

Lone Parent Obligations: early findings of implementation as well as experiences of the Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance regimes

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The Government is committed to reducing child poverty and to increasing the employment rate of lone parents. Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) introduced from November 2008, mean that lone parents with older children, claiming Income Support (IS) solely based on being a lone parent, will have to claim Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) if they are capable of work, or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) if their capability for work is limited by a disability or health condition.

This summary presents early evaluation findings on the implementation of LPO and experiences of the IS and JSA regimes, based on in-depth interviews with staff and customers.

Key findings from this stage of the evaluation

- The implementation of LPO has gone well to date. Staff report that they have been well supported and most customers we interviewed, affected by LPO, were aware of the change to their benefits and why the changes were happening.
- For those lone parents currently on IS, they valued the flexibility and support that could be offered. However, there was no evidence that the increased frequency of Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) had resulted in customers having a greater work orientation.
- For those lone parents on JSA, there were differences in their confidence and capability to 'self-help' during the first stage of the JSA regime. There were no instances of JSA customers we interviewed having been fast-tracked within the JSA regime or accessing support through New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP).
- Both Lone Parent Advisers (LPAs) and generalist staff supported lone parents on JSA, depending on the area. LPAs were reported by some of the staff interviewed to be more aware of the range of (financial) support for lone parents, but less confident at working within the JSA regime.
- At the time of the research staff had limited experience of applying JSA parent flexibilities. They tended to have good awareness of them, but there were exceptions.
- Within the JSA parent flexibilities, staff described difficulty in defining appropriate childcare. This was seen as subjective and customer-led, whereas what would constitute affordable childcare was easier to calculate, for example with the help of Better Off Calculations (BOCs).
- At the time of the research the transition of customers from IS to JSA was still in its infancy. Of the staff interviewed, only one had any direct experience of involvement in disallowance or sanctioning under LPO.
- Staff felt that the ending of IS entitlement would help to encourage lone parents to look for work. Being on JSA seemed to have had a positive effect on customers' attitudes to work and job search behaviour, with many lone parents reporting that they were more likely to look for work on JSA than IS, in part because they disliked attending sign-on appointments.

Background

There is a comprehensive, mixed-methods evaluation in place to assess the effects of LPO. The aim of the evaluation, as a whole, is to explore whether and how lone parent employment interventions provide an effective incentive to look for paid employment, alongside an effective package of support for workless lone parents to enable them to find, enter and sustain paid employment.

This report is the second from the evaluation of LPO¹ and presents findings on the early implementation of LPO, the operation of the IS regime and the early stages of the JSA regime as they are experienced by lone parents.

The findings are based on qualitative fieldwork in five case study areas. This included 75 interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff and 203 interviews with lone parent Jobcentre Plus customers split between four stages of the lone parent customer journey.

Findings

Interviewee characteristics and attitudes to work: Most of the lone parents that took part in the interviews were female and were qualified at NVQ Level 2 (or equivalent) or below on leaving compulsory education. A number of customers had since engaged in a range of training and studying however, or had plans to do so. Most lone parents were not in paid employment at the time of the interview.

Many of the lone parent customers mentioned the same 'life goals' for the next few years, one of which was to get a paid job or become self-employed. Interviewees described the key motivating factors for them to gain paid employment, including financial independence, but some were concerned that they would not be financially better off in work or were apprehensive at a possible move from the financial stability of benefits into work.

The IS regime for lone parents: Lone parents with a youngest child aged six or under on IS represent the 'steady state' of lone parents on IS once the roll-out of LPO is completed. Customers valued the flexible and individualised support on offer through WFIs, and staff placed an emphasis on building rapport with customers in order to establish positive relationships. This was supported by seeing the same adviser for each WFI, which customers also valued.

There was limited evidence, however, that the increased WFI frequency provided a greater focus on work. Interviews with both staff and customers suggested low levels of engagement with the action planning process. Overall it was felt by staff that the effectiveness of the regime depended on the individual customer and their attitude to work.

Awareness and understanding of the ending of IS eligibility: Most staff felt that the LPO processes had provided customers with good levels of awareness about the LPO changes and the implications it had for them. Most of the interviewees whose IS eligibility was due to end in the near future were aware of the forthcoming changes to lone parent benefits and they displayed a reasonable level of understanding of the basic changes involved.

Front-line Jobcentre Plus staff, and LPAs in particular, saw the promotion of LPO to lone parent IS customers as an important part of their role. Staff felt that Lone Parent Work Focused Interviews (LPWFIs) were particularly useful for getting customers to focus on the changes, and suggested that the increased frequency of these to quarterly in the final year of IS eligibility was beneficial in promoting customer awareness and understanding of LPO.

The process for ending IS eligibility: All staff were aware of the existence of exemptions and transitional protection, and there were no examples from the customer interviews of anyone who appeared eligible for exemption from LPO or who could have transitional protection applied.

Customers who had moved from IS to JSA tended not to take out a lone parent transition loan, to cover the week's gap in payment periods, because they did not want to incur

¹ The first report was an international evidence review: Finn, D. and Gloster, R. (2010). *Lone Parent Obligations: A review of recent evidence of the work-related requirements within the benefits systems of different countries*. DWP Report No. 632.

(more) debt (and there were many lone parents interviewed who were in debt and had previous or ongoing negative experiences with debt). They said they would fill this gap by borrowing from friends or family or budgeting in the run up to the change from weekly to fortnightly payments.

The JSA regime for lone parents: Generally, customers had a good awareness of the requirements and conditionality of the JSA regime.

There were differences in the confidence and capability of JSA customers to 'self-help' during the first stage of the JSA regime. Staff are able to fast-track lone parents to later stages of the JSA regime or offer a referral to NDLP, if they need more support. However, there were no instances of JSA customers we interviewed having been fast-tracked or accessing support through NDLP.

Experience of the 13 week review was mixed, some customers found it helpful and others did not. Where customers had raised the possibility of training with advisers, they were told they were unable to access it as this point in their claim, which they would have liked to have been offered earlier.

The job role of staff that worked with lone parents on the JSA regime varied between the case-study areas. In some it was LPAs and in others it was generalist JSA regime staff. This affected the customer experience. Those customers who were able to continue to see the same LPA when they were claiming IS and JSA tended to report they had received more support, and appeared to benefit from the continuity of relationships and the trust and personalisation this brought. LPAs were also reported by some of the staff interviewed to be more aware than generalist JSA regime staff of the range of (financial, in particular) support for lone parents, whereas LPAs were less confident at working within the JSA regime.

In recognition of their need to care for their children, a number of flexibilities have been introduced into the JSA regime for parents with these responsibilities. Although at the time of the research staff had had limited experience

of applying these flexibilities they generally demonstrated a good awareness of them. But, there were some exceptions.

Benefit disallowance and sanctioning lone parent customers: The threat of benefit sanctions was seen by lone parent customers on IS as a key reason to attend WFIs. However in a small number of cases, the interviews with staff and customers confirmed low levels of awareness amongst some customers that failure to attend WFIs may result in a cut in their benefits.

At the time of the research the transition of customers from IS to JSA was still in its infancy, so evidence of the disallowance and sanctioning regime within JSA is very limited at this stage of the evaluation. Of the staff interviewed only one member of staff had direct experience of disallowance or sanctioning through LPO.

Childcare and its provision to support lone parents into work: Many lone parents we interviewed described themselves as 'carers by choice': parental childcare was held as the ideal, and as such some customers were strongly resistant to using formal childcare. Where alternatives to parental care were considered, they tended to focus on childcare that could be provided by close family members and friends.

Both customers and staff highlighted some gaps in childcare and after-school provision to support the JSA regime and working parents. Staff observed a gap in specialised childcare provision for children with disabilities. Both staff and customers also highlighted the challenge of the high cost of childcare in urban areas, particularly for younger children, and the lack of transport/work-home connections in more rural areas. Some lone parents also had concerns about leaving their children on their own after school and feared that they might become involved in anti-social behaviour.

Within the JSA parent flexibilities staff described difficulty in defining 'appropriate childcare'. This was seen as subjective and customer-led, whereas what would constitute 'affordable childcare' was easier to calculate, for example with the help of Better Off Calculations (BOCs).

Effect of LPO on lone parents' attitudes to work and propensity to work: There was a general consensus amongst staff that lone parent customers with younger children tend to be more open-minded and receptive to the idea of work. Many were more likely to have some (recent) work history and to want to work in the future, whereas lone parents on IS with older children (such as those now moving to JSA) were more likely to have been on benefit for a longer period of time, and find the idea of entering or returning to work more daunting. Customers were also concerned about the availability of part-time and flexible work. Many lone parents were seeking to work within school hours and were also concerned about how 'family friendly' employers would be in accommodating domestic responsibilities and emergencies.

Apart from work orientation, several factors that limited the likelihood lone parents would work were identified by the customers we interviewed. These included the cost and availability of transport. Most lone parents were reliant on public transport to access non-local employment and in some rural areas the use of public transport was impractical and transport costs made taking low-paid work less financially attractive.

Generally, lone parents thought that they would be financially better off in work, and many had had BOCs. However, some thought they would be worse off in work due to the extra costs of prescriptions, dentists and opticians, travel to work and childcare, which they were not sure whether the BOC had taken into account. Many of the interviewees who had debt reported that if they returned to work the payments to service their debt would increase. In some cases this could reduce the incentives for them to return to work.

Being on JSA seems to have had a positive effect on customers' attitudes to work and job search behaviour, with many lone parents reporting that they were more likely to look for work on JSA than IS. In part this was because they disliked having to attend sign-on appointments and for some because of the stigma they perceived was attached to claiming JSA.

LPO going forward

This stage of the evaluation was undertaken early in the roll-out of LPO. On the whole the implementation of LPO was considered to have gone well and there were only a few teething problems. There were some issues identified that may need to be considered further within the implementation of LPO. These include:

- making sure that staff working with lone parents, particularly as they move on to JSA, have access to all the information they need to fully support lone parents and their need to balance caring for their children with the requirement to job search and move into work;
- ensuring that there is suitable childcare available to lone parents moving into work and that staff feel confident in applying the parent flexibilities around childcare within the jobseekers regime;
- putting in place further measures to help allay any fears lone parents may have about a move into work, particularly around financial and practical support.

In addition, later stages of the evaluation will consider further the experiences of those affected by LPO and their outcomes over time.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 735 8. Research Report 645. March 2010).

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

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