, she still got into debt and could not afford basic utility bills (Box 8). At one point, she was considering sending her children to stay with her mother, as she was concerned that she would not be able to feed them.

⁴ See Rabindrakumar (2017a) for methodology.

“I literally had a sandwich a day just to save food for the children...But I couldn’t have seen them go without or go hungry.”

Kelly, single parent case study (Box 8)

The repercussions are exacerbated when finances are already tight. For example, while it was ‘low level’ – ie the shortest fixed term sanction that can be given under Jobseeker’s Allowance – Mary-Anne’s sanction coincided with the school holidays. This made managing the care for her children difficult. She was unable to pay her credit card bill, and has had to use a local debt agency to manage her increased debts.

“To not have money at such a time is really inconvenient because that is the time when you need more money to take them out and keep them busy...[My daughter] asked for money from her friends at school and they gave her money.”

Mary-Anne, single parent case study (Box 4)

In theory, sanctioned claimants should have access to hardship payments. However, despite availability, these are often not claimed. Overall, available data for October 2012-June 2015 suggests around a third of sanctioned Jobseeker’s Allowance claimants received a hardship payment. In the past, claimants have not always been told about hardship payments, in part explaining the relatively low award rate (Newis, 2014). There are still concerns about the accessibility of these vital funds. One single parent reported that she did not apply for a hardship

payment as the process was too difficult to manage. Instead she was without money, until she managed to successfully appeal her sanction. This is a particular concern under Universal Credit, when hardship payments have become much less accessible (see Box 2) – contrary to recent moves to make hardship payments more readily available under Jobseeker’s Allowance (DWP, 2017c).

Appeals can also provide some form of redress – claimants are refunded their sanctioned benefits when they successfully challenge a decision. However, as noted above and in others reported by single parents, this process can take a long time. In fact, decision-making was found to be particularly slow under Universal Credit, which may explain some of the delays (NAO, 2017). As a result of a long wait until an appeal decision, single parents can go for weeks with lost funds, tipping them into debt which is difficult to pay back on top of ongoing bills, particularly with interest.

“I can’t pay any bills and I need to because I am getting more into debt.”

Sasha, single parent case study (Box 7)

Mental and emotional impact

The examples in this report have deliberately included both warnings and actual sanctions, to recognise the impact of the sanctions system in its entirety. As these cases illustrate, it is not only an actual sanction being imposed which has an effect on single parents, but the system of conditions and warnings as a whole. When Sasha received a sanction warning, she experienced disturbed sleep and a panic attack as a result. Again, she is not alone – other parents described feeling threatened by the language and communication used.

“I have anxiety and they made my condition worse. They [work coaches] often put threatening messages in my journal on a Friday.”

Single parent feedback, Universal Credit claimant – warned

For those that receive a sanction, the financial crisis that can result unsurprisingly causes a significant level of stress and worry.

“Total and utter fear, shock and worry. Panic about how to manage.”

Single parent feedback, Jobseeker’s Allowance claimant – sanctioned (overturned)

Impact on wider support services

In the absence of this state safety net, support networks can be vital. Sasha’s mother stepped in to help with childcare, looking after Sasha’s son part of the week. Sometimes her grandparents help financially from their pension. Kelly also described having to borrow money from family and friends.

“Would have been homeless but for family and friends”

Single parent feedback, Universal Credit claimant – sanctioned (overturned)

However, as Sara found, this has its limits when family or friends are also under financial strain (Box 5). Likewise, Sasha found that her friends were increasingly not speaking to her after she had to borrow money from them to manage her basic outgoings. And, of course, some claimants will not have a similar support network around them on which they can rely.

Support networks for sanctioned claimants are not restricted to just family and friends. Sanctions also have a knock-on impact on other support services. Local services have a significant role. Single parents like Sara reported how shortfalls in income had an impact on rent arrears, affecting local housing providers. Beyond the financial impact, single parents' experiences reflected how housing providers have become a central part of delivering wider support. Sara, Sasha and Kelly all reported support from their local housing providers in managing their finances in the interim period. In Kelly's case (Box 8), a debt manager from her housing association helped her to deal with the jobcentre and her Universal Credit claim.

The local voluntary sector also experiences the fall-out from sanctions. Sara and Sasha describe accessing support from local advice services such as Citizens Advice or StepChange, helping them to manage their debts as a result of their sanctions. Together with Kelly, they also received support from foodbanks. They were not alone. The Trussell Trust reports around a fifth of their foodbank clients in London are single parents;⁵ one report suggests nearly one in ten (8 per cent) of foodbank referrals studied were primarily due to sanctions (Garret, et al, 2016).

5 Trussell Trust data, unpublished.

Impact on job-seeking

Finally, no assessment of the impact of benefit sanctions would be complete without examining whether they fulfil their policy objectives in encouraging claimants to seek and move into work.

“[W]e place conditions on people, that changes behaviour and that helps people get into work”

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (BBC News, 2017)

For the single parents in this report, there is little evidence of a positive impact on job-seeking as a result of benefit sanctions – as others have also found (Johnsen, 2016). For some, their sanction presented an immediate practical barrier to finding work. One single parent reported that she had been sanctioned under Universal Credit for leaving her job (which was subsequently overturned); while sanctioned, she still looked for work but couldn't travel to interviews as she did not have enough money for transport. Sasha found herself in a similar position. While sanctioned, she found it even harder to fulfil her claimant commitment and jobcentre appointments due to the travel costs involved.

“How can I come to the appointments? How can I pay my bills? I still need to pay bills.”

Sasha, single parent case study (Box 7)

Negotiating changing conditionality while children grow up can also hinder routes to employment, including study or training, as one recent Gingerbread helpline call illustrates (see below). This chimes with the concerns flagged in the recent NAO (2017) assessment of benefit sanctions, which noted that the evidence demonstrating sanctions are correlated with an increased chance of employment also indicates that this may also result in less sustainable work (eg temporary or lower paid) than claimants would otherwise find.

Helpline call: A single parent of a three year old is working part-time as a carer, but her employer asked her to start working weekends, when there was no suitable childcare available. She would like to retrain as a nursery assistant to better balance work and care, but this would mean opening a claim for Universal Credit; under this system, she would need to seek and be available for work. Therefore, although training would allow her to enter more sustainable employment as a single parent, she would be expected to give this up should a job become available in the meantime.

Other single parents illustrated how sanctions can disrupt their relationship with the jobcentre. Re-establishing trust with their work coach – particularly if they have felt unfairly threatened by

a warning or have had a sanction decision overturned – was difficult and engagement with the jobcentre viewed negatively as a result. In these cases, implementing current sanction rules have moved parents further away from employment support and work – very far from the personalised and positive support that work coaches are supposed to provide (HC Deb, 2017). Again, this to some extent chimes with the NAO (2017) warnings of the possible deterrent effect of sanctions on job-seeking. For Mary-Anne, while she felt she was more likely to make sure she fulfilled her online job search requirements, this was to ensure compliance with the rules rather than because she felt she was moving closer to work as a result.

“Hated going to the jobcentre after that”

Single parent feedback, Jobseeker’s Allowance claimant

“When they sanctioned me, it really made me angry, so I did not feel like complying or looking for work any harder...I do not want to see [the same work coach].”

Mary-Anne, single parent case study (Box 4)

“I think it is very impersonalised”

Sara, single parent case study (Box 5)

Taken together, these examples illustrate how benefit sanctions are fundamentally a problematic way of supporting single parents – one of the government’s key target groups in achieving full employment and targeting so-called ‘worklessness’. The current system is based on the premise that single parents need a stringent set of rules in order to actively seek work – largely replicating a historic approach to single claimants without children. When the vast majority of non-working single parents want to work or study (Barnes and Tomaszewski, 2010), and most are caring for very young children and therefore economically inactive, this rationale is clearly flawed. Instead of using sanctions solely in cases of clear wilful non-compliance, they are being used to police a tick-box approach that allows little flexibility to recognise claimants’ wider needs and barriers to work or study. While this is described as ‘fairness for the taxpayer’, single parents and their children are caught in the wide gap between policy intention and reality.

“My little boy is not a burden. The government is making out he is a burden. I want to go to work.”

Rani, single parent case study (Box 2)

“I don’t think the children should be punished... still need to be fed and clothed and live in a warm home...sanctions undermine the purpose of the benefit system in our country to protect the poorest and most vulnerable from poverty.”

Kelly, single parent case study (Box 8)

5 The future for conditionality and sanctions

The experiences in this report highlight how DWP policy continues to fail to support single parents to be both carers and earners. Despite continued government claims that sanctions are used as a ‘last resort’, this report illustrates how far the use of sanction warnings and actual sanctions are from cases of genuine non-compliance for single parents. If the government intends to found its new benefits system on tailored and flexible support, and close continuing employment gaps, it must address these issues urgently. In particular, it must recognise the impact on parents and children and limit the use of financial sanctions, suspend unrealistic conditions, overhaul claimant commitments and rebalance employment support away from penalties. Without this, families and children will continue to be caught in the middle of a misguided and failing policy.

As has been made clear, the conditionality and sanctions system is flawed in recognising single parents’ needs in seeking and sustaining work – not least because they have been shoehorned into a system designed for single claimants without children.

It is far from clear how sanctions encourage job-seeking among single parents – most single parents are already motivated to work or train, and the evidence in this report shows how sanctions can in fact move parents further from work.

The system of conditionality does little to address the structural barriers to work facing single parents. Parents still face difficulties in finding appropriate childcare and working hours; they still often struggle to juggle job-seeking requirements with managing caring responsibilities. Moreover, there is a risk that single parents are pushed into unsustainable work in a bid to comply with conditions and avoid a sanction (and likewise risk a sanction for leaving such work). For single parents’ trapped between barriers to work and jobcentre conditions, benefit sanctions can feel far from the ‘last resort’ the government suggests.

Benefit sanctions have a distressing impact on claimants. Moreover, sanctions for parents are not just a punishment for the individual claimant, but have a serious impact on the security and well-being of the family as a whole – including children. The effects of a sanction are also not limited to the penalty period, but can have longer term financial repercussions. With a long appeals process, even those sanctions which are eventually overturned have serious implications as a result of debts incurred.

It is concerning, therefore, that conditionality has already been extended to parents of three and four year olds and is being piloted for those in work under Universal Credit. In this context, the government must have pause for thought. There is an argument for looking at radical alternatives to the sanctions system – including ending financial sanctions as a whole. Of course, this is a fundamental reform for any government and particularly so for one likely to be preoccupied by the departure from the EU. In the interim, we outline four key areas to address urgently, to ensure a fairer approach to administering benefits.

Minimise financial penalties

Recommendations:

- Introduce a ‘yellow card’ warning system before a first sanction
- Reduce, rather than fully suspend, benefit payments for parents with dependent children.

The government has yet to pilot a proper ‘yellow card’ system, with clear warnings to claimants before imposing a first sanction.⁶ As many sanctions arise from a lack of understanding of

⁶ The government did pilot what it termed a ‘yellow card’ system, which was limited to an additional 14 days to provide evidence after being referred for a sanction – rather than a proper warning system before making any referral.

commitments or inappropriateness of conditions in changed circumstances, this warning system would allow claimants to change either their activity or claimant commitment accordingly. This would limit the use of sanctions for the many cases where claimants do intend to seek work.

The full suspension of Jobseeker's Allowance, or the standard allowance under Universal Credit, should be stopped – particularly for parents of dependent children. There is little evidence that this level of sanction is needed in order to encourage job-seeking; moreover, any punitive element of sanctions must be balanced with the best interests of children. As a minimum, the government should change benefit sanctions from a full suspension of the benefit payment to a part-suspension. To some degree, there is already precedent for this – a claimant awarded a hardship payment effectively has their sanction reduced to 40 per cent of their benefit (or 20 per cent in some cases; see Box 1), rather than 100 per cent. The government could follow this threshold for reducing (rather than suspending) Jobseeker's Allowance and the Universal Credit standard allowance when applying a sanction, allowing claimants to keep at least 60 per cent of their benefit. This approach maintains a financial penalty for supposed transgressions, but does not place the burden on claimants to prove their financial need and risk delaying essential support, helping to limit the severe impact of sanctions for families with children.

Suspend unrealistic conditions

Recommendations:

- End the mandatory use of Universal Jobmatch for job-seeking, allowing wider job search options for claimants
- Suspend job-seeking requirements for parents of three and four year olds, until affordable and good quality childcare and flexible work is available locally.

In addition to delivering appropriate advice, other jobcentre infrastructure needs development to address single parents' needs. The main way parents are obliged to look for work is through the DWP's Universal Jobmatch site – a parent's use of the site can be used as evidence of job-seeking activity. In view of the severe limitations on flexible and part-time roles advertised on the current site (Dewar and Ben-Galim, 2017), single parents should not be mandated to use the site as a condition of their claim and the DWP should accept other forms of job-seeking. The DWP should also take urgent steps to increase the level of part-time and flexible roles across the pay and qualification scales on Universal Jobmatch, and improve the site's functionality to search for roles that fit single parents' requirements (eg in line with working hours expected under welfare rules).

With the introduction of new conditionality for parents of pre-school children under Universal Credit, potential barriers to work faced by these parents must be better recognised. Stronger protections against unrealistic conditions are needed, including allowing the suspension of job-seeking requirements where there is no local affordable and good quality childcare or flexible work. Without a stronger commitment to recognise the needs of these parents, they are at risk of facing unfair sanctions – and affecting even younger children than before.

Overhaul claimant commitments

Recommendations:

- Publish a parent's guide on the full range of possible single parent flexibilities
- Introduce a clearer process for revising claimant commitments to accommodate changes in circumstances and recognise additional needs
- Increase scrutiny and evaluation of single parents' claimant commitments.

A more transparent and open process is needed to discuss and negotiate claimant commitments and ensure single parents' needs are recognised. Parents and work coaches should be equally clear and involved in agreeing claimant commitments. As a priority, the DWP should produce a document outlining the potential flexibilities available (eg expected hours of work, travel times,

training opportunities) with links to further advice from specialist organisations, which parents should have sight of before signing their claimant commitment. It should be an obligation for work coaches to provide and discuss this document, and record this, before a single parent signs a claimant commitment.

The lack of recognition of wider barriers to job-seeking (eg a precarious housing situation, as in Rani's case) can mean that claimants are penalised despite there being little realistic chance of them fulfilling job-seeking requirements. The intention under Universal Credit to understand a claimant's wider circumstances has the potential to be significant, particularly through joining up with local services via the promised 'Universal Support' – however, it is far from clear as to whether this will lead to adjustments to conditionality rules facing claimants given current evidence. This is particularly worrying where a parent's situation changes after signing a claimant commitment, or parents feel inhibited from entering work or leaving unsustainable work. Claimant commitments are intended to be 'living' documents, but single parents' experiences suggests they are rarely revisited. Guidance for work coaches and parents should be clear on the process for agreeing revisions as parents' circumstances change.

Finally, the existing evaluation of Universal Credit for families (DWP, 2017b) pre-dates the rollout of increased job-seeking expectations for parents of pre-school aged children, therefore a significant element of recent reforms has yet to be publicly assessed. As a pilot measure, the DWP should include a second tier of scrutiny for these parents, with a second work coach or senior manager reviewing claimant commitment content against available flexibilities and support (eg suspending job-seeking while training for up to a year) to ensure it is fair and reasonable. These results, alongside quality control measures in place for claimant commitments more broadly, should be put into the public domain.

Rebalance employment support

Recommendations:

- Introduce single parent training for work coaches, covering needs, appropriate conditions and available jobcentre support
- Strengthen into-work support provision, eg for childcare costs
- Pilot alternatives to financial penalties to enable job-seeking.

A better and more consistent understanding among work coaches is needed of single parents' needs and how these relate to the local job market (eg the availability of part-time and/or flexible work), the way in which single parents' work preparation and job-seeking can be different from other claimants, and jobcentre support (eg support for childcare costs) available. Specialist stakeholder organisations should be involved in the development and content of these training modules.

The examples in this report suggest that job-seeking claimants need a better balance between conditions and practical support. Too often, sanctions – whether as warnings or those imposed – seem to be a first, rather than a last resort. In the meantime, single parents have found a reluctance to address even short-term barriers to work at the jobcentre. For example, single parents incur upfront costs from entering work – particularly childcare costs, as Fay's case illustrates – for which they receive little help. The withdrawal of dedicated support for these situations, such as In-Work Credit, with no consistent guidance for advisers on how to address circumstances in the absence of these funds, means that jobcentres are sometimes hindering rather than facilitating moves into work. Potential support such as Budgeting Advance loans can be made accessible for up-front childcare costs, and routinely made available to parents entering work.

In other cases, jobcentres can be too focused on moving single parents into work through applying pressure via warnings and sanctions rather than longer term support towards more sustainable employment. After being sanctioned, Sara was assigned a new work coach who

recognised her degree qualification and started to encourage her to apply to the civil service, which would offer better pay and progression as well as flexibility. However, her extreme financial pressures in the wake of her sanction meant she was forced to take a lower paid job as quickly as possible rather than explore alternative avenues. If the government genuinely wishes to address employment gaps and encourage better quality work (including progression in work, as promoted by Universal Credit), a fundamental change is needed in the way benefit conditions and sanctions are used – and the readiness to provide alternative support.

While the benefit system for working age claimants is being radically overhauled, it is surprising that the system of conditions and sanctions has remained unquestioned. With a slow rollout and an appetite for a ‘test and learn’ approach, the government has an opportunity to look at non-monetary nudges rather than simply punitive financial sanctions as a way to achieve its employment outcomes. Devolved work programmes in Scotland, where benefit sanctions are now not applied, offer a chance to learn further lessons on the effectiveness of current sanctions and potential alternatives. While benefit sanctions have dropped off the radar of late, continued cross-party parliamentary scrutiny would be valuable to ensure opportunities for reform are not lost.

With radically changing expectations of single parent benefit claimants under Universal Credit, it seems an opportune time to consider whether the penalties applied within the system of benefit conditions are still appropriate. Benefit sanctions may have reduced in number of late, but Universal Credit reforms will mean many more parents will come within their scope – not just through job-seeking requirements for parents with pre-school aged children, but conditions to seek higher pay or more hours for working claimants. The apparent move towards a more holistic system of support for low-income families, whether in or out of work, suggests the narrow ‘work-first’ pressures of the legacy benefit sanctions are out of date yet continue to be applied. As the record high single parent employment rate suggests, the model of ‘work-shy’ claimants who need cajoling into work no longer holds. Without action from the government, however, single parents and other low-income families will continue to be caught in the middle of a misguided and failing policy – and the significant financial and emotional burden that this entails.

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