

The invisible family



The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic
on single parents living in London

Final report, June 2022

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About us

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 have been supporting, advising, and campaigning with single parents to help them meet the needs of their families and achieve their goals. We want to create a world in which diverse families can thrive. We will not 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.



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Acknowledgments

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Summary

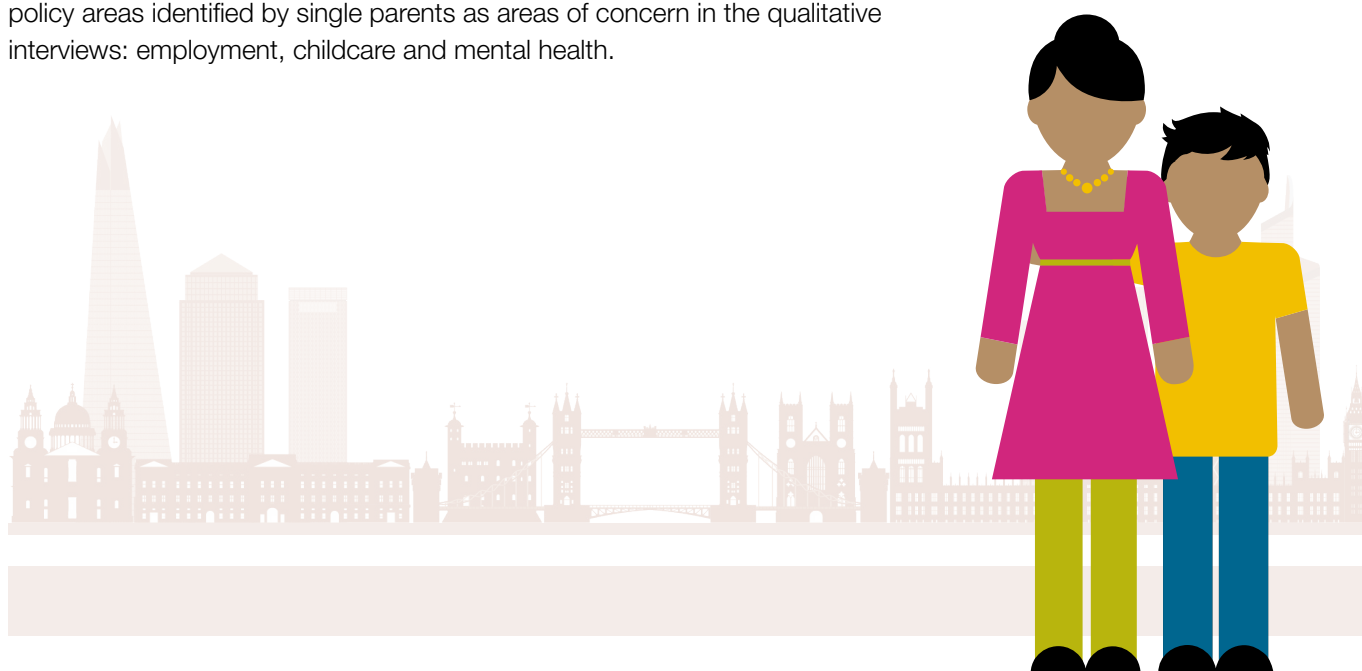
The Covid-19 pandemic exposed, exacerbated, and solidified deeply entrenched health and socio-economic inequalities, leaving many individuals and groups even more vulnerable now than they were before the pandemic began. Single parents are no exception, and the last two years have presented particular challenges for single parents living in London – especially around employment, childcare, and mental health.

To track the impact of policy change and to gain a better understanding of how single parent experiences evolved throughout the pandemic, Gingerbread interviewed 42 single parents across London in November 2020 and in February 2022. We particularly wanted to explore the impact that the pandemic would have on single parent employment in London, building on previous research we conducted into the pre-pandemic experiences of single parents.¹

As uncovered through Gingerbread’s nationally focussed research over the same time period, single parents collectively feel that they are an afterthought in policy making and government decisions. Or, as one of our interviewees succinctly put it, “we are the invisible family.”

To try to make the challenges of single parenthood more ‘visible’, and to better protect single parents who live in London following the Covid-19 pandemic, Gingerbread have identified a number of policy recommendations at a local and national level. These recommendations are divided into three policy areas identified by single parents as areas of concern in the qualitative interviews: employment, childcare and mental health.

Single parents collectively feel that they are an afterthought in policy making and government decisions... as one of our interviewees succinctly put it, “we are the invisible family.”



¹ Gingerbread (2019). Held back: Single parents and in-work progression in London. https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Held-Back-single-parents-and-in-work-progression-in-London_WEB-1.pdf

Policy recommendations

Employment

The pandemic has had an impact on some of the key industries where single parents have traditionally worked, and there have been many business closures in the Capital. It is important that single parents have focused support from jobcentres, and the opportunities to use their skills or to retrain to get back into work.

- 1 The GLA should prioritise single parents in their 'Workforce Integration Network', which launched in March 2022.²**
- 2 Jobcentre Plus should use the expansion of work coach capacity to introduce specialist single parent advisers in London.** Single parents need specialist advice and training programmes to encourage them to return to roles which match their skill set or to retrain into new industries.
- 3 JCP in London should work with local employment partnerships to develop local work in the boroughs.** Fair and Flexible local jobs are key for a post pandemic economic recovery.



Childcare

Childcare costs are higher in London than they are in any other region of the UK. This is not sustainable for single parents, especially with the cost of living rising exponentially.

- 1 The current cap on the Childcare Element of Universal Credit needs to be higher in London.** The cost of childcare in the city exceeds the government support that is available.³ Many single parents are paying more for childcare in London than they are earning and are financially worse off for working more hours.⁴
- 2 The childcare scheme at the GLA was developed in partnership with Gingerbread.** Several London Boroughs have adopted the scheme, and they encourage employers in their area to adopt a similar approach.⁵ We want to see this rolled out across all London Boroughs and encourage employers to follow suit.



² GLA, (March 2022). The Mayor's Academies Quality Mark: Statement of requirements for applications from Mayoral priority sectors training providers. <https://www.london.gov.uk/publications/mayors-academies-quality-mark>.

³ Government Publications, HMRC, 2019b.

⁴ Coram Family and Childcare, Childcare Survey (2022). https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Resource%20Library/Childcare%20Survey%202021_Coram%20Family%20and%20Childcare.pdf.

⁵ GLA (2021), Childcare Deposit Loan Scheme. <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/education-and-youth/support-families-and-early-years/early-years-and-childcare/childcare-deposit-loan-scheme>.

- 3 Flexible childcare funding would also support more single parents to be able to access and afford childcare.** We would like to see more innovative schemes made available to single parents in London, such as Islington council's childcare bursary fund, which provides parents with 8 weeks' funding for childcare. This can be used in a variety of ways: a deposit for nursery places, to cover childcare costs when parents enrol on short courses to boost their skills and employment chances or for when they attend an interview, or parents can use the money from this fund to set up their own business.

Mental health and wellbeing

Single parents were the most common family type to report feelings of depression and anxiety during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the effects continue to linger. As we emerge from the pandemic, it is important that the effects on mental health and wellbeing – in both children and adults – are recognised and better supported.

- 1 Local government and service providers need to recognise single parents as a priority group when accessing mental health services.** Currently, across the London borough councils, there is an inconsistency in recognising single parents as a 'vulnerable group'. Thus, the wellbeing support available to single parents differs depending on where in London they live. This needs to be levelled up.
- 2 More investment from national government is needed for specialist mental health care for children.** In London, there is a gap in mental health support for primary school children outside of a school setting. This is why Gingerbread supports Young Minds' 'community hub' programme, which provides young people with a safe space to talk and connect with others, highlights the importance of a trusted adult, and emphasises the need to equip community care (such as faith leaders/ youth group workers) with the tools to recognise and help young people with mental ill health.
- 3 Hunger has a significant impact on mental and physical wellbeing.** Yet not all London councils have a specific food policy. We recommend that all London councils prioritise tackling food insecurity as a short and longer-term policy mission.



About this research

To better understand how the Covid-19 pandemic affected single parents in London, particularly in relation to their experiences of employment, we interviewed 15 single parents in November 2020 and a further 17 in February 2022.⁶

The two sets of interviews were conducted against a significantly different social, economic, and political backdrop. Interviewees came from 18 different London boroughs, and included 7 single fathers, parents from a range of ethnic groups, as well as disabled parents and parents of disabled children. Our sample reflects the diversity in working experiences for single parents amid the pandemic, and the single parents we spoke with had a range of qualifications, sector experience, childcare requirements, working patterns (such as flexible working and home working) and key worker status.

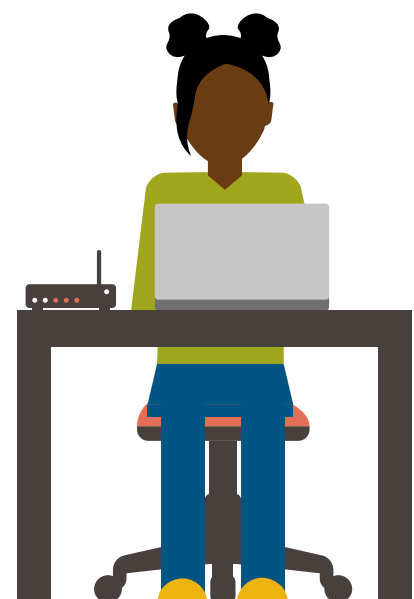
This longitudinal approach provided a way for Gingerbread to measure how government policies introduced at different stages of the pandemic affected single parents who live in different London boroughs. It meant that we could capture a snapshot of the lived experiences of single parents at various times during the pandemic and allowed us to elicit the meanings and interpretations that people attribute to these experiences. The time span also enabled us to explore the impact over time between reactive policy and those for whom it is introduced to help.

To map the scale of the impact of the pandemic on single parents, this research combines the qualitative research with a quantitative analysis of the government's Labour Force Survey comparing the experiences of single and couple parents, both in London and nationally, from the quarter before the start of the pandemic (October-December 2019) to the final quarter of 2021 (October-December). This mixed method approach brings to the fore the complicated relationship between 'identity' and 'experience' in a local context.

By examining whether identity (whether this be single parenthood, gender, age, ethnicity, disability, nationality, and location) had a direct impact on how single parents experienced the pandemic in London, this report provides a unique thematic approach examining single parents' experiences during the pandemic.

The report is divided into three chapters: a national overview, quantitative analysis, and qualitative analysis. Each chapter evaluates three themes: employment, childcare, and mental health and wellbeing.

Our sample reflects the diversity in working experiences for single parents amid the pandemic



⁶ The intention was to re-interview the same group in the second wave; however, this was only possible for 10 of the original participants. To match the demographic sample identified in 2020, an additional 17 interviewees were recruited, meaning that 27 single parents were interviewed in February 2022.

1. National context

1.1. Employment and economic activity

Previous Gingerbread research has found that the work trajectories of single parents through the first stages of the pandemic were different to those experienced by couple parents.⁷ Single parents were more likely to be furloughed and experienced greater upheaval as a result of having to home school their children during lockdowns.⁸ As we emerge from the pandemic, there are ongoing issues affecting single parent employment at a national scale.

Though the overall level of single parent unemployment has not risen as much as had been feared once the Job Retention Scheme (furlough) came to an end in autumn 2021,⁹ single parents who are unemployed are now remaining out of work for longer than they were pre-pandemic. There has also been a drop in labour market participation.¹⁰

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the government put in place a range of employment support measures to help those who had lost work to return to the labour market. The Job Entry Targeted Support Scheme (JETS) was launched in October 2020 and is intended to provide “light touch” support for up to six months to Universal Credit claimants who have been unemployed for at least three months.¹¹ Separately, the Restart programme is intended to provide up to twelve months of tailored support for up to one million unemployed Universal Credit (UC) recipients who had been unemployed for more than twelve months. The programme opened in July in 2021 and is due to accept referrals for three years.¹²

However, there are indications that single parents are struggling to access back to work support. Interim findings from Gingerbread’s ongoing Single Parent Employment Challenge project showed that single parents who are out of work are often unaware of such schemes and are ‘parked’ on out of work benefits rather than being offered tailored support.¹³ Nevertheless, single parents who have participated in these schemes have rated the support provided favourably, especially when compared with that provided as standard by work coaches – which they often felt did not take into account their individual circumstances or recognise the needs of single parenthood.¹⁴



7 Gingerbread (2021), *Caring Without Sharing: single parents’ journeys through the COVID-19 pandemic – final report*. <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/publications-index/caring-without-sharing-final-report/>.

8 Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2021b), *An overview of workers who were furloughed in the UK*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/effectsoffurloughonukworkersoctober2021>.

9 Gingerbread (2022), *Interim report: The Single Parent Employment Challenge – job loss and job seeking after the pandemic*. <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/publications-index/interim-report-the-single-parent-employment-challenge-job-loss-and-job-seeking-after-the-pandemic/>.

10 Ibid.

11 DWP (2022), *Work and Health Programme including JETS provider guidance, Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/work-and-health-programme-including-jets-provider-guidance/chapter-1-introduction-and-overview#overview-of-the-work-and-health-programme--whp-jets>

12 Ibid.

13 Gingerbread (2022), *The Single Parent Employment Challenge: Interim Report – job loss and job seeking after the pandemic*. <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/publications-index/interim-report-the-single-parent-employment-challenge-job-loss-and-job-seeking-after-the-pandemic/>.

14 Ibid.

1.2. Childcare

Childcare is simultaneously the biggest enabler and barrier to single parents being able to work in the way they would like. Yet, the costs of formal childcare have far outstripped wages over the last two decades. The 2022 Coram Childcare Survey shows starkly that it has become more difficult to source and afford childcare in London since the start of the pandemic.¹⁵ For single parents particularly, childcare prices are not sustainable, especially as wider costs of living are rising at the highest rate in decades.¹⁶

In the last two years, there has been a decline in the proportion of local authorities in England reporting that they have enough childcare to meet demand for pre-school children. There has also been a reduction in the proportion of local areas with enough childcare (childcare sufficiency) for disabled children and parents working full time, while provision for parents working atypical hours and families living in rural areas has increased.¹⁷

So far this year, between 11 and 31 percent of local authorities have reported reductions in the availability of various aspects of childcare.¹⁸ For example, 31 percent of local authorities reported a reduction in the number of wraparound childcare places for school age children. Around half of local authorities further described an increase in charges and prices to parents, as well as reduced opening hours and a reduced number of staff, which brings into question the sustainability of post-pandemic childcare settings across the country. This is particularly the case in inner London where the cost of childcare per week for those under two is higher than any other region in England.¹⁹

The Understanding Society Covid-19 study has also revealed that in 2021, Londoners who did not live with a partner were more likely to be find their financial position “quite” or “very difficult” in comparison to those who live with a partner (12 percent and 3 percent respectively).²⁰ Having to pay for childcare from one income was a major driver of this financial precariousness.

Unsurprisingly then, most parents we interviewed commented on just how expensive childcare is – with some acknowledging it would be more affordable and their finances would stretch further if they did not live in London. The pandemic added a new problem into the mix: it was not just affordability that was a major barrier to care, but accessibility. It was near on impossible to find childcare if a parent or their child had Covid-19. This is still a problem in 2022 because single parents have no back-up if their child has to stay off school or nursery because they have tested positive with Covid and support schemes for those on very low incomes, such as the Test and Trace Support Payment, have now ended.



¹⁵ Coram Family and Childcare (2022), Coram Family and Childcare Survey 2022. <https://www.coram.org.uk/resource/coram-family-and-childcare-survey-2022>.

¹⁶ House of Commons Library (2022), Rising cost of living in the UK. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9428/>

¹⁷ Coram Family and Childcare (2022), Coram Family and Childcare Survey 2022.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research (2021), Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study, 2020-2021.

1.3. Mental health and wellbeing

Earlier research undertaken by Gingerbread has shown that many single parents have expressed concerns about their own mental health and that of their children throughout 2020 and 2021. This report reveals that this concern continued into 2022. An analysis of Labour Force Survey data shows that single parents remained much more likely to report depression and were 'more vulnerable to stress and mental health problems during the crisis' compared with other family types.²¹

Whilst there has been a considerable body of quantitative research exploring the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on adult mental health, few other studies have explored the experiences of single parent families specifically.²² However, one analysis has shown that behavioural, emotional, and restlessness/attentional difficulties increased after the third lockdown was introduced in January 2021, particularly among primary aged children, those with special educational needs and disability (SEND), and those from low-income or single adult households.²³ These children continued to show increased mental health problems throughout the pandemic, with higher levels of behavioural, emotional, and attentional difficulties. This research validates these findings within London specifically, as single parents with children who have additional needs, reported that they had – and some continue to have – behavioural changes as a result of the lockdowns.

Although there are no figures which 'characteristically' break down children with mental ill health in London, for adults, these figures are categorised by age and gender. In March 2021, 26 percent of Londoners aged sixteen and over reported characteristics of poor mental health. Female Londoners (28 percent) are more likely to display features of poorer mental health than male Londoners (24 percent). Crucially, fewer Londoners living with a partner had aspects of poor mental health (22 percent) compared with 31 percent of those not living with a partner.²⁴

Additional research has shown that other particular groups of concern (regarding ongoing mental ill-health) include those among which single parent families are disproportionately represented, such as those in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) and those with SEND.²⁵



21 Gingerbread (2020); Gingerbread (2021); Taylor, Z. E., Bailey, K., Herrera, F., Nair, N., & Adams, A. (2022). 'Strengths of the heart: Stressors, gratitude, and mental health in single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic'. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 36 (3), 346–357, p. 346.

22 For example, see: Daly, Michael, Angelina R. Sutin, and Eric Robinson. "Longitudinal changes in mental health and the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from the UK Household Longitudinal Study." *Psychological Medicine* (2020): 1-10.

23 Co-Space Study, (February 2021). Changes in children's and young people's mental health symptoms: March 2020 to January 2021. https://cospaceoxford.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Report_08_17.02.21.pdf.

24 University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2021), *Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study*. <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/topic/Covid-19>.

25 Department for Education (2022), *State of the nation 2021: children and young people's wellbeing*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2021-children-and-young-peoples-wellbeing>.

Although mentioned less than their concerns over the impact that the pandemic has had on their child's long term social development, single parents interviewed for this report expressed concerns over longer term behavioural development and mental health in the second round of qualitative interviews (February 2022). It is notable that the mental health of a child was only mentioned in the 2022 interviews, while both rounds of interviews found that single parents had concerns over their own mental health because of the pandemic.

Longer term impacts – other than the symptoms and effects of developing 'long-Covid' – have been researched less than short-term impacts of the pandemic. The closing chapter of this report looks at the concerns single parents have around the long-lasting impacts of the pandemic on their family, at a point when all legal Covid-19 restrictions were coming to an end in England.

2. Quantitative analysis

For the quantitative measures in this report, analysis was undertaken of quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) datasets from the period immediately before the pandemic (fourth quarter, 2019), to the final quarter of 2021.

To identify the specific impact of being a single parent, rather than that of being a parent per se, the work experiences and behaviours of single parents were compared against those of couple parents. This analysis was undertaken both for London and at the national level, to assess whether trends in the capital were unique or were replicated more broadly.

We also assessed impacts on more precisely defined subgroups – such as single parents with particular levels of education – by combining data for the four quarters of 2019 and compared it with data combined for the four quarters of 2021.



2.1. Trends in single parents' work status

The proportion of single parents of working-age who are in work has always been lower compared with couple parents – both in London and in the UK. As shown in Figure 1, there is little evidence of marked changes in employment levels for either group since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. The employment rate of single parents in London has risen by three percentage points since the final quarter of 2019, now standing at 72 percent. This change in the data, albeit small, is more marked than any that has occurred in relation to any of the other groups of parents analysed using LFS.

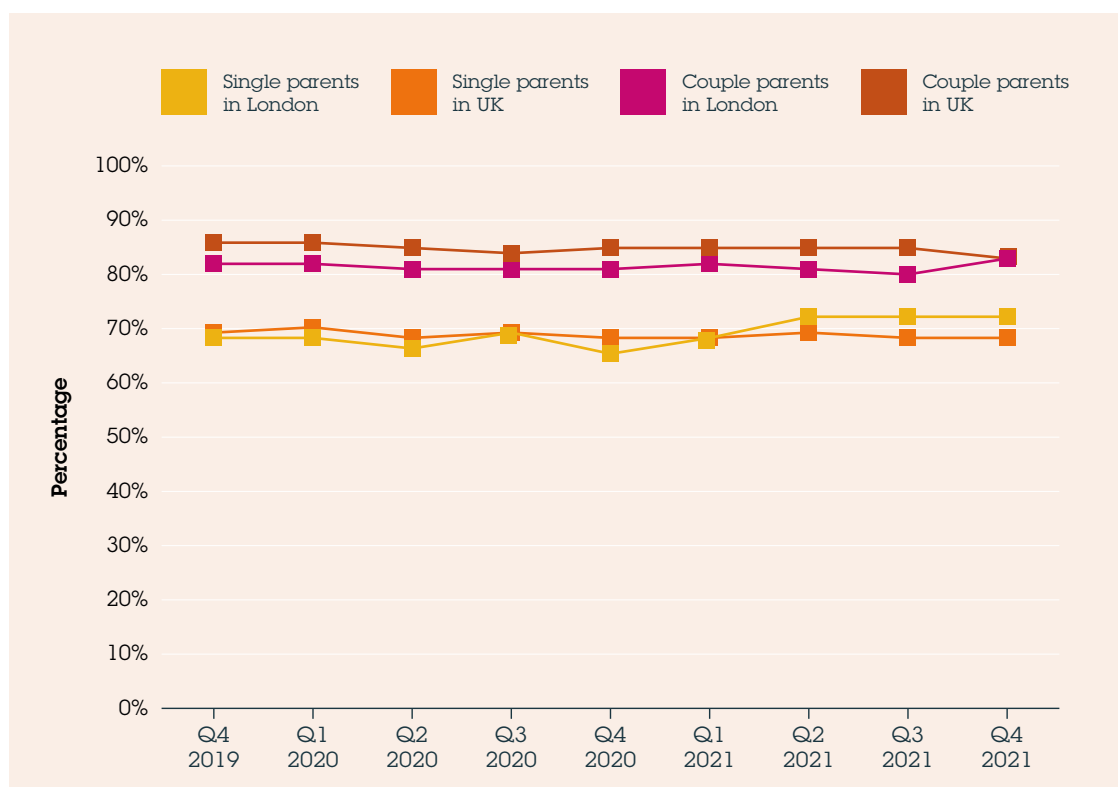


Figure 1
Employment rates for single parents and couple parents, London and UK

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) household datasets, Q4 2019 to Q4 2021.

Similarly, as shown in Figure 2, unemployment rates for all four groups of parents remained almost identical in the final quarter of 2021 to those recorded before the onset of the pandemic. For couple and single parents in London, rates of unemployment have always been slightly higher than those seen nationally, implying a greater competition for the roles available.

For single parents in the capital, they fluctuated most markedly during the first and second years of the pandemic, compared with other groups of parents. The unemployment rate for single parents in the capital now stands at six percent, compared with three percent for couple parents.

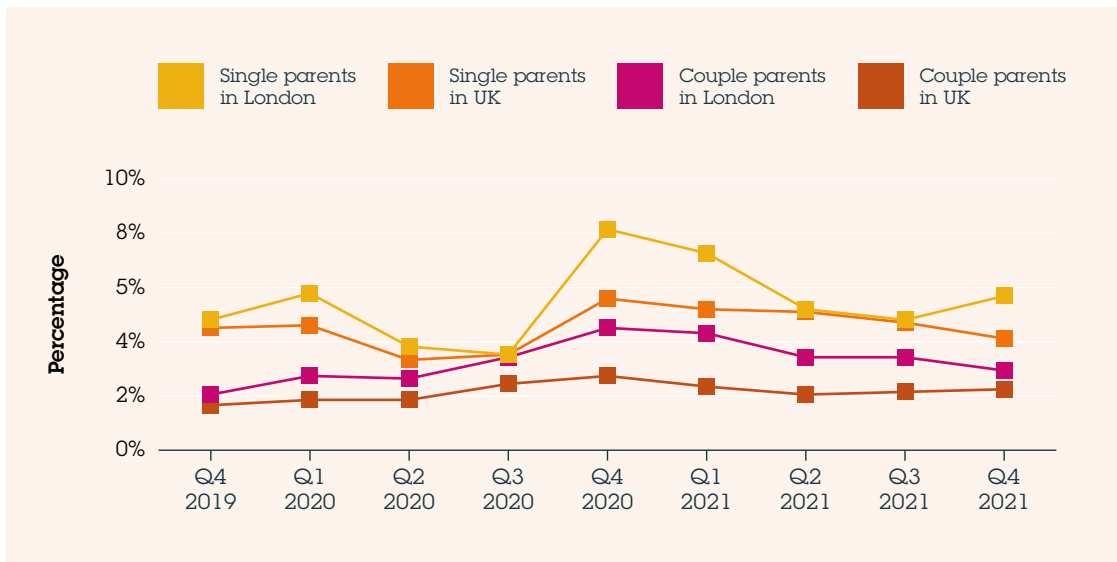


Figure 2:
Unemployment rates for single parents and couple parents, London and UK

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) household datasets, Q4 2019 to Q4 2021.

Intriguingly, the employment rate among single mothers in London has risen by five percentage points since the period immediately before the onset of the pandemic, compared with a rise of two percentage points for couple mothers and a decline of one percentage point for couple fathers. This change explains the slightly higher employment rate for single parents in London at the end of 2021, compared with the end of 2019.

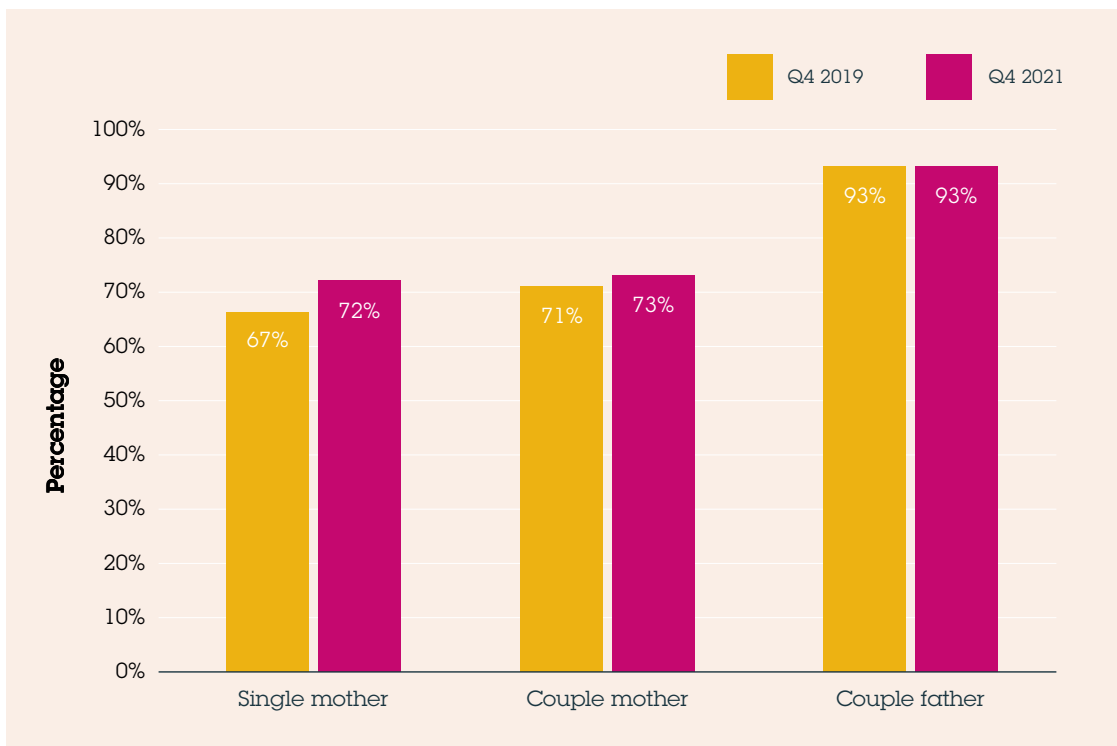


Figure 3:
Employment rates for different groups of parents in London

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) household datasets, Q4 2019 to Q4 2021.

2.2. Types of work undertaken by single parents

Single and couple parents in London tend to be better-qualified than parents in the UK more broadly. As shown in Figure 4, the pandemic has not had a particular impact in this area.

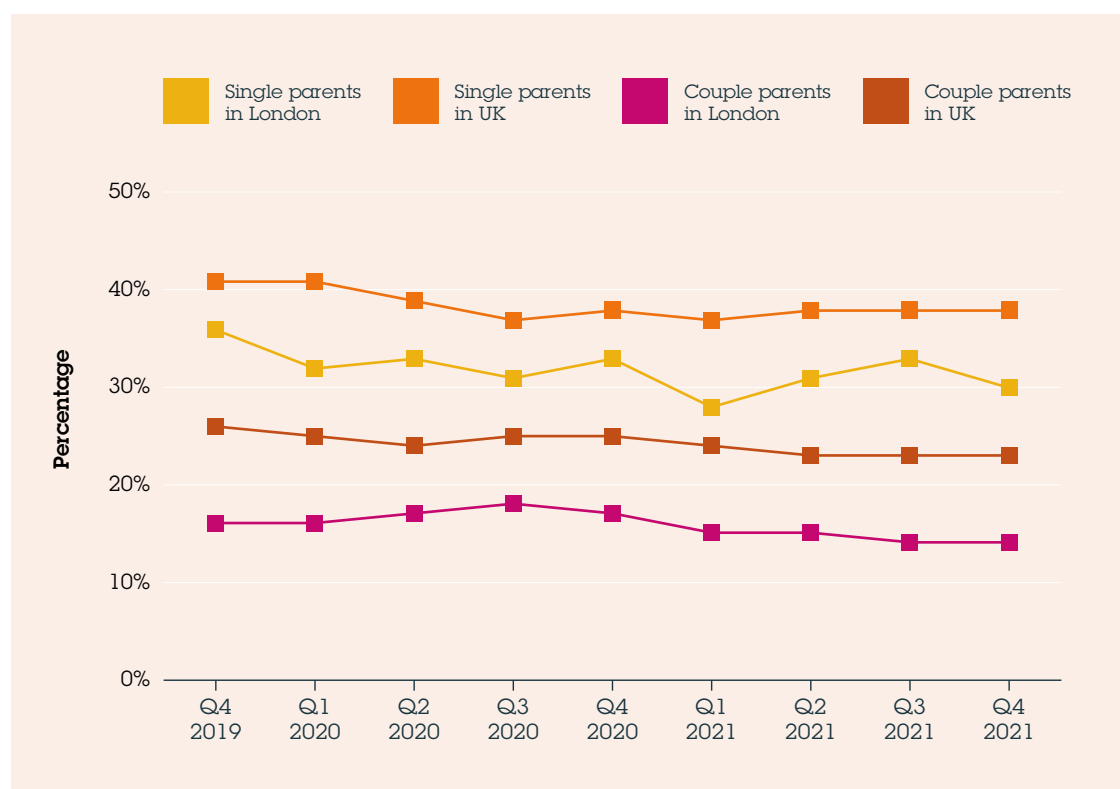


Figure 4
Proportions of different groups of parents with highest educational qualification at Level 2 or below, in London and UK

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) household datasets, Q4 2019 to Q4 2021.

When we consider the educational levels of mothers and fathers specifically though, we find that these differences (as shown in Figure 5) are primarily explained by parental status, rather than sex. In the final quarter of 2021, 28 percent of single mothers in London had a highest qualification at Level 2 or below, compared with 14 percent of couple fathers and 14 percent of couple mothers.

Earlier Gingerbread research has shown that, as well as having lower levels of education, single parents in London tend to work in lower occupational groups on average, when compared with couple parents.²⁶ As illustrated in Figure 5, this remained the case when we combined data for different parental groups immediately prior to the pandemic.

²⁶ Gingerbread (2019), Held back: Single parents and in-work progression in London. https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Held-Back-single-parents-and-in-work-progression-in-London_WEB-1.pdf.

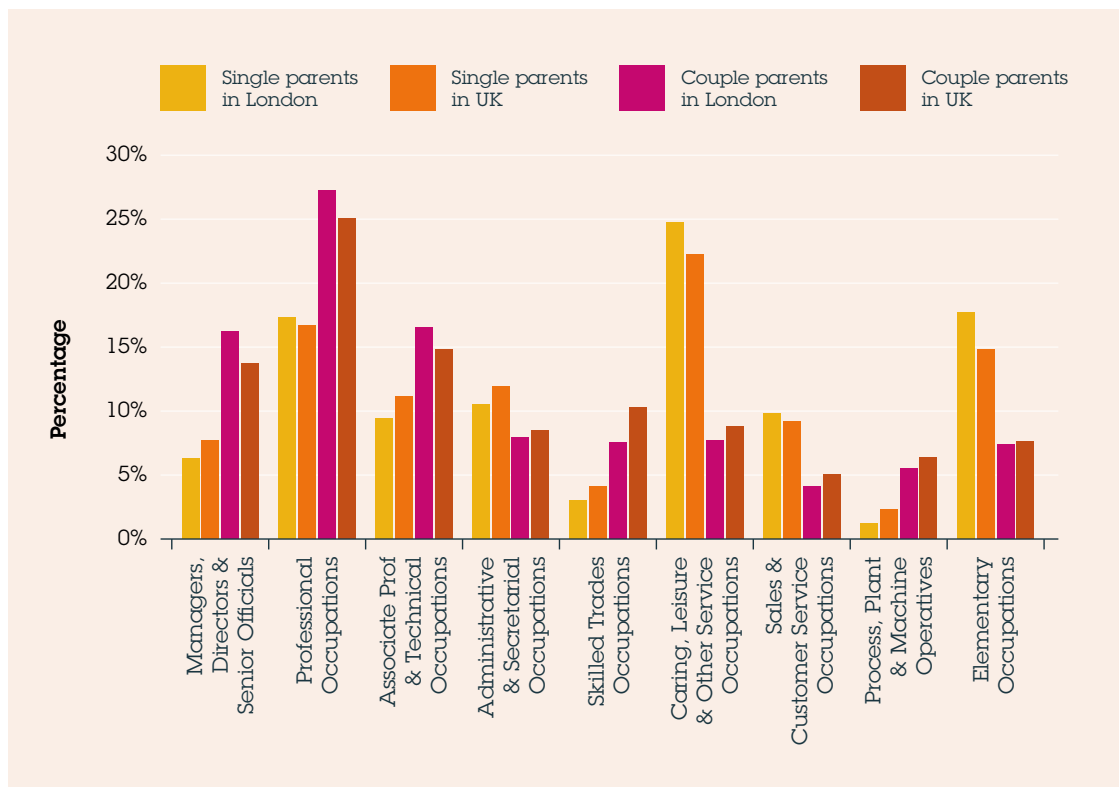


Figure 5:
Occupational groups of single parents and couple parents, London and UK, 2019

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) household datasets, combined across 2019.

In the year prior to the start of the pandemic, 53 percent of single parents in London had jobs in the lowest four occupational groups, compared with 25 percent of couple parents in London – this compares with 49 and 28 percent nationally. Although women were slightly more likely to be in the lowest occupational groupings compared with men, the primary factor explaining these differences appears to be parental status. In 2019, 56 percent of single mothers and 30 percent of single fathers in London were employed in the lowest four occupational groups, compared with 27 percent of couple mothers and 23 percent of couple fathers.

When we compare the situation in 2019 with that in 2021, we see that these patterns remain, with single parents working in London more likely to have lower skilled jobs, compared with couple parents. Interestingly, the proportion of single parents in London in the lowest four occupational groups has declined by 8 percentage points since 2019, compared with a 4-percentage point reduction for couple parents. In the UK, both groups have experienced a comparable decline (two percentage points each). This change for single parents appears to be largely driven by an increase in the proportion working in administrative and secretarial occupations and a decline in those working in care, leisure, and other service occupations.

Previous Gingerbread research has already shown that single mothers in London are much more likely than couple mothers to be over-qualified for the work that they are currently undertaking.²⁷ Our analysis of the current LFS data shows that despite the wider changes to the job market as a result of the pandemic, single parents in London remain persistently underemployed.

²⁷ Gingerbread (2019), *Held back: Single parents and in-work progression in London*.

Our latest analysis shows that 18 percent of single parents in London with a qualification at Level 4 or above (degree and above) have a job in the four lowest occupational groups, compared with 11 percent of couple parents. Similarly, 58 percent of single parents with a qualification at Level 2 have a job in the four lowest occupational groups, compared with 38 percent of couple parents. This finding is replicated by the qualitative interviews in 2020 and 2022, as many single mothers with Level 4 qualifications were working in roles where a degree was not a requirement.

Ahead of the pandemic, single parents in London were more likely than couple parents to work in health and social work (27 percent and 11 percent respectively), education (16 percent and 12 percent), and administration and support services (11 percent and 6 percent). However, the single parents we spoke with working in these industries were more likely than those working in other industries, to describe a lack of understanding from their employer around single parenthood.

While a number of these differences appear to be explained by gender rather than parental status, comparing single mothers with couple mothers indicates that this is not the case in many instances. Most markedly, 27 percent of single mothers in London worked in health and social work in 2019, compared with 18 percent of couple mothers. Meanwhile, six percent of single mothers worked in professional, scientific, and technical activities in the capital, compared with 11 percent of couple mothers, and 11 percent of single mothers worked in administration and support services, compared with six percent of couple mothers. The latter differences are likely to reflect the fact that single parents are more likely to work in lower occupational groupings, as covered earlier in this chapter.

As Figure 6 highlights, the distribution of single parents' jobs across different industries in the capital remained similar in 2021 compared to 2019. Interestingly though, the proportions of single parents working in health and social care and in administration and support services fell by six percentage points and two percentage points respectively – with the former decline not being matched by the experiences of couple parents.

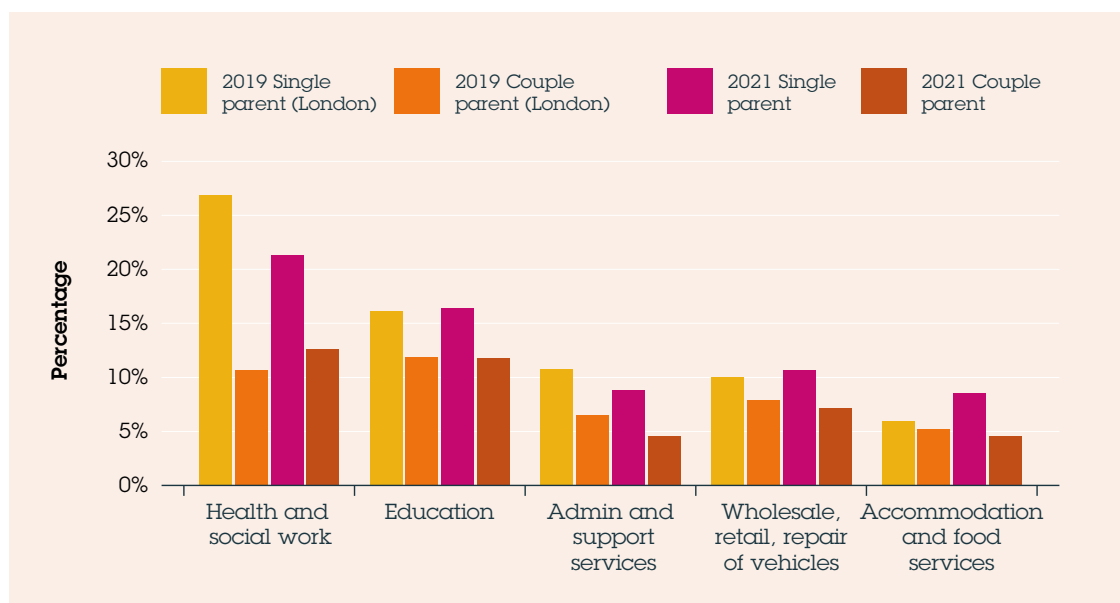


Figure 6
Industries*
in London in
which main
jobs were
located, by
parental
status

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) household data-sets, combined across 2019 and 2021.

* Data are displayed for those industries where at least 1% of single parents in the capital worked during 2019.

2.3. Jobs and vacancies

The distribution of jobs in the capital changed over the first two years of the pandemic and it is not yet known what this may mean for single parents seeking work going forward. As shown in Figure 7, the distribution of workforce jobs in London (which have decreased by 2% overall over the past two years at the absolute level), has changed in several ways.

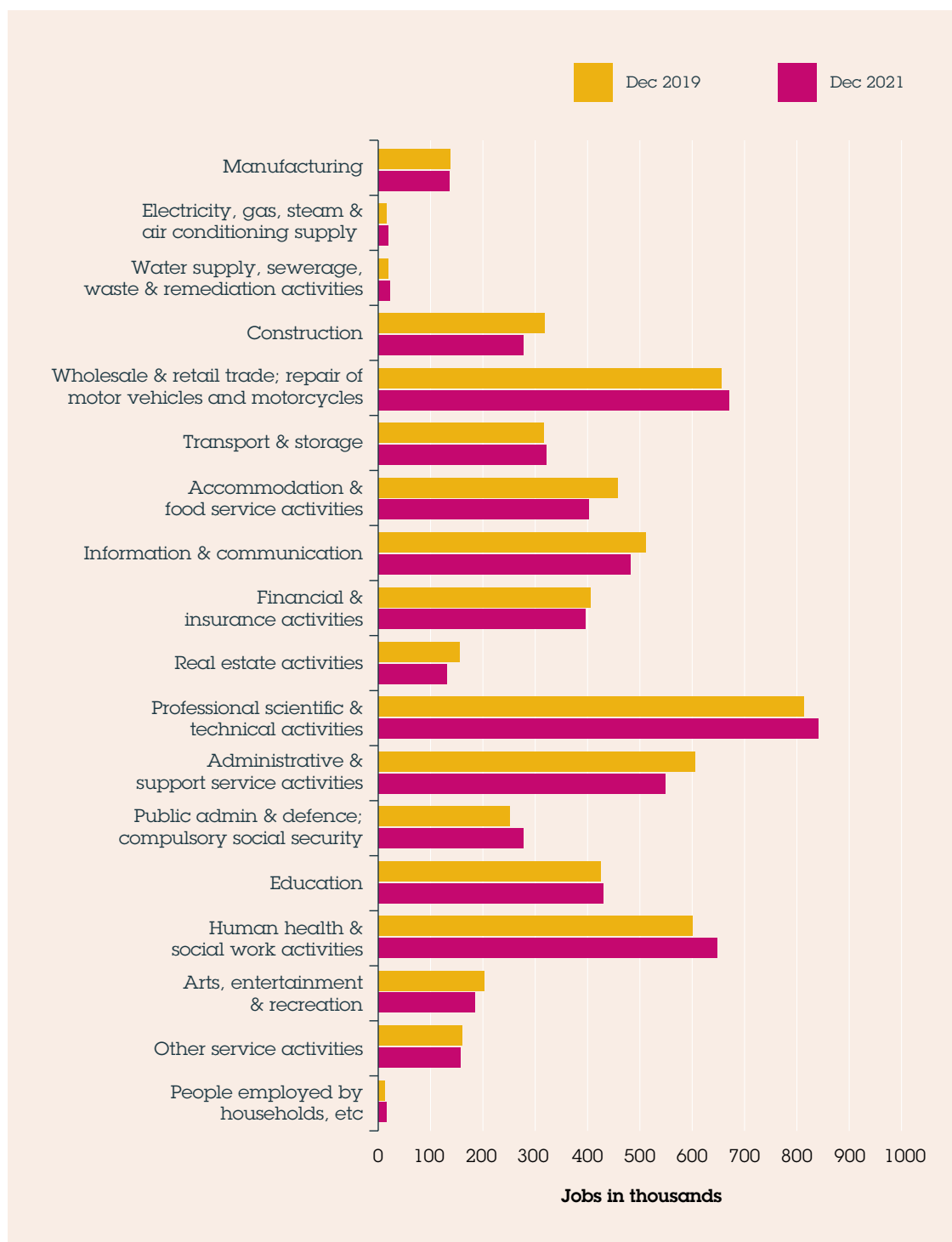


Figure 7
Workforce jobs in London by industry*

Source: Office for National Statistics, Workforce jobs by region and industry.

* Data is shown for industries with at least 2,000 jobs in the capital in December 2019.

Between 2019 and 2021, there was an 8 percent growth in jobs within health and social work in the capital. Yet, over the same period, there has been no substantial change in the number of jobs in education or in wholesale and retail trade, and there was a drop of nine percent in jobs available in administration and support services.

To understand the potential challenges for single parents finding work, however, it is necessary to consider numbers of job vacancies, rather than the number of industry jobs overall. Job vacancies are currently at an all-time high, with the lowest number of unemployed people per vacancy since at least the early 1960s.²⁸ Reflecting this trend, data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) shows that the number of vacancies per one hundred employee jobs nationally increased from 2.6 to 4.1 between the fourth quarter of 2019 and the fourth quarter of 2021 (data is not currently available on a regional basis).

As Figure 8 shows, while there has been an increase in job vacancies across all the industries examined, this has been most marked in accommodation and food services. This is likely a reflection of the easing of Covid-19 restrictions – when people were allowed to travel within England and eat out again, more people were needed to provide such a service than had been the case over the previous two years.

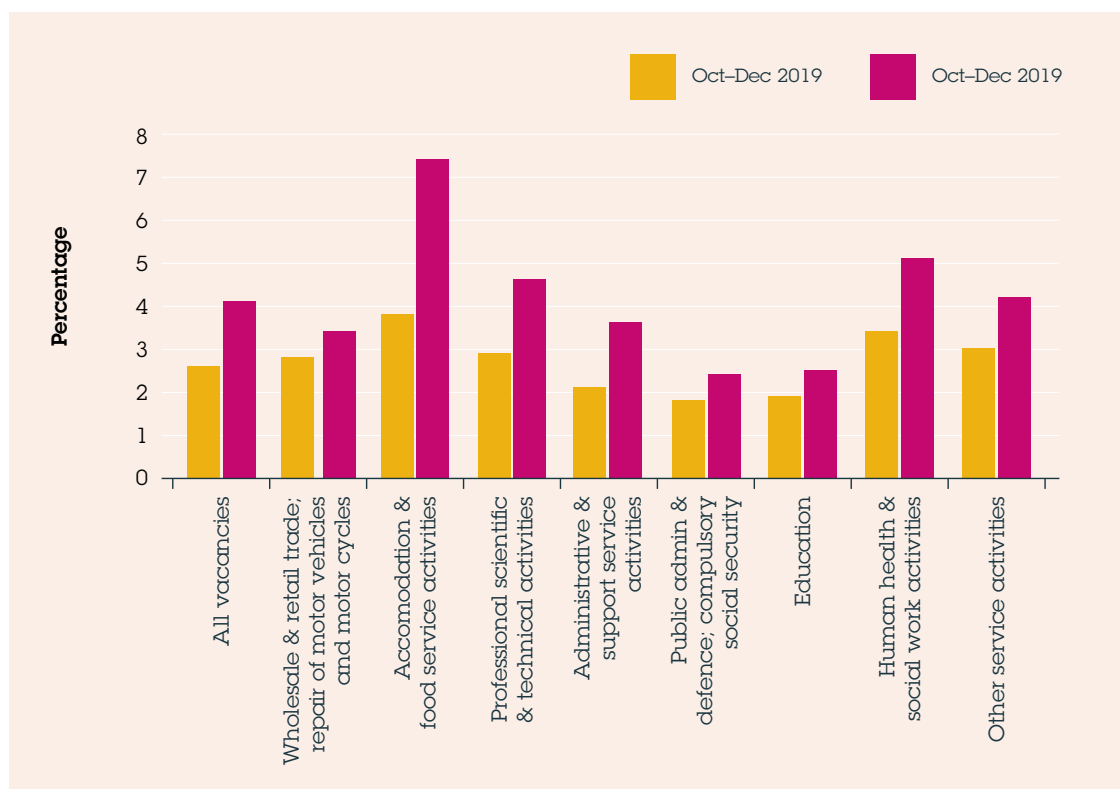


Figure 8
Number of UK vacancies per 100 employee jobs by industry

Source: ONS (2021), Vacancies by Industry²⁹

²⁸ The University of Essex, Institute for Employment Studies (2021).

²⁹ ONS (2021), Vacancies by Industry. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/datasets/vacanciesbyindustryvacs02/current>.

2.4. Flexible working and furlough

Flexible Work

Prior to the start of the pandemic, just 15 percent of single parents in London reported having flexible working arrangements.³⁰ These rates were marginally lower than those seen for couple parents (17 percent). This is despite the fact that single parents need more flexibility at work to manage their childcare responsibilities.³¹

Encouragingly, our analysis shows that the proportion of single parents in London with flexible working arrangements increased by 6 percentage points between the final quarter of 2019 and the final quarter of 2021.

Flexi time is the most common type of flexible working arrangement used by single parents and couple parents alike, and there has been a small increase in its use for both groups over the past two years (4 percent and 2 percent respectively). Annualised hours and term-time working are the only other types of flexible working arrangement regularly used by one parent in the capital.

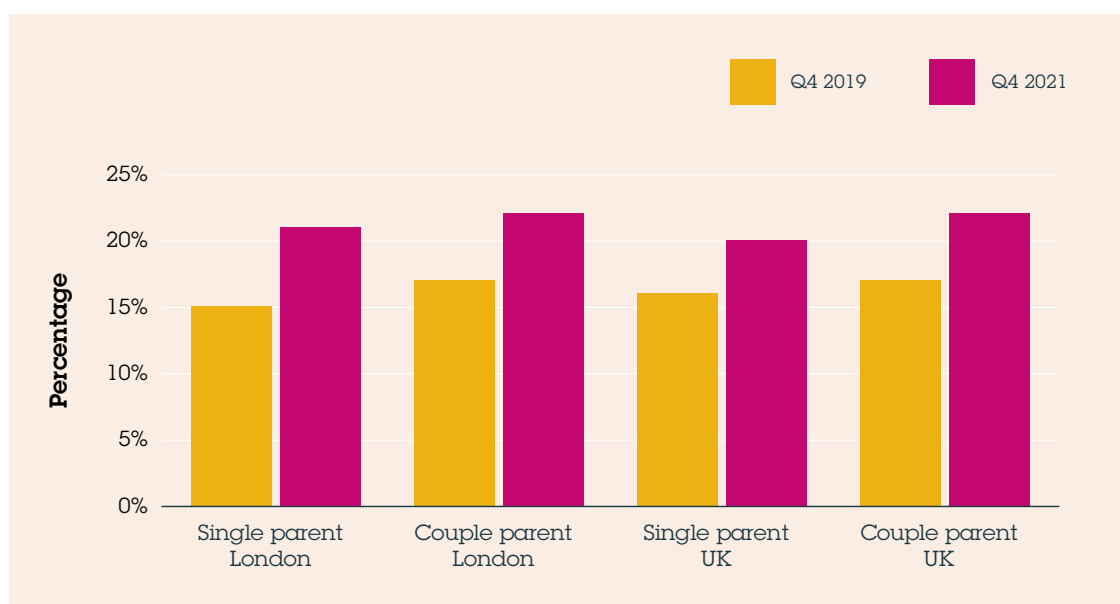


Figure 9
Proportion of single parents and couple parents who reported having a flexible working arrangement, London and UK

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) household data-sets, Q4 2019 and Q4 2021.

In the second quarter of 2021, Timewise reported that 22 percent of jobs in London were advertised as flexible.³² This compares with 20 percent of London-based jobs in 2020 and 14 percent in 2019. Research undertaken by Timewise focusing specifically on part-time workers in the capital has argued that the Covid-19 pandemic has amplified the difficulties traditionally faced by this group in a number of ways, such as, not using their skills, and not feeling valued.

³⁰ The LFS asks about six flexible work measures: flexitime, annualised hours, a term-time arrangement, a job share, a nine-day fortnight, and a four-and-a-half-day week.

³¹ Gingerbread (2021), *Caring Without Sharing*.

³² Timewise, 2021a. Please note that Timewise utilises a broader definition of flexible working – encapsulating part-time working and homeworking alongside the various types of flexible working arrangements covered by the LFS.

Part-time work

Intriguingly, part-time working among single parents in London has declined by three percentage points since the period before the onset of the pandemic (Q4 2019). This decline appeared even more dramatic in the summer of 2021 but has been rectified to some extent in the final two quarters of 2021. Such a change is not replicated for single parents across the UK as a whole, or for couple parents in either geographical area. It might suggest that more single parents in part-time work have lost or left their jobs in London, or that single parents are increasingly shifting from part-time towards full-time work in the capital.

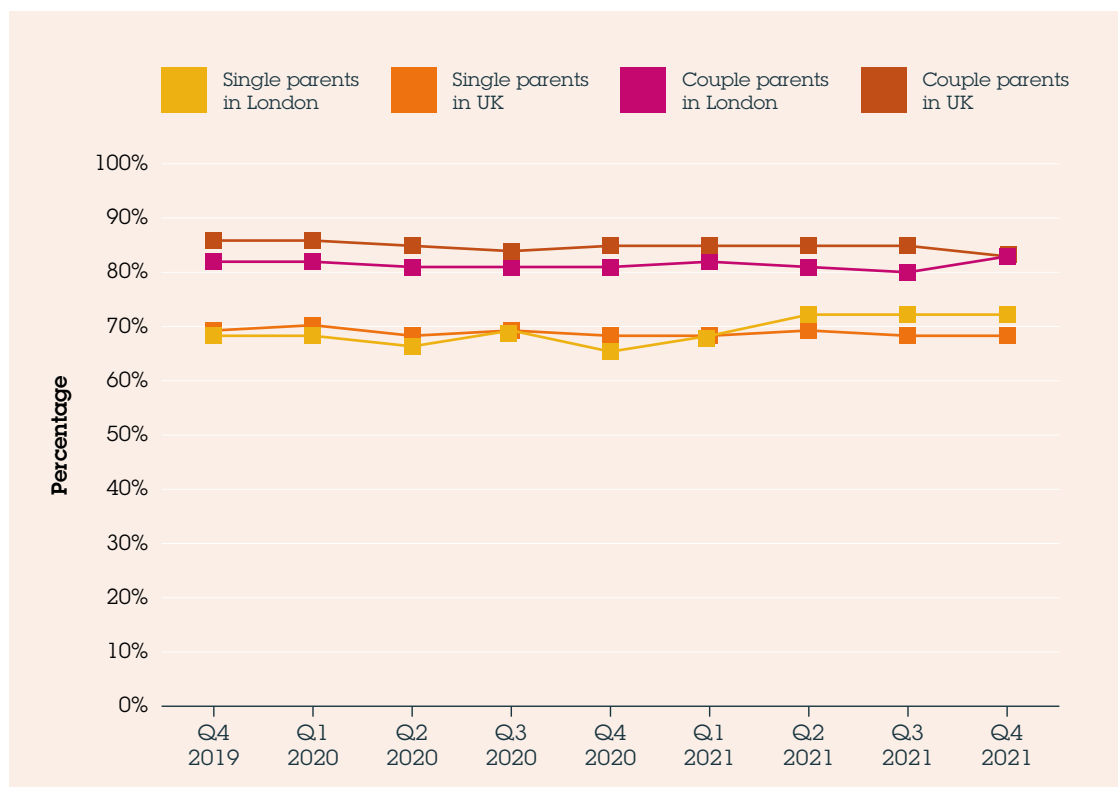


Figure 10
Prevalence of part-time working for single parents and couple parents in work, London and UK

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) household datasets, Q4 2019 – Q4 2021.

Mothers are more likely to work part-time compared with fathers. This tendency explains much of the differences between single and couple parents shown in Figure 10. Nevertheless, as shown in Figure 11, single mothers were significantly more likely to work part-time compared with couple mothers before the start of the pandemic: 57 percent in London, compared with 40 percent of couple mothers.

The slight decline in part-time working amongst single parents in the capital highlighted above means that their rates of part-time work are now slightly less different to those of couple mothers in the capital.

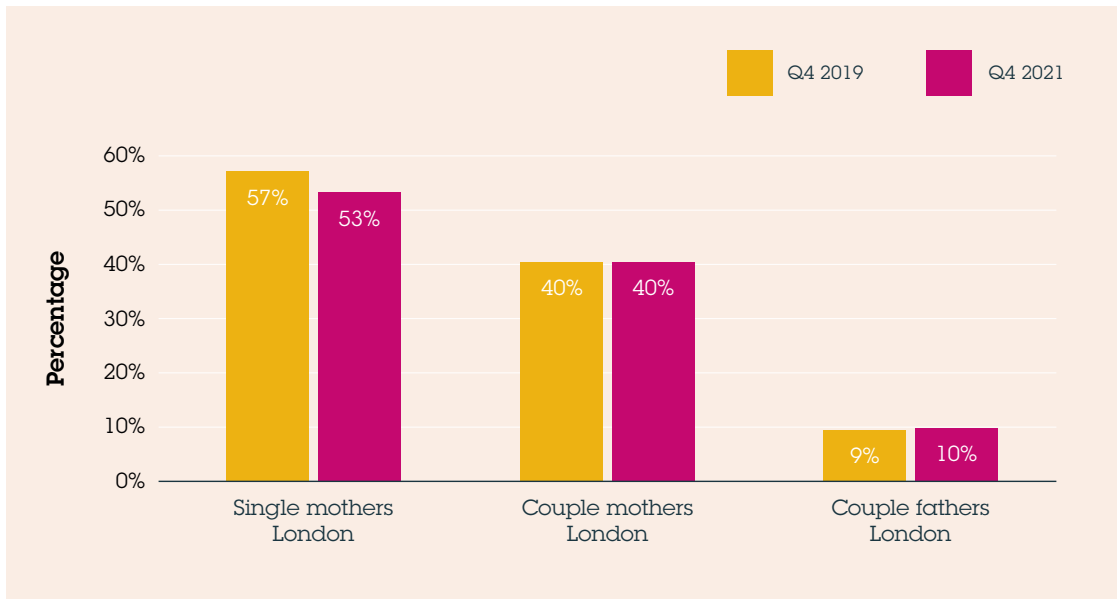


Figure 11
Rates of part-time working for different groups of parents in London

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) household datasets, Q4 2019 – Q4 2021.

In 2022, Timewise research demonstrated that fewer jobs are being advertised as part-time, engendering greater competition and making asking about part-time working an even greater deterrent. Consequently, Timewise has concluded that the risk that the gap between opportunities for location-based flexible working and time-based flexible working is increasing and that options are narrowing for those who cannot work a full week.³³ This link between employment, flexibility, and location, as well as ‘feelings of value’ are examined in the Section 3 of this report.

Working from home

Of all the changes to working patterns resulting from the pandemic, homeworking is one which has become markedly more prevalent. ONS data showed that home working was more common amongst certain groups in the first stages of the pandemic, including those living in London and those in professional and managerial occupations.³⁴ However, single parents are less likely than couple parents to have benefited from the shift to homeworking.³⁵

Building on this earlier data, Figure 12 shows that the likelihood of working from home has increased more noticeably among couple parents, compared with single parents, both in London and in the UK more widely. Rates of homeworking stood at a similar level of all four groups of parents at the end of 2019. By the final quarter of 2021, homeworking had increased by 15 percentage points among single parents in London, compared with an increase of 19 percentage points among couple parents in London. As a note of caution, the LFS asks respondents what they ‘mainly do’ in their job, rather than what they are doing currently – and it only records home-working where someone reports that they are ‘mainly doing’ this.

³³ Timewise, 2021b.

³⁴ Office for National Statistics (2021a).

³⁵ Gingerbread (2020).

In addition, people may have become increasingly likely to indicate that they mainly worked from home throughout 2021, having now done this for most of the previous two years – although this arrangement may not be reflected in their contracts as such. By the end of 2021, fewer London-based single parents reported mainly working from home than couple parents (20 percent and 26 percent respectively).

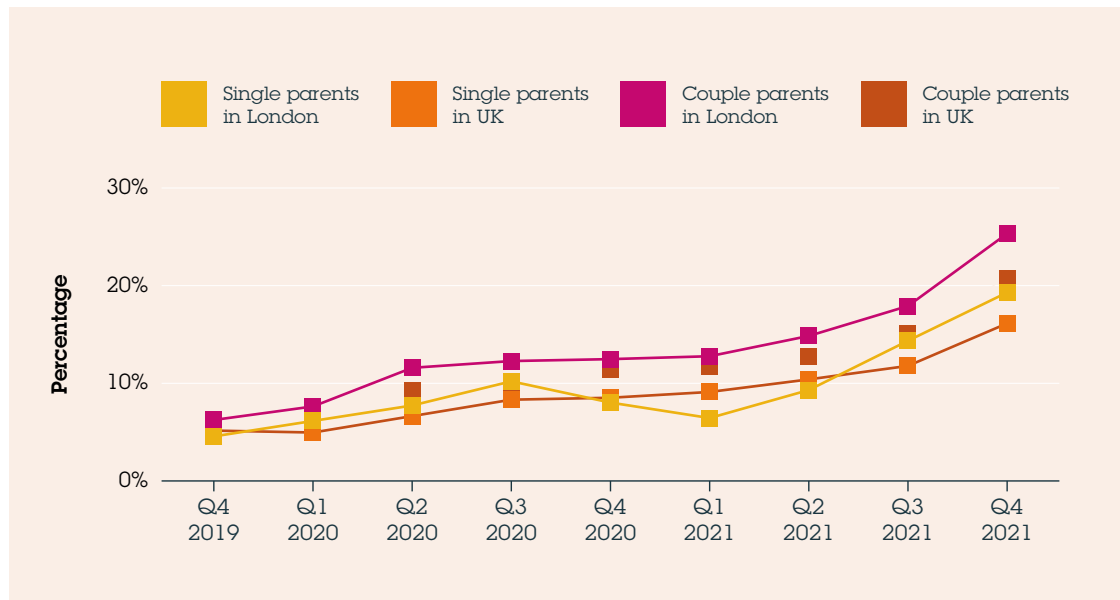


Figure 12
Proportion of different groups of parents who report “mainly” working from home

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) household data-sets, Q4 2019 to Q4 2021.

Furlough

A major factor affecting experiences of employment during the pandemic was support available through the Job Retention Scheme (furlough) and the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS). Single parents were slightly more likely than couple parents to be furloughed by their employer – and this difference was particularly pronounced in London.

Single and couple parents both in London and across the UK were similarly likely to be in receipt of the government’s self-employment grant scheme.

These differences appear to be more closely linked to parental status, rather than sex – particularly in relation to furlough. As shown in Figure 13, couple mothers and couple fathers were equally likely, both in London and in the UK, to have been furloughed, whilst single mothers were significantly more likely than both groups to have been furloughed, with this difference being particularly marked in the capital.

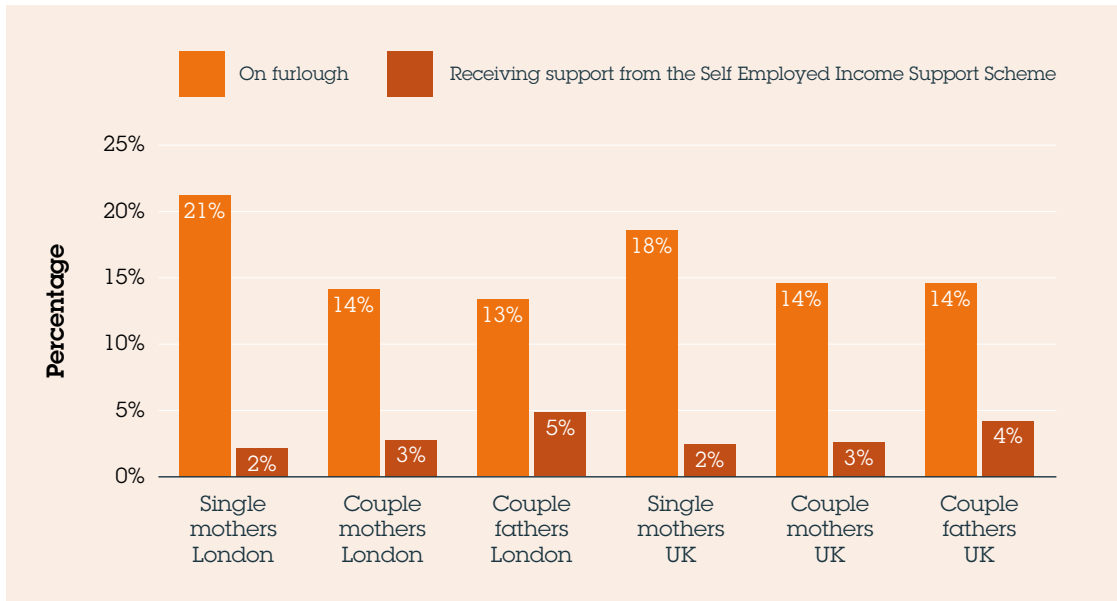


Figure 13
Experience of furlough* and self-employment support for different groups of parents in London and UK, April-June 2020

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) household dataset, Q2 2021.

* The LFS did not explicitly measure the experience of being on furlough (either as an employee or as a recipient of the government's self-employment grant scheme) throughout 2020. However, in the second quarter of 2021, it introduced a question, asking participants what they were doing one year ago (also analysed in Office for National Statistics, 2021b).

3. The experiences of single parents

Gingerbread interviewed 15 single parents in November 2020 and 27 in February 2022. This longitudinal approach allowed Gingerbread to capture a snapshot of the lived experiences of single parents at various times during the pandemic, and it enabled us to explore the impact over time between reactive policy and those for whom it is introduced to help.

Divided into three themes – employment, childcare and mental health and wellbeing – this chapter explores the lived experiences of single parents and highlights the complicated relationship between single parenthood, locality, and identity.

3.1. Furlough and self-employment support

Furlough

For those who used the Job Retention Scheme (furlough), the government paid 80 percent of their regular wage each month. People did not receive 100 percent of their wage unless their employer agreed to pay the 20 percent difference. Furlough was generally perceived as a successful mechanism in shielding families from absolute hardship and for protecting jobs across London. That said, those who were on a low income felt the 20 percent drop in income more acutely.

“It was only at eighty percent as well, so I had to take a reduction in my pay, which then affected everything.... Oh, it was awful... it was not nice.”
– Eva (November 2020)

Single parents we spoke with described feeling grateful for the financial support furlough provided, and many reflected on how they would not have managed without it. However, the loss of income and connection with work had a detrimental impact on their finances, their wellbeing, their relationships with their employers, and their sense of self.

Where their salaries were being topped up by employers, single parents we interviewed reported being reticent to disclose this to others. Some parents felt lucky that they were on full pay as most others on furlough



were receiving 80 percent of their usual wages, and conversely those who received the statutory amount felt a sense a resentment and a feeling that their employer did not value them. Hence, furlough presented a multifaceted impact, which went beyond just the financial effects. Being furloughed in the first place, and how much parents were being paid by their employers when on furlough, led to confusion, comparison, and worry over job security. Some parents felt that their job was more secure as their employer topped up their wage, while others questioned their job security and longevity if they received the standard 80 percent of their salaries offered through the scheme. Interestingly, some parents linked their feelings around job security to the number of people that were furloughed from the company they worked for.

“I am not shouting about it, but I was at home getting paid the full amount, so I was very lucky.”

– Mike (November 2020)

“The furlough scheme was helpful. At least we knew we were going to get paid. But... even while I was on the furlough scheme they [employer] said, ‘you have to come in otherwise you won’t get paid’, so it still was hanging over our shoulders.”

– Louise (November 2020)

“I asked to be furloughed but I was told no straight off. I was told my organisation does not offer it.”

– Chelsea (November 2020)

In addition, the interviews revealed inconsistency amongst their employers in how they approached furlough. Some employers mandated that furloughed staff still fulfil some (if not all) working responsibilities, which contravened the scheme’s regulations. Other employers either denied furlough to staff who were looking to access the scheme for childcare and home-schooling reasons, or simply refused by saying their organisation did not offer it.

Moreover, the parents we interviewed in late 2020 did not know when furlough would end, and this uncertainty increased the anxiety and stress described by many parents when discussing the effect furlough had. By February 2022, the Job Retention Scheme had ended, meaning that we could gain an insight into how employers reacted to this change, how single parents felt about it, and what support was in place when job support schemes ended. The reactions of employers to supporting employees who had Covid, however, highlights a broader inconsistency with how people are supported if they need time off work.

“Thankfully, I have not contracted Covid, but senior management told us that if anyone did get the virus then they would not be compensated for it. We were told that very early on.”

– Ibrahim (February 2022)

“I am not shouting about it, but I was at home getting paid the full amount, so I was very lucky.”

“I asked to be furloughed but I was told no straight off. I was told my organisation does not offer it.”

“I am sure they cannot just be paying sick pay every time you get Covid but, hopefully, there are some rules around it. Personally, I have not explored how that works in my organisation, or I haven’t asked people who have been off for a long time – are they getting full pay or are they getting like a reduced pay or low pay?”

– Lee (February 2022)

For those who knew that they would not be compensated or that they must take a reduction in pay (SSP) if they became ill with the virus, they worried more about catching the virus – especially when travelling to work. For those who could walk to work – which reduced cost and their chances of getting the virus – they were still cautious (such as keeping a distance) as they knew the financial and health impact of getting Covid. This is another example where location affected single parents’ experiences of the pandemic, even after restrictions were significantly lifted.

These experiences demonstrate the lack of protection offered to single parents. In both the November 2020 and February 2022 cohort, no two single parents worked for the same employer. It is evident that different companies reacted differently and that decisions made by employers – whether this be topping up furlough, allowing flexible hours, allowing home (and then hybrid) working had a significant impact on how single parents experienced the pandemic.

Self Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS)

Single parents we interviewed who had used the SEISS felt the very design of the scheme meant they lost out. Firstly, SEISS took the average amount of pay from the past three years and it did not ‘top up’ income to a certain level to maintain a particular standard of living. Our interviews show that the design of the scheme disproportionately punished single parents with young children, those who had become self-employed more recently, and those who worked part-time. The government calculations did not consider time off work for sickness or maternity/paternity leave within the last three years, which for single mothers especially, was particularly problematic:

“Yes, I got the self-employment grants... I got two of them. The main challenge is my son is four. The first two, obviously it takes the last three years of your salary and for one of those years I have been a single mum and two of those years I’ve been a single mum on maternity leave. So my income for the last three years was not very good at all. So to take the average of the crappiest time of my income life.”

– Bernie (November 2020)

“I am a freelance consultant. I work two days a week. Every time we have the lockdown, I can’t work because of the work I do. Then I have to take unpaid leave. I am self-employed. It is only two days a week, so it is not a biggie, which is why I have not applied for the SEISS, but it is not ideal.”

– Sally (November 2020)

“I am sure they cannot just be paying sick pay every time you get Covid but, hopefully, there are some rules around it.”

“I am a freelance consultant. I work two days a week. Every time we have the lockdown, I can’t work because of the work I do. Then I have to take unpaid leave. I am self-employed. It is only two days a week, so it is not a biggie, which is why I have not applied for the SEISS, but it is not ideal”

The second key issue raised in the interviews was how the SEISS required claimants to earn at least half of their income through self-employment, leaving a significant cliff-edge when it came to financial support available to those who were slightly underneath the threshold. This was a requirement which particularly impacted those with multiple part time jobs and/or flexible jobs – which single parents often utilise to build their careers around childcare arrangements.

“I was ineligible (for SEISS) because I did not earn 50 percent, I earned 48 percent self-employed so I lost all of that income. There was nothing to see me through. I never missed filing a tax return. My income reduced by 48 percent. There needs to be some kind of... I don't know what the word for it is. They should look at your tax return and average out what you would have lost, then work that out percentagewise in terms of what they pay people who did satisfy the criteria. I would have been better off losing all my employment and being in receipt of aid. That is wrong. Continuing to work is better for your mental health and all of that, so why should you be punished for that?”

– Abigail (November 2020)

“I was ineligible (for SEISS) because I did not earn 50 percent, I earned 48 percent self-employed so I lost all of that income. There was nothing to see me through.”

3.2. Working from home

Interviewees who could work from home reported that this had helped them manage personal and professional responsibilities more effectively, especially when children were able to return to school. A key benefit for single parents working from home was the ability to build working hours around domestic commitments. Many reported no longer having to forgo working commitments for household responsibilities and vice versa, which was a first for many.

Single parents often commented on the impact that working from home had on their ability to carve out free time in their day. Interviewees described how it was a significant effort to maintain the commitments of the school run, work commute, returning to home/school and then attending to domestic responsibilities pre-pandemic, whereas working from home allowed them to do these activities with less time pressure as there was no stress to rush into work.

“Homeworking gives you flexibility and an opportunity to be the best version of yourself.”

– Nikki (November 2020)

“I feel so much better. I mean, I can cook more now. It is little things. My house is tidier ... And I can pick her up without having to put her in after school club everyday now as well. Which means I am closer to her with her homework. Because usually I would be killing myself and then because I was working so far from home, I would have to log on again in the evening as well, because I was taking that hour and a half to get home.”

– Chelsea (November 2020)

“Homeworking gives you flexibility and an opportunity to be the best version of yourself.”

“In the first lockdown, although it meant very late nights for me, it was really nice to have the time during the day with my son because the weather was nice outside the whole time. That was really lovely. Then of course the online stuff is brilliant because usually I was doing about three hours’ travelling on tubes and buses and I am not doing that anymore.”

– Abigail (February 2022)

When we interviewed parents in November 2020, many single parents expressed hopes to keep working from home in the future, but also anxieties that homeworking or hybrid working would not remain the norm as restrictions were eased.

“We have actually had a conversation within our team about it. I am hoping that employers are seeing that as employees, we can be just as productive working from home as we are in an office.”

– Victoria (November 2020)

“There is a risk that when we do transit out of Covid, employers will fall prey to the same old mentality that they want more to be delivered, and it’s better to have everybody in your radar physically.”

– Asha (November 2020)

Unfortunately, the February 2022 interviews revealed that for some parents, this concern became a reality.

“From tomorrow it’s going to be going back to the office. I’m quite upset about it, really, because it’s going back to how it was before. Because it was almost two years of having that flexibility, of being able to take her to school, pick her up. It was a huge benefit for us both. And now my boss isn’t that understanding, even though she’s a mum herself, and, you know, it’s business-as-usual quite early on.”

– Katherine (February 2022)

3.3. Support from employers

Having a supportive employer was a strong predictor of single parents in London successfully working through the pandemic. Key to this was an understanding from employers that single parents were under immense pressure to perform a multitude of roles – effectively acting as sole earner, teacher, parent, and playmate.

The interviews show some positive examples of how employers were understanding and showed compassion to their single parent employees. There were also some stark examples of employers doing the opposite. In the case of the latter, it was not usually down to ill-intent of employers, but rather a lack of consideration for the added pressures facing their single parent employees. This was particularly prominent among employers who did not have children themselves.

“In the first lockdown, although it meant very late nights for me, it was really nice to have the time during the day with my son because the weather was nice outside the whole time. That was really lovely.”

“There is a risk that when we do transit out of Covid, employers will fall prey to the same old mentality that they want more to be delivered, and it’s better to have everybody in your radar physically.”

Consequently, single parents who were working, often had to remind their employers of the stress they were under in order to explicate any decline in output. However, even when they did, the mechanisms put in place were not always helpful.

“If I hadn’t said anything they would have just expected business as usual from me. But the fact that I raised it, I got the reply of ‘if you have to take two hours out to home school you have to make that up in the evening or on a Saturday.’ I just thought to myself you are not getting it. That showed me you have missed the whole point. Because that means I am doing extra and that is not my fault that I must home school.”

– Chelsea (November 2020)

“The management team did not have any children and you had other staff members that had children, but they were adults, so it didn’t affect them. So, they were not very understanding at the beginning, the fact that I was doing full-time.”

– Louise (November 2020)

“At the beginning it was really daunting because it was like, oh my god, this is work – meanwhile, I am late to meetings due to looking after my child, and then the meeting would take place on a bedroom floor amidst a load of toys. I was the only single parent in my team. It was the most stressful time of my life ever. I had to juggle this human being that has needs 24/7 and my work... You might have a bunch of managers who are families of a few people, they have support, there is a husband and wife at home. They cannot understand it [single parenthood] because they are not in it. There was nothing out there. We are the invisible family.”

– Nikki (November 2020)

Conversely, where support was offered, parents expressed immense gratitude to their employers for allowing them to focus on other responsibilities, such as home-schooling. Interviewees described how simple and practical steps to help them get by made a difference. Measures included setting realistic work goals and accepting that output may fall while home-schooling during lockdowns, allowing parents to work around childcare/teaching arrangements, ensuring staff had the required equipment to be able to work from home effectively, and granting furlough requests and allowing parents to take time away from work.

In all these examples, the onus was on the single parent rather than on the employer. Of the 24 parents that we spoke with, not one mentioned that their employer had extra support or policies in place to help single parents throughout the pandemic (or indeed before). Two parents had the option of heavily subsidised childcare and a different two had parent support networks at their company. However, both options were available for couple and single parents, and this putting together under the same grouping often heightened feelings of loneliness and isolation at work – not all their colleagues could understand their situation as single parents.

“The management team did not have any children and you had other staff members that had children, but they were adults, so it didn’t affect them. So, they were not very understanding at the beginning, the fact that I was doing full-time.”

“They cannot understand it [single parenthood] because they are not in it. There was nothing out there. We are the invisible family.”

3.4. Commuting

Public transport was a source of contention for many parents. Travelling on the Tube makes it often impossible to avoid contact with others, especially in rush hour. The interviews revealed that many single parents with younger children avoided public transport all together in the first couple of lockdowns as they were worried about getting Covid, particularly because at that time the effect the virus had on children was unknown.

Although many parents are now less fearful about using public transport than they were earlier on in the pandemic, this worry about health has been replaced with a worry about money, and how to afford the fares with the cost of living rising so rapidly. It is likely that many single parents will struggle to pay for vital services – transport, food, internet connection if working from home – because the cost-of-living price hike in 2022, will risk pushing them into poverty and heighten feelings of ill health and poor wellbeing.

3.5. Universal Credit (UC)

UC is of particularly significant for single parents because of the number of single parents in London in receipt of the benefit. In February 2019, around 132,000 single parent households in London were in receipt of UC. By August 2021, this has increased to just over 226,000 single parent households – representing around 89 percent of single parent households in the capital with dependent children.³⁶

The government made significant changes to UC in response to the first lockdown. A loan was given for those who had lost their jobs, and the standard rate of UC was uplifted by £20 per week (known as the ‘£20 uplift’). It is worth noting though that many single parent families on UC in London would not have seen much, if any, benefit from the uplift due to the benefit cap. As of May 2021, there were 30,000 single parents in London affected by the benefit cap – more than in any other English city.²⁷

That said, the £20 uplift was a lifeline for single parent households in London, and many of the single parents interviewed in February 2022 commented that they had felt this loss in income in October 2021 acutely. This financial loss fuelled a narrative that government policy throughout the pandemic had left single parents behind, and that in terms of policy making, they were always an afterthought.

“It was a massive help to me... it gave me a little bit more freedom and then it was taken away.”

36 The estimate of the number of lone parent families in London was taken from the 2020 Families by Family Type, regions of England and UK constituent countries dataset, available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/familiesbyfamilytyperegionsofenglandandukconstituentcountries>. In practice, the denominator should be slightly lower than the ONS figure, as DWP only count as lone parent families those with a child aged 20 or under (whereas ONS records all dependent children).

37 GLA (2021), Socio-economic impact of Covid-19. <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/socio-economic-impact-of-Covid-19>. <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/socio-economic-impact-of-Covid-19>.

“It was a massive help to me ... it gave me a little bit more freedom and then it was taken away.”

– Eva (February 2022)

“For me to survive, after the UC comes in, I either have to spend all my savings or move to a really cheap town in the middle of nowhere, and where I don’t have any support and we don’t know anybody.”

– Bernie (February 2022)

“I found it very difficult – I felt like I was constantly jumping through hoops.”

– Ibrahim (February 2022)

On a more positive note, some parents reported that it was because of the help they received with childcare costs through UC, that they were able to carry on working when they returned to in person work.

“For me to survive, after the UC comes in, I either have to spend all my savings or move to a really cheap town in the middle of nowhere, and where I don’t have any support and we don’t know anybody.”

3.6. Home-schooling

Gingerbread’s Caring Without Sharing project revealed how the age of a child and a parent’s occupation had a significant impact on the experience of single parents who continued to work and home-school throughout the pandemic. For example, older children can travel to and from school themselves, saving money on breakfast and afterschool clubs. Many parents also felt fortunate to have key-worker status based on their occupation. This meant that their child could attend nursery or school in the second and/or third lockdown – parents no longer had to worry about home-schooling.

Another theme which emerged from the 2020 and 2022 interviews, was the worry felt by single parents that their child would fall behind at school as they were not able to help them sufficiently with their schoolwork. One mum mentioned how the methods used at her school to teach algebra were completely different to the methods her son was using, and she expressed feelings of guilt and concern that she did not understand these new approaches well enough to help. Consequently, some single parents we interviewed, who admitted to struggling financially as a result, paid for a tutor to come to the house or took their child to a tutor’s house when the restrictions allowed – many wished that they could have had this interactive educational support earlier.

While many single parents had no choice but to work around home-schooling hours, this proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, many single parents were grateful to be able to build their hours around at-home responsibilities. Nevertheless, this newfound flexibility came at a cost – with many single parents working around the clock to meet domestic and working requirements.

“I was told by my employer that if I take two hours out to home school, I have to make that up in the evening, but I can only do what I can do. If that means my work has to suffer, my daughter’s education comes first. And because I am the way I am, work didn’t suffer and nor did my daughter. So then I ended up getting run down because I was logging on later at night once I had schooled her, and at the weekend.”

– Chelsea (November 2020)

This is not the only example of a parent recognising that home-schooling (including the worry that it caused) and working at the same time influenced their physical and/or mental health. The February 2022 interviews revealed how the stress that home-schooling had caused, had resulted in a deterioration in the relationship between parent and child – this was a temporary decline for most parents.

“I am not one of those mums who shouts at her children, but I snapped a few times when trying to teach her. I feel awful about it.”

– Katherine (February 2022)

Over one third of parents in 2022 said that they had to give up on home schooling quite early on for the sake of keeping a good relationship with their children. Some children did not like or did not respond well to having their parents teach them, and parents decided that their child’s happiness, their own wellbeing, and the parent child bond was more important to them than their child’s education – particularly if their child was not in an exam year. This conflict between education and welfare did not resolve – it was repeatedly referenced in the 2020 and 2022 interviews.

For many single parents who had to take temporary time out of work or lose their job completely as a direct result of the pandemic (such as for childcare and home-schooling), they missed out on career opportunities and potential promotions which would have seen an increase in pay. It meant that parents we interviewed had less money to pay for increasing childcare costs when they returned to work, college, or when they had to attend medical appointments.

Unsurprisingly then, in 2021, Londoners who did not live with a partner were more likely (12 percent) to be find their financial position “quite or very difficult” in comparison to those who live with a partner (three percent).³⁸ Having to pay for childcare from one income is a major driver of this financial precariousness. The overwhelming majority of parents commented on just how expensive childcare is – with some acknowledging it would be more affordable and their finances would stretch further if they did not live in London. The pandemic added a new problem into the mix: it was not just affordability that was a major barrier to care, but accessibility – it was near on impossible to find childcare if a single parent or their child had Covid-19 – and the health of those caring and those who needed care.

“I was told by my employer that if I take two hours out to home school, I have to make that up in the evening...And because I am the way I am, work didn’t suffer and nor did my daughter. So then I ended up getting run down because I was logging on later at night once I had schooled her, and at the weekend.”

“I am not one of those mums who shouts at her children, but I snapped a few times when trying to teach her. I feel awful about it.”

38 University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research (2021).

3.7. Support bubbles

In June 2020, the UK Government allowed single adult households to “bubble” with someone from outside of their household. This policy alleviated some of the practical concerns single parents faced during the pandemic, such as shopping for food, household tasks, and childcare, all of which helped reduce stress levels and improved the mental health of both parent and child.

“Support bubbles were a lifeline for me and my daughter.”

– Katherine (February 2022)

“It was amazing – just having a hug, just having adult company.”

– Hannah (February 2022)

Support bubbles were not introduced until four months after the first lockdown, fuelling single parents belief that their circumstances had not been sufficiently taken into account in policy-making during the Covid-19 pandemic.³⁹ Many single parents felt that their children should have been prioritised for school places, given they did not have anyone to share the load of working and caring with, particularly when they could not form a support bubble. In some cases, not being able to form a support bubble increased feeling of loneliness and had a negative impact on mental health. It also of course reduced childcare options available to the parent.

Many single parents we spoke to “bubbled” with their parents and often travelled out of London to live with them in the successive lockdowns. For others, bubbles allowed them to make stronger local connections and friendships, by bubbling up with a neighbour so they could help each other with childcare and food. It was because of this that some parents were keen to stress that they believe there is a greater sense of local community now than before the pandemic – it has brought people together. Interestingly, some parents (despite craving adult interaction) chose not to bubble up with anybody so that their children could bubble up with their dad and they could share childcare.

“I did not, but the kids bubbled with their dad, who bubbled... Well, it evolved a bit. The kids dad was bubbled with his mum and the kids bubbled with their dad, so they were still able to see their dad on a Saturday afternoon, but unfortunately, he was not willing to see them more at other times, so it just meant that the existing arrangements that they have was maintained.”

– Polly (February 2022)

“Support bubbles were a lifeline for me and my daughter.”

“The kids bubbled with their dad... so they were still able to see their dad on a Saturday afternoon, but unfortunately, he was not willing to see them more at other times, so it just meant that the existing arrangements that they have was maintained.”

³⁹ Gingerbread (2021).

3.8. Mental health and wellbeing

Our November 2020 interviews reveal that the challenges experienced by the single parents during lockdown, such as changes to employment, home-schooling, and lack of contact with others, had an impact on their wellbeing and mental health. By February 2022, there had of course been major shifts in support offered from schools in particular, and so it was the ongoing effects from financial insecurity and worries about their children which were the most prevalent reasons to affect mental health and wellbeing. Our interviews found that sole responsibility for a child during a pandemic predominantly manifested itself in two forms of reduced wellbeing for single parents: career anxiety and health anxiety. In relation to the former, it was clear that the pandemic had aggravated single parent's anxieties about their employability through and beyond Covid-19.

“Women ... are becoming the main casualty within the workplace, because, obviously, the childcare has been what has held a lot of people back from work. So, when they are looking at redundancy, there is just going to be a bigger gap between men and women again, and the men are not the ones being made redundant, it's the women, and this is going to be the biggest problem for single mothers”

– Mel (November 2020)

“There is the additional stress of my biggest fear: what if I get sick and lose my job? I can't. I don't take the bus anymore. I cycle 100 kilometres a week to take my son to and from school, go home to work and then go back to pick him up, bring him back and then go to the clinic and back again. I am not getting on a bus because I need to have control over something. My brother has long Covid, and he has had to leave his work. I can't be in that position because there is no backup.”

– Abigail (November 2020)

Another strand of anxiety came from the health implications of Covid-19. As sole carers of their children, single parents we interviewed showed a heightened concern for their own health and that of their children. This was often driven by the worry about what would happen to their children if they were to fall seriously ill. That said, health anxiety was frequently in conflict with the career anxieties that were also present – with many parents forced to make difficult decisions, some of which involved forgoing the likelihood of their families being in good health for their work or vice versa.

“While I was in work there were several health issues with customers. At one point I was like that is like five fevers have been reported to me. So all in all it was just really a matter of “is this worth it for the risks that I'm putting my father (he is vulnerable and she is his main carer) under with this virus increasing? I had to say, ‘Do you know what? Actually, no, this isn't the right place for me right now’. Maybe out of the Covid situation, it would have worked, but the fact that it was in the middle of the pandemic, it really freaked me out.”

– Mel (November 2020)

“There is the additional stress of my biggest fear: what if I get sick and lose my job? I can't.... My brother has long Covid, and he has had to leave his work. I can't be in that position because there is no backup.”

These tough decisions, however, were made by both the resident and non-resident parent. Sadly, a more prevalent thread to emerge from the interviews than parents allowing their child to bubble up with the non-resident parent, was parents using Covid-19 restrictions as a reason why their child couldn't see their other parent, or for parents using Covid-19 restrictions as a way not to see their child and/or pay child maintenance.⁴⁰

“My ex, the father of my son, is quite nasty to me about my feelings about Covid, and my expectations for him in terms of contact time and how that is managed, because my son travels from London to Oxford with him to see his 12-year-old half-brother who also comes from another home, and that home is an anti-vaxxer home. And then my son's father has lodgers, so I've said 'Look, I expect everyone in this mixed scenario to test, and I need to see the results of those tests and we will provide ours.' And my son has no problem doing those tests, I have no problem, but he's given what for about it, and it's incredibly stressful.”

– Polly (February 2022)

Covid-19 restrictions and feelings around how closely the restrictions needed to be followed, forced changes to pre-agreed childcare arrangements. This had a negative impact on parent and child wellbeing. It added to the general feelings of stress and anxiety described by single parents, especially when child maintenance payments ended, as this sudden 'sole financial responsibility' was another burden to bear.

It is notable that the mental health of a child was only mentioned in the 2022 interviews, while both rounds of interviews found that single parents had concerns over their own mental health because of the pandemic. The interviews revealed that the bombardment of messages around sanitisation, social distancing, and hand washing fed into young people's anxieties around venturing back into a world where they are in contact with lots of people. Young people struggled with anxieties around leaving family members, parents returning to work and re-socialising in fear that someone they love – or indeed themselves – may become unwell. As Katherine mentioned in 2022, her daughter had become 'obsessed with washing her hands even though they were sore' and that she 'didn't want to leave her mum and go to school'. This highlights the cyclic relationship between health and social anxieties for children because of the pandemic. In turn, worries about their children, whether this be their education, behavioural changes, or social interaction (as a result of the lockdowns), heightened single parent anxieties at a time when Covid-19 restrictions were easing in England.

The interviews also found a need for more support services for those who are living with 'long Covid' and/or who have developed mental health problems because of contracting Covid or through their pandemic experiences. This is especially relevant within the workplace. Of those interviewed in February 2022, almost all said that they were not aware of any extra support offered by their employer or that any changes had been made to sickness policies.

“I've said 'Look, I expect everyone in this mixed scenario to test, and I need to see the results of those tests and we will provide ours.' And my son has no problem doing those tests, I have no problem, but he's given what for about it, and it's incredibly stressful.”

40 National lockdown: Stay at home guidance for England” was published on 4 January 2021. This said that individuals may not leave or be outside their home except when they have a “reasonable excuse”. A “reasonable excuse” includes continuing “existing arrangements for contact between parents and children where they live apart” – including travelling from one household to another. Yet, this was only put into legislation ten months after the first lockdown. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8901/CBP-8901.pdf>.

3.9. Cost of living and food insecurity

Currently, 49 percent of children in single parent families are in poverty, compared with 25 percent of children in couple families.⁴¹ In 2022, 31 percent of working-age lone parents and thirty-five percent of their children are in “persistent poverty”, which was considerably higher than for any other group.⁴²

Furthermore, more recent analysis, based on data collected as part of the Understanding Society Survey during the Covid-19 pandemic in mid-2020, has found that lone parent families were most at risk of food insecurity (nine percent). The same pattern was observed in relation to severe food insecurity. The 2022 interviews revealed that as well as food insecurity, single parents faced additional difficulties in accessing food during the pandemic – many could not get online delivery slots and some supermarkets put in place a one person from each household or a no child policy to reduce Covid-19 transmission. Yet, single parents could not leave their child with anyone else. This meant that the “one in and one out” supermarket rules excluded single parents from shopping in that store.

In this example, their identity as a single parent – particularly those with younger children – prevented them from accessing vital services which were available to couple parents with children of all ages. For those who could get online food delivery slots, however, there was a mix of emotion. This ranged from relief as they did not have to take their child food shopping and it reduced the possibility of getting Covid-19, to despair. This was because all those who were lucky enough to place an order online mentioned how this was a much more expensive way to shop.

“With the cost of living going up now, it is a lot worse being back at work, more travelling, like into London. They still need money put on their Oysters and what-not. There are eight of us in the house and it is costing five pounds more a week just for the same amount of milk.”

– Mike, a single parent of 7 children (February 2022)

Food was not the only service that single parents struggled to access during the pandemic. Medical, financial, leisure, and transport services all played a part in single parent’s experiences of the pandemic. What people could and could not access largely depended upon where they lived in London, where they worked, and their accessibility to childcare at a price within their budgets.

“With the cost of living going up now, it is a lot worse being back at work, more travelling, like into London. They still need money put on their Oysters and what-not. There are eight of us in the house and it is costing five pounds more a week just for the same amount of milk”

41 ONS (2020), Percentage and number of children falling below thresholds of low income and material deprivation in the United Kingdom. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-for-financial-years-ending-1995-to-2020>.

42 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2022), The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2022>.

Conclusion

This report shows that there are differences between the challenges single parents face at a local and national level. Locality is a crucial but overlooked theme in much of the current research assessing the impact of the pandemic. Yet, particularly for single parents living in London, their commute, access to services, whether they had a supportive employer and the availability of local and flexible jobs, have all had a direct impact on their experiences of the pandemic – and will continue to do so.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of childcare and mental wellbeing as social infrastructures. It has led many single parents to believe that more people can relate with the struggles single parents face every day (not least challenges with employment and childcare), because of the pressures caused by successive lockdowns.

Single parents across London hope that this feeling can be mobilised and turned into positive actions for change for single parents at both a local and a national level. They do not want to be the ‘invisible family’ within the UK’s post-pandemic recovery, as they were in many Covid-19 policy decisions.

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Recommendations

Employment

- 1 The GLA should prioritise single parents in their 'Workforce Integration Network', which launched in March 2022.**
- 2 Jobcentre Plus should use the expansion of work coach capacity to introduce specialist single parent advisers in London.** Single parents need specialist advice and training programmes to encourage them to return to roles which match their skill set or to retrain into new industries.
- 3 JCP in London should work with local employment partnerships to develop local work in the boroughs.** Fair and Flexible local jobs are key for a post pandemic economic recovery.



Childcare

- 1 The current cap on the Childcare Element of Universal Credit needs to be higher in London.** The cost of childcare in the city exceeds the government support that is available. Many single parents are paying more for childcare in London than they are earning and are financially worse off for working more hours.
- 2 The childcare scheme at the GLA was developed in partnership with Gingerbread.** Several London Boroughs have adopted the scheme, and they encourage employers in their area to adopt a similar approach. We want to see this rolled out across all London Boroughs and encourage employers to follow suit.
- 3 Flexible childcare funding would also support more single parents to be able to access and afford childcare.** We would like to see more innovative schemes made available to single parents in London, such as Islington council's childcare bursary fund, which provides parents with 8 weeks' funding for childcare. This can be used in a variety of ways: a deposit for nursery places, to cover childcare costs when parents enrol on short courses to boost their skills and employment chances or for when they attend an interview, or parents can use the money from this fund to set up their own business.



Mental health and wellbeing

- 1 Local government and service providers need to recognise single parents as a priority group when accessing mental health services.** Currently, across the London borough councils, there is an inconsistency in recognising single parents as a 'vulnerable group'. Thus, the wellbeing support available to single parents differs depending on where in London they live. This needs to be levelled up.
- 2 More investment from national government is needed for specialist mental health care for children.** In London, there is a gap in mental health support for primary school children outside of a school setting. This is why Gingerbread supports Young Minds' 'community hub' programme, which provides young people with a safe space to talk and connect with others, highlights the importance of a trusted adult, and emphasises the need to equip community care (such as faith leaders/ youth group workers) with the tools to recognise and help young people with mental ill health.
- 3 Hunger has a significant impact on mental and physical wellbeing.** Yet not all London councils have a specific food policy. We recommend that all London councils prioritise tackling food insecurity as a short and longer-term policy mission.



Technical appendix

The interviews in November 2020 and February 2022 were semi-structured. In 2020, the interviews were carried out on the telephone and averaged thirty minutes. In 2022, over half of the parents chose to use an online platform – either Teams or Zoom – rather than to speak on the telephone. These conversations averaged almost forty-five minutes. On each occasion, the single parents interviewed received a £20 shop voucher as a reward for their participation. In advance of the interview, each parent was provided with a consent form to sign, written information on the nature of the project, and what would be required of them as an interviewee.

Participants – in both 2020 and 2022 – were collected using Gingerbread’s network of London-based peer support groups, advertising in Gingerbread’s monthly newsletter, and on Gingerbread’s website. For transparency, all research interviews were recorded and transcribed professionally. Once transcribing had ended, thematic analysis was undertaken to identify key trends. This method highlighted when participants had different understandings of the same issue (for example, experiences of employment and domesticity in the lockdowns varied from person to person) and allowed for these experiences to be compared and contrasted.

Demographic Analysis: 2020

In November 2020, Gingerbread interviewed a cohort of 15 single parents who worked before the first Covid-19 lockdown. Given the particularities of the sample – working single parents in London – we did not make any further specification for interviewee requirements, instead opting for collecting an organic sample which was broadly representative of the single parent population in London, both in terms of demographics and employment characteristics.

The sample reflects the diversity in working experience for single parents amid the Covid-19 pandemic: it includes different qualifications, sectors, childcare requirements, working patterns (i.e., flexible working and home working) and a mix of single parents with and without key worker status. This broad brush of in-work experience is set out in Table 1.

In line with the broader national ethnicity split among the single parent population, however, we set an ethnicity quota for the sample – that at least twenty percent of interviewees would be from a BAME background. But, in November 2020, we collected a sample in which more than fifty percent were from BAME backgrounds, thereby over-representing the BAME single parent population.

Ethnicity – just as with gender, age, and disability – were of particular interest in this research as these four ‘characteristics’ were identified by scientists as increasing the likelihood of an individual become ill with Covid. For example, males over a certain age with existing health concerns, just as a male from a BAME background with no health concerns, or those of any age and background who had compromised immune systems, were statistically more likely to get Covid than those who did not share these characteristics. Certain areas of London have a higher BAME population than others – did this, for example, affect single parents experience of the pandemic? A recent study found that BAME workers (thirty percent) are more likely to have used public transport than White workers (twenty percent) if they had to travel to their place of work. This highlights how, for socio-economic reasons, BAME communities were also more likely to be exposed to the virus. Questions like this cannot be answered by using statistical data in isolation and demonstrate the value of applying a mixed method approach to Covid-19 research.

Amongst demographic characteristics other than ethnicity we secured a more balanced sample. The sample was broadly representative of the single parent population when it came to number of children and the age of the youngest child, with the majority having one child, and smaller proportions having two or more than two children. Most parents had one child of either pre-school or primary school age. This was a crucial element, as earlier Gingerbread research had found that the Covid-19 pandemic – and the home-schooling requirements within it – posed unique challenges for those with young children. These interviews provided a means to explore this issue – and age as a factor – further.

Table A Demographic Information for the November 2020 sample

Characteristic	Breakdown of achieved interviews in November 2020		
Work pattern (pre-Covid-19)	Full-time hours 9	Part-time hours 4	Not working 1
Number of jobs	One job 10	Two jobs 1	More than two jobs 3
Type of work (main job in Nov 2020)	Employee 12	Self-employed 2	Unemployed 0
Number of children	One child 9	Two children 3	More than two children 2
School stage of youngest child	Pre-school 5	Primary School 8	Secondary School 1
Type of support	Job-Retention Scheme 4	SEISS 2	Neither 8
Ethnicity	White 5	BAME 8	Other 1
Gender	Female 13	Male 1	Other 0
Highest Educational qualification ⁴³	Level 2 (GCSE or equivalent) 1	Level 3 (A-level or equivalent) 2	Level 4 (Degree or above) 11

⁴³ We did not set a quota for education levels and collected a sample which had an overrepresentation of those with Degree Level qualifications. None of the interviewees reported having qualifications lower than Level 2 – GCSE or equivalent.

Demographic Analysis: 2022

For continuity, we aimed to re-interview the same 15 single parents that we spoke with in 2020. Unfortunately, this was not possible as only ten of these fifteen parents responded to our request for a second interview. Considering that the first sample had over-represented BAME single parents and under-represented single fathers, single parents with children in secondary school, and single parents with Level 2 and 3 qualifications, ten participants was not enough to create a fair or representative sample. Consequentially, we had to recruit extra participants using the same channels used in 2020. To create a sample that matched as closely as possible to the single parent population in Britain (as measured using the Labour Force Survey, The Census, and statistics released by the Office of National Statistics), 27 parents were interviewed in 2022. Of the 27, ten had been interviewed in 2020 and 17 had not. For those who had not been interviewed by Gingerbread before, they described their experiences from the start of the pandemic. This allowed us to track the evolution of single parent experiences over the course of the pandemic. Although – and largely because of the time lapse between both interviews – the possibility of recall error was a methodological challenge that could not be eliminated, what parents remembered and even what they failed to remember, is a source of insight rather than an obstruction to gaining research knowledge.

Although the interviews focused on the impact of the pandemic on single parents, it was important to capture whether their child had a disability because it was not only the age of the child/children that affected parent experience of the pandemic, but whether their child has any additional care needs.

However, to best capture the single parent experience in London, policy change, and any shifts in public attitudes over the duration of the pandemic, the next chapter combines the results of the 2020 and 2022 interviews alongside the most up to date Labour Force Survey (LFS) data. The key trends, as revealed through the application of a thematic analysis, and how they interact with this demographic analysis, are highlighted throughout the report.



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