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UNIVERSAL CREDIT CONDITIONALITY CHANGES & THE IMPACT ON SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

Full Report

Written by Ruth Talbot

THE SINGLE PARENT RIGHTS' CAMPAIGN

The Single Parent Rights' Campaign is a national campaign to end discrimination towards single parents. It is led and delivered by single parent volunteers and supported by 23 organisations. These are, **Amicable, Asian Single Parents' Network, Bird Soup, Career Mums, Dads Unlimited, Frolo, Global Equality Collective, Happity, Independent Mothers, Mothers Uncovered, Mush, Neesie, Nspire 2 Rise, One Parent Families, Scotland, Only Mums and Only Dads, Parenthood Matters, Save the Children, UK, Single Mums Business Network, Single Parents on Holiday, Single Parent Support and Advice Services, Single Parents Wellbeing, Talented Mums and The Childhood Trust.**

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ACRONYMS

AET - Administrative Earnings Threshold

CET - Conditionality Earnings Threshold

CMS - Child Maintenance Service

DWP - Department of Work and Pensions

JSA - Jobseekers Allowance

N - Number of Respondents

DLA - Disability Living Allowance

FSF - Flexible Support Fund

MIF - Minimum Income Floor

UC - Universal Credit

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Single parent employment levels have generally been increasing since the late 1990s and are now at almost 70%, with around 50% of these individuals working full-time. Prior to 2008, single parents in receipt of income support weren't required to work until their youngest child turned 16 years old - but this has decreased over time to 3 years. In recent years the government has tightened conditionality for single parents on Universal Credit (UC). In 2023, they increased work requirements for lead carers of 3 to 12-year-olds to 30 hours per week, up from 16 hours for lead carers of 3-year-olds and 25 hours for lead carers of 5 to 12-year-olds.

The objective of this study was to understand how single parents are managing with their current work requirements, how the increased hours would impact them, and what barriers they face to increasing their hours in paid employment.

METHODOLOGY

The study involved four methods: (i) desk-based research of Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) work coach guidance, (ii) an online survey completed by 638 single parents, (iii) a 'Big Question' video with Changing Realities participants and (iv) lived experiences stories.

FINDINGS

The research reveals that most (81%) of single parents would find it unmanageable to increase their working hours as requested - and that if they are required to work 30 hours per week, this will have a negative impact on them (81%). Even prior to the increased conditionality, while 53% of respondents were meeting or exceeding work requirements, 59% found them unmanageable.

Respondents repeatedly explained how managing a home, family, and job single-handedly limited their ability to work longer hours. They also highlighted external barriers to work, including a lack of childcare or flexible work and single parent employment discrimination. They did not see the support on offer from the job centres as beneficial, with 74% saying they do not find work coach meetings useful and a further 20% stating they are not sure if they are useful.

CONCLUSION

Conditionality heightens pressure on single parents, from the excessive and unhelpful work coach meetings to the rigid and unmanageable work requirements. If implemented in its current format, the latest increase in work requirements risks pushing single parents further away from the labour market whilst doing nothing to address the very real work barriers these individuals face. Significant changes - as outlined in the table below - are required to ensure single parents can thrive, not merely survive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The table below outlines the key recommendations made by this report and the expected outcomes. Further details on these recommendations are included in section 5.

Table 1: Recommendations and Expected Outcomes

Recommendation	Expected Outcome					
	Reduced Stress on Single Parents	Lower Single Parents Sanction Rates	Greater Career Opportunities	Increased Employment Rates	Decreased DWP Staff Workload	Greater Trust in DWP Staff and Processes
Conditionality Earnings Threshold						
Introduce a 'Single Parent Lead Carer' category with staggered work requirements	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Conduct a review of how this policy is impacting single parent claimants	✓	✓		✓		✓
Revoke plans for mandatory in-work progression support	✓	✓			✓	✓
Claimant Communications						
Communicate the policy change with all lead carers, outlining the flexibility and the easements available	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Create a more user-friendly claimant commitment	✓	✓			✓	✓
Work Coach Support						
Provide dedicated single parent work coaches	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Reduce mandatory work coach meetings	✓	✓			✓	✓
Focus work-coach support on practical job search assistance	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Childcare Support						
Expand upfront childcare costs support to parents returning from maternity leave	✓		✓	✓		✓
Remove the lower threshold for funded childcare hours for working parents	✓		✓	✓		
Expand the funded childcare hours to those in training or education	✓		✓	✓		
Support single parents with holiday childcare costs	✓		✓	✓		✓
UC Systems & Processes						
Link DLA payments and work requirements automatically	✓	✓			✓	✓
Decrease the UC taper rate to 50 pence	✓			✓		✓
Legal Protection for Single Parents						
Introduce legislation to prevent single parent discrimination	✓	✓	✓	✓		



INTRODUCTION

YOU'RE GONNA FIND A LOT OF PARENTS DOWN THE JOB CENTRE EVERY WEEK, NOT BECAUSE WE DON'T WANT TO WORK, BECAUSE WE GENUINELY CAN'T.

Single parent survey respondent

The recent conditionality changes for those on UC are part of a long trajectory stretching over 20 years. Work search requirements for single parents were first introduced in 2001, when single parents on Income Support were required to attend compulsory work-focused interviews.¹ In 2008, Lone Parent Obligations were introduced, which gradually removed entitlement to Income Support for single parents. Initially single parents lost this entitlement when their youngest turned twelve. By 2017, this had been gradually reduced to when a single parent's youngest child turned three.²

In October 2023, the number of hours single parents with children aged 3 to 12 were required to work increased to 30 hours a week. This was up from 16 hours for parents of 3 to 4-year-olds and 25 hours for parents of 5 to 12-year-olds.

When the change was announced many Single Parent Rights' members voiced their concern around the impact that this would have on them and their children.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

This research was designed in response to the concerns raised by single parents – in order to enable policy makers to better understand their current work situation, how the increased work requirements would impact them, and what barriers they face to increasing work requirements.

The ultimate objective is to use the research findings to lobby government and other campaign groups around the key needs of single parents, and ensure that the policy's implementation addresses the realities and specific needs of single parent families.

In this report we:

- Outline the work context for single parents and review the changes to work conditionality and childcare policies since 2008 (section 2)
- Explain the methodology used to conduct the research (section 3)
- Present the findings from our research covering over 600 single parents and our analysis of the DWP guidance and communications around the new policy (section 4)
- Identify what changes need to be made to ensure work conditionality works for single parent families (section 5)

HOW CAN YOU CLEAN A HOUSE, COOK, KEEP ON TOP OF LOOKING AFTER 3 CHILDREN AND WORKING 30 HOURS. I AM PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY EXHAUSTED WHEN I COME IN IN THE EVENINGS, THEN I HAVE TO DO DINNER, COOK, DO HOMEWORK, BED TIME ETC. IT'S ALL TOO MUCH. I DID NOT CHOOSE TO BE A SINGLE PARENT WHEN MY YOUNGEST TURNED 1. I DID NOT WANT TO BE A WORKHORSE, EXHAUSTED TO EVEN DO ANYTHING WHEN I GET HOME. THIS GOVERNMENT ARE MAKING SINGLE PARENTS WORK SO HARD AND DRAINING THEM.

Single parent survey respondent





THE CONTEXT: SINGLE PARENTS, BENEFIT CONDITIONALITY AND WORK BARRIERS

SINGLE PARENTS AND WORK

Research into single parent employment has repeatedly found that most single parents are in work, and the majority want to work when the conditions are right for them and their children.

Almost 70% of single parents are currently in work, around 50% of whom work full time. Despite the high numbers of single parents in work, in 2020/21, 39% of single parent families were in poverty – almost double the rate of coupled families.³

Work is often cited as having a positive impact on mental health and being a route out of poverty. However, research shows that paid work only supports single parents' mental health when it is balanced with their childcare responsibilities.⁴ Furthermore, the link between work and poverty reduction has become weaker in recent years as the percent of children living in poverty from homes with at least one adult in work has increased.⁵ 174,000 single parents of children in poverty are already working full-time.⁶

BENEFIT CONDITIONALITY AND WORK REQUIREMENTS

Work Search Requirements and Earnings Thresholds

UC claimants are placed into one of three work search regimes. The regimes refer to the level of work search that a claimant is required to undertake and impacts how much contact and support claimants are given from their work coach:

- Individuals not meeting their Administrative Earnings Threshold (AET) are placed in the intensive work search regime.
- If an individual is earning their AET but not meeting their Conditionality Earnings Threshold (CET) they are placed in the light touch regime.
- Once an individual is meeting their CET, or if they are not required to work, they are placed in the no work search requirements.

TERMINOLOGY BUSTER: ADMINISTRATIVE EARNINGS THRESHOLD AND CONDITIONALITY EARNINGS THRESHOLD

The Administrative Earnings Threshold (AET) is the minimum that an individual must earn to move out of the 'Intensive Work Search' group, and the 30 hours or Conditional Earnings Threshold (CET) is the amount an individual must earn to be moved out of the 'Light Touch' group and into the 'No Work Search Requirements' group.

The thresholds are based on the number of hours the claimant is expected to work multiplied by the National Living Wage/ National Minimum Wage depending on the claimants' age.

While both the CET and AET thresholds are based on gross taxable pay, only employed earnings can contribute to meeting the AET (self-employed earnings are discounted).

Increased Work Requirements

Prior to 2008, single parents were not required to work until their youngest child turned 16, though many did – for example, in 2003, 51% of single mothers were in work.⁷ In 2008, the then Labour government expanded work requirements to lead carers of 12-year-olds. Lead carers refers to both single parents and the main carer in a couple eligible for means tested benefits. However, the main impact of increased work conditionality has fallen on single parents who are more likely to be in receipt of benefits.

In 2013, as part of the Conservative Government’s policy reform plan, UC was introduced, with the stated aim of making the benefit system fairer, and reduce poverty rates, worklessness, welfare dependency and levels of fraud and error.⁸ By October 2023, 6.2 million people were claiming UC, 58% of whom were women and around half of claiming households had children in them.⁹

In 2017, work requirements were further expanded, this time to lead carers of 3-year-olds. Carers in this group were now expected to work 16 hours a week. In the government’s impact assessment for this policy change, they identified that 75% of those affected were single parents.¹⁰ Two easements were also introduced. The expected maximum commute time was reduced to 60 minutes each way (rather than the standard 90 minutes for other UC claimants) and claimants were allowed to pause work requirements for up to a year to undertake training that would improve their employment prospects.¹¹ This second easement was based on the belief that parents in this group were more likely to be further from the job market and need to upskill.

In October 2023, work requirements for lead carers of 3–12-year-olds were increased to 30 hours per week (up from 16 hours for carers of 3–4-year-olds, and 25 hours for carers of 5–12-year-olds).¹² This is known as the Conditionality Earnings Threshold (CET). This policy change disproportionately impacts single parents, both (i) because they are more likely to be in receipt of UC and face conditionality rules, and (ii) because they face greater barriers to work (as explained below).

Table 2: Work Requirements for Lead Carers

Year change introduced	Age of youngest child	Work requirements for single parents
Pre 2008	16+	Required to work ¹³ as standard job seekers
November 2008	12+	Required to work ¹⁴ for at least 16 hours per week ¹⁵
October 2009	10+	Required to work ¹⁶ for at least 16 hours per week ¹⁷
October 2010	7+	Required to work ¹⁸ for at least 16 hours per week ¹⁹
May 2012	5+	Required to work ²⁰ for at least 16 hours per week ²¹
2016	5+	Required to work 25 hours per week ²²
2017	13+	Required to work 35 hours per week
2017	3+	Required to work 16 hours per week ²³
October 2023	3+	Required to work 30 hours per week ²⁴

The Administrative Earnings Threshold

In addition to the raising of the CET, the Administrative Earnings Threshold (AET) has gone through several recent changes. In September 2022, it increased from 9 to 12 hours. In January 2023, it rose again to 15 hours. Claimants are thus expected to earn the equivalent of the National Minimum Wage x 15 hours, making the current AET £617. Plans are in place for it to rise to 18 hours although the roll out has been delayed.

The table below explaining changes over time in the single parent and coupled parents' AET highlights the difference in the earnings each are required to reach. For a single parent the AET is currently 15 hours, or £617, whilst a couple has a joint AET of 24 hours, or £988.

Table 3: Administrative Earnings Threshold (AET) Levels 2020 to 2023

Year introduced	Single parent AET	Couple AET
2020	8.62 hours	13.77 hours
26th September 2022	12 hours	19 hours
30th January 2023	15 hours	24 hours
2024 (yet to be implemented)	18 hours	29 hours

Currently, the system also provides greater flexibility to couples in how the AET is reached as it is calculated on both partners' incomes combined. The theory behind this is that it accounts for the lower standard allowance individuals in a couple are entitled to - £289.41 per adult, as opposed to £368.74 for a single adult claimant. This means that an individual in a couple earning below their individual AET can still be moved into the Light Touch regime if their partner is meeting their combined AET. There are plans to end the couples AET and require each partner to meet their individual AET.²⁵ However, to date, there are no public plans to end the couples CET which in effect gives couples more flexibility. This means the CET has a greater impact on single parents, as they cannot be flexible with a partner in how they split working hours to meet their joint UC work requirements.

UC Conditionality for the Self-Employed

Self-employed lead carers are governed by the Minimum Income Floor (MIF). Prior to the introduction of the 30 hours CET, the MIF was £722 for lead carers of 3-year-olds and £1090 for lead carers of 5-12-year-olds. In the 2023 Autumn Statement, it was announced that the MIF would increase to £1250 per month for lead carers of 3-year-olds from April 2024.²⁶ This was later retracted and the start date for the higher MIF was brought forward to January 2024, giving impacted claimants very little time to adjust to the changes.²⁷

TERMINOLOGY BUSTER: THE MINIMUM INCOME FLOOR

The Minimum Income Floor (MIF) is the earnings threshold for an individual who is 'gainfully self-employed'. UC entitlement for someone who is self-employed is then calculated based on their earnings being at the MIF level or their actual earnings – whichever is higher. This means that if a claimant's self-employed earnings dip below the MIF one month, their benefit payments are not increased accordingly in the way they would be if they were in employment.

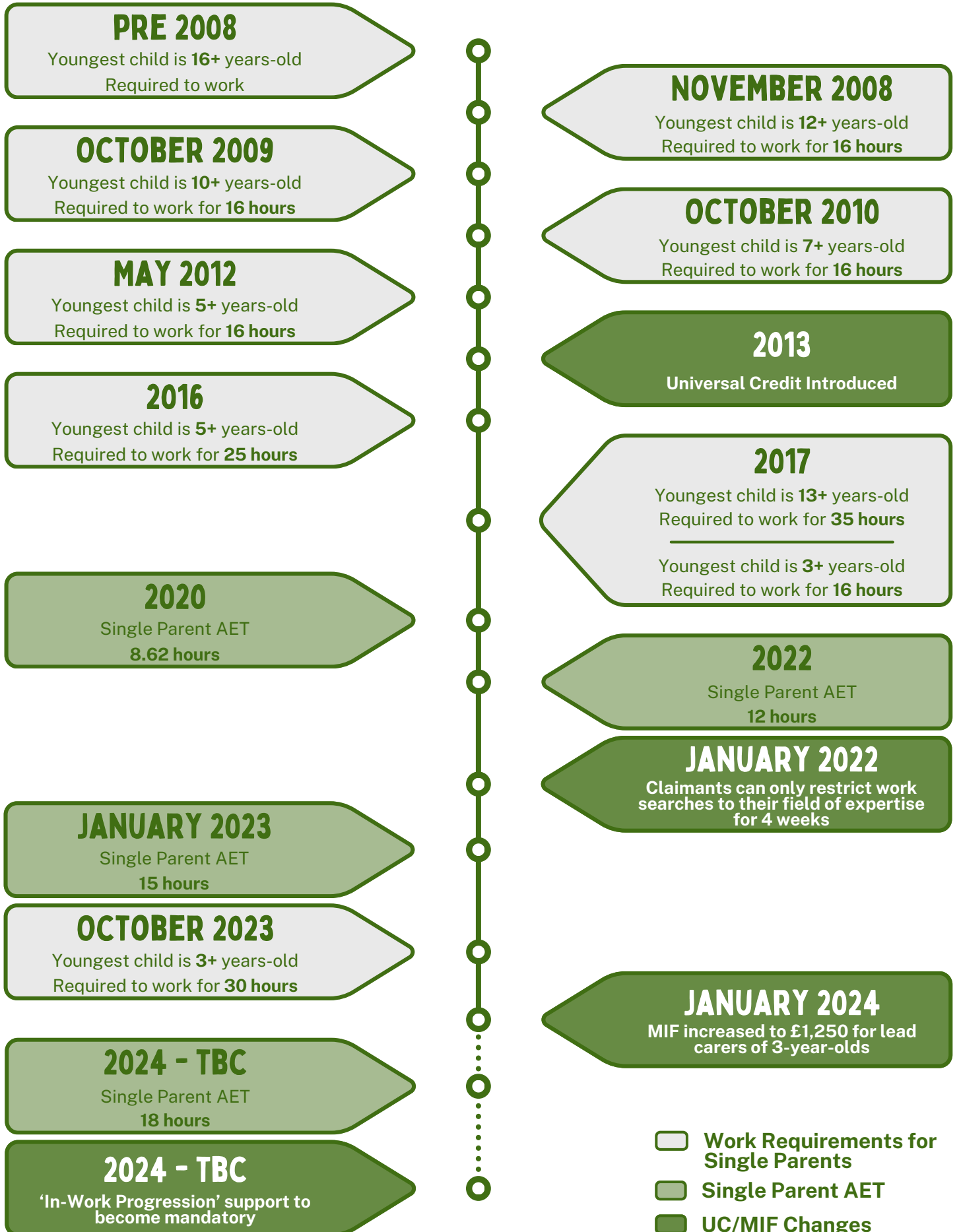
Work Search Requirements

Since early 2022, the government have systematically tightened work search requirements.²⁸ In January 2022, the 'Way to Work' campaign was introduced. This meant claimants could only restrict their work searches to their field of expertise for 4 weeks (down from 12), after which they are required to broaden their work search activity to suitable jobs in any sector.²⁹

Changes have also been made to work coach meeting requirements. In July 2023, increased work coach meetings were announced for lead carers. Parents of one-year-olds are now required to meet a work coach every three months – up from every six months and parents of two-year-olds must meet with their job coach monthly - up from every 3 months.³⁰ This can be especially challenging for single parents who lack childcare for the meetings.

An infographic on the next page breaks down the changes in work search requirements over the years.

UNIVERSAL CREDIT CONDITIONALITY CHANGES



Who Will be Impacted by the New Benefit Conditionality Rules?

Data from the DWP shows that 700,000 individuals will be impacted by the most recent changes to UC conditionality. This figure reflects both the increase to work requirements and the increase in work coach meeting requirements. 90% of these lead carers are women and 33% have a declared health condition. As highlighted above, most of this group are single parents. The 700,000 individuals will be impacted as follows:

- 98,000 lead carers of 1-year-olds will have to meet a work coach every 3 months
- 84,000 lead carers of 2-year-olds will have to meet a work coach every month
- 140,000 lead carers of 3- and 4-year-olds will have to work 30 hours (up from 16 hours)
- 385,000 lead carers of 5- to 12-year-olds will have to work 30 hours (up from 25 hours)

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING WORK

The existing literature highlights the barriers that single parents face when accessing work and trying to increase their working hours. In addition to the pressures of single parenting, three key external barriers are often highlighted: a lack of flexible work which fits around single parenting responsibilities; unavailability and unaffordability of childcare; and single parent employment discrimination. Research conducted by Total Jobs and the Fawcett Society highlighted that single mothers were disadvantaged in almost every area when compared with mothers in couples, from being able to afford childcare, to being able to pursue their career aspirations.³¹ Data also shows that single parents face greater rates of unfair sanctions.³²

Caring Responsibilities

It is indisputably harder to combine work and raising a child when you're on your own. Single parents face higher costs in raising children as they are unable to make savings by sharing household costs with a second adult.³³ Single parents also have higher childcare needs due to not being able to shift parent around nursery runs and school holidays, and there is only one annual leave entitlement available to take time off when their child is sick.

Availability of Flexible Work

Time wise data reveals that for almost 2 million people in the UK, the biggest barrier to higher wages is the lack of quality part-time or flexible jobs.³⁴ Research from the Fawcett Society showed that while 35% of coupled mothers reported that access to flexible work helped them to manage their work and caring responsibilities, only 25% of single mothers reported the same.³⁵ Their research also highlighted that whilst 16% of mothers in couples reported not experiencing challenges in finding employment that accommodated their childcare responsibilities, only 8% of single mothers said the same.³⁶ Inequality in working from home disproportionality impacts sectors and roles that single parents are more likely to work in.^{37 38}

The Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023, coming into force in April 2024 may help with increasing flexible work opportunities.³⁹ However, the Act does not remove the rights that employers hold to reject applications for flexible working, neither does it provide the right of appeal for employees whose requests are rejected.⁴⁰

Childcare

Childcare is a huge barrier to work for single parents who must cover the costs from only one income. The childcare system in the UK is in well-documented crisis - with a lack of availability, inequality in access, and high costs.

Only 50% of local authorities in England have sufficient childcare available for children under two, with provision below demand for older ages too. Disadvantaged areas have been hit hardest by the lack of places,⁴¹ with availability for disadvantaged 2-year-olds decreasing.⁴² The aforementioned study by the Fawcett Society showed that while 18% of coupled mothers reported a limited availability of childcare, 24% of single mothers reported this, highlighting that it's an issue which disproportionately impacts single parent families.⁴³

The current funded hours offer is only available 38 weeks a year, and doesn't start till the term after the child turns 3. Furthermore, it's not available in Northern Ireland. And even with the funded hours, nursery fees are high and rising. In London, a full-time childcare place for a 3–4-year-old costs over £8,000 per annum on average after the 30 funded hours price reduction.⁴⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, childcare costs have a greater impact on single parents' ability to work than couples. Research from the Fawcett Society highlighted that 33% of mothers in couples reported that significantly lower childcare costs would enable them to increase their hours at work, compared with 44% of single mothers.⁴⁵

During the 2023 Spring Budget, Chancellor Jeremy Hunt announced increased childcare support alongside the tighter conditionality for UC claimants,⁴⁶ as follows:

- A phased expansion of the current 30 funded childcare hours for 3-year-olds for working parents to infants from 9 months by September 2025.
- Support for the expansion of wraparound childcare for primary school aged children.
- An increase in the maximum childcare support available for parents on UC from £646 to £951 for one child and from £1,108 to £1,630 for those with two or more children.⁴⁷
- The introduction of support to cover up-front childcare costs for people moving into work.
- An increase in staff to child ratios in childcare settings for two-year-olds from 1:4 to 1:5.⁴⁸

While the additional funding for childcare is welcome there are serious concerns with the roll out. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found the new offer provides almost no benefit to households in the lowest 30% of the income distribution compared with 80% of families with incomes over £45,000.⁴⁹ A huge funding gap has also been identified. The Women's Budget Group has calculated that by 2025/26 an additional £5.2 billion would be needed to fund the full hours at cost.⁵⁰ Without funding for providers matching their costs, there is a risk that more providers will collapse. Research from the Department for Education shows that the number of childcare providers fell by 5% in 2022, while a further 10% were facing closure and 50% were struggling to cover their costs.⁵¹

Parents in education and training are also excluded from the childcare hours. This means that although lead carers are allowed to pause their work requirements to study, they are unable to access childcare to enable them to do this, making it harder for them to upskill and improve their earning potential.

Infographics on the next page outline the current and proposed future childcare offer.

CURRENT AND PLANNED CHILDCARE SUPPORT ⁵²



Single Parent Employment Discrimination

Previous research from Single Parent Rights identified that up to 80% of single parents experienced single parent discrimination in one or more areas of their life. This rate was higher for certain groups, including those on lower incomes, Black single parents and single parents of colour, and single parents living with disabilities. 60% of research participants reported that ending single parent employment discrimination would help enable them to find work showing just how widespread the issue is.⁵³ Areas of identified discrimination included bullying from colleagues, being excluded from professional development opportunities and being overlooked for promotions. This previous research also highlighted a lack of understanding from employers regarding their roles as single parents.

A 2023, Fawcett Society study reinforced these findings, highlighting that 15% of mothers in couples reported experienced discrimination in the recruitment process due to being a working parent, compared with 23% of single mothers.⁵⁴

THE ROLE OF EMPLOYERS

Although employers are a critical part of the puzzle when it comes to active labour market policies, they are often overlooked in research. A recent report from Katy Jones and Calum Carson of Manchester Metropolitan University sought to address this.⁵⁵ They found that employers whose staff members were receiving UC lacked an understanding of the UC conditionality rules. Employers were also concerned about the negative impact conditionality could have on staff well-being, performance, and commitment. They generally felt that creating a supportive environment for staff was more important for progression rather than benefit conditionality. A supportive environment was seen to include personalised support, and access to appropriate childcare, transport, and skill support/ training. The research also highlighted employer concerns with the broader policy approach, highlighting that the Work First approach pushes benefit claimants into work at the expense of supporting recruitment processes - and that this results in a high volume of inappropriate applications, which is costly for employers.

TERMINOLOGY BUSTER: ACTIVE LABOUR MARKET POLICIES

Active Labour Market policies are policies implemented by government which seek to help the un- and under-employed find work.





METHODOLOGY

The study employed a four-fold approach as follows:

Desk Based Research and Communications with the DWP

To better understand the reality facing single parents in receipt of UC we analysed primary data, published from government and relevant secondary research. We also sent key questions to the DWP, to better understand the implementation of the policy, and gained information from partner organisations who also had direct communications with DWP. This included a Freedom of Information request for the DWP guidance to work coaches on the new work requirements.

Survey

We designed a digital survey and tested it with a core group of single parents, before distributing the survey through Single Parent Rights' social media channels, our database and via partner organisations and key single parent influencers online. 638 single parent respondents completed the survey. When analysing the data, we undertook statistical significance testing where relevant. Percentages have been rounded up/ down as appropriate, occasionally this leads to over 100% for total responses.

Big Question - Changing Realities

We shared a 'Big Question' video with participants of the Changing Realities project. Changing Realities, run in partnership with Child Poverty Action Group UK, works with over 100 parents and carers across the UK and the University of York to document life on a low-income during the cost-of-living crisis and push for change.⁵⁶ Twelve responses were received from single parents via video/ messaging. These were then transcribed and thematically analysed.

Lived Experience Stories

We developed lived experience stories based on six individuals, four of whom had completed the survey, and two of whom were known to us via our broader campaign work. These stories aim to bring to life the issues single parents face which are raised in the report.

All names have been changed to protect anonymity.





RESEARCH FINDINGS

INFORMATION FROM DWP COMMUNICATIONS

As part of the research, we submitted Freedom of Information requests for the guidance given to work coaches on the recent changes, and for the high-level equality assessment which was conducted into the policy change.⁵⁷ We also had direct communications with the DWP to better understand how the new rules would be implemented and who would be impacted.

Three key points were evident from these communications:

- Policymakers lack understanding of the families impacted by this change.
- Flexibility has been embedded within the 30 hours ruling.
- Easements exist but are not guaranteed.

Lack of Understanding of Those Impacted

The high level impact assessment of this policy change did not provide a breakdown of the single parent status of those impacted. The only reference to the relationship status of impacted lead carers was a line stating, “lead carers might be more likely to be married”.⁵⁸

Previous related policy changes – including the expansion of work requirements to lead carers of 3 year olds in 2017, and the raising of the AET from 15 hours to 18 hours - were both identified by the DWP as disproportionately impacting single parents.⁵⁹ Furthermore, evidence obtained via a freedom of information request from Save the Children in 2021 revealed that 1 million single parents were claiming UC, almost 90% of them women.

It seems likely that single parents will therefore also be disproportionately impacted by this latest conditionality change. Furthermore, single parents will face disproportionate impact from this policy as they face greater barriers to accessing work than parents in couples, as detailed in the Barriers to Accessing Work section above.

Without understanding who is impacted by this change, it is impossible for policymakers to address their specific needs.

Flexibility with the CET Policy

The announcement from the DWP when this policy was introduced stated that there would be flexibility with the implementation; “Commitments will be tailored to parents’ personal circumstances.”⁶⁰ However, there is some contradiction within the DWP’s own guidance as the ‘Intensive Work Search Regime Guidance’ document states, “For claimants who are able to work, and who are placed in the Intensive Work Search regime, the aim is to encourage them to undertake as much work (and earn as much) as they reasonably can do as quickly as possible,” and then later states, “These maximum hours can be adjusted to take into account any health condition, caring responsibilities or other circumstances that the claimant may have.”⁶¹

Furthermore, even prior to this change, DWP research from 2017 found that many parents felt that work requirements were too onerous and lacked flexibility.⁶² IPPR research from 2022 also found that claimants didn't find their commitments were personalised or manageable, and they were unaware of the flexibility on offer.⁶³

Easements within the System

DWP communications highlighted some easements and clarification around policy implementation, as follows:

- Commute time can be counted towards the total amount of work/ work search hours.
- Commute times can be reduced from the standard 90 minutes each way depending on the number of hours that an individual claimant is expected to work.
- Lead carers responsibilities takes precedence over the CET/ AET requirements so work requirements can be negotiated downwards.
- Parents of 2- to 4-year-olds will continue to have the right for work related requirements to be switched off for up to a year to undertake training where the work coach believes this is beneficial for their career.

These easements are welcome. However, unlike the legacy benefits where the easements were detailed in legislation (in regulations), these easements are not listed for parents, and the guidance documents for work coaches that explains them are not freely available to the claimants. Furthermore, the DWP's own research shows that staff do not inform claimants about the flexibilities surrounding work requirements for lead carers.⁶⁴

PRIMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Overview of the Survey Sample

The primary research data is comprised of survey responses from 638 single parents alongside the six lived experience stories which provide more detailed examples of the single parent reality. Tables 4 below and the graphs on the following pages provide an overview of the survey sample.

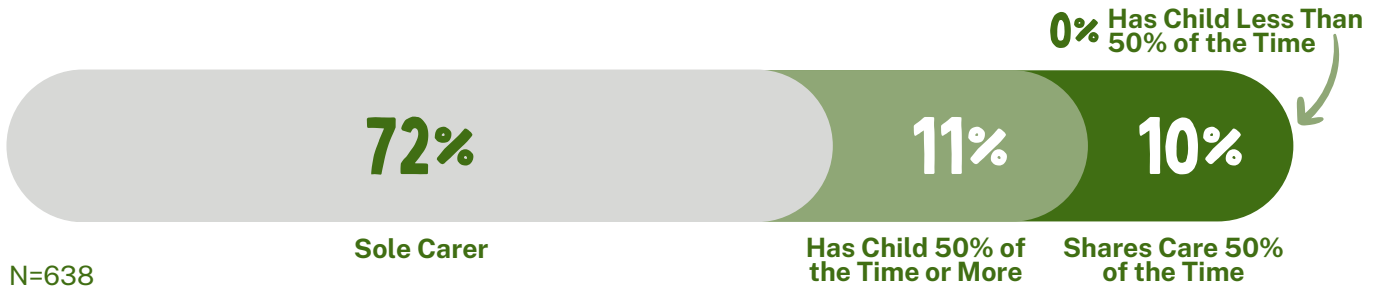
A further twelve single parent Changing Realities participants were consulted on their views on the new work conditionality rule via the Big Question, but their demographic details were not captured.

Table 4: Survey Respondents: Characteristics and Background

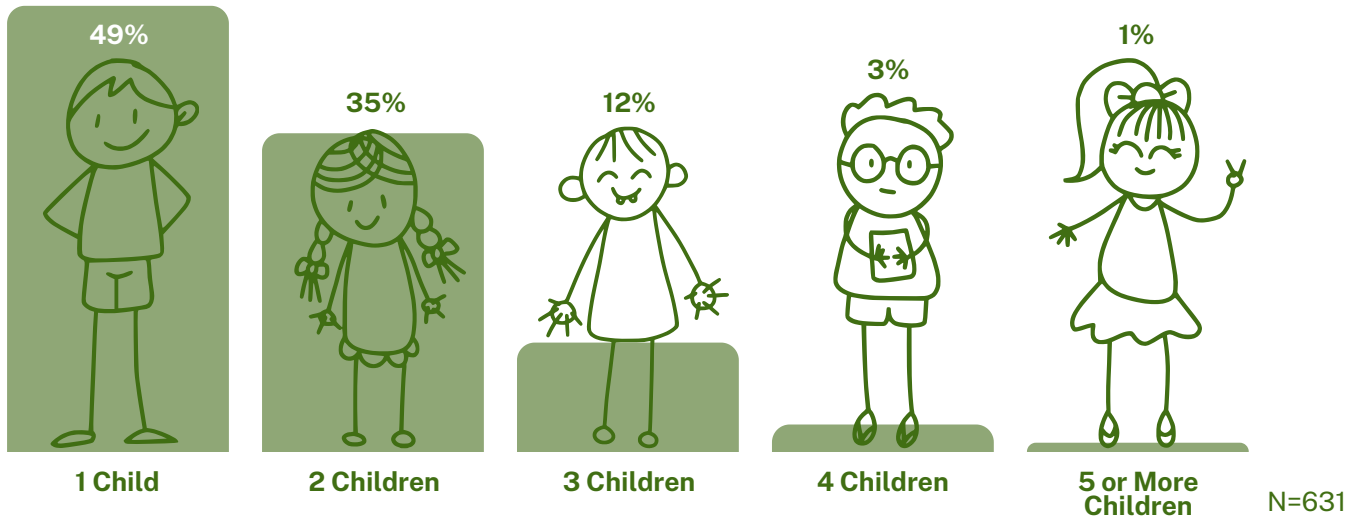
Category	Answer	% of Respondents	National Average of Single Parents
Country of Residence	England	86%	84%
	Scotland	7%	8.2%
	Wales	4%	4.6%
	Northern Ireland	3%	2.8% ⁶⁵
Number of Respondents			638
Living with a disability	Yes	29%	27%
	No	67%	73%
	Rather Not Say	4%	N/A
Number of Respondents			518
Gender	Female	98%	85% ⁶⁶
	Male	1%	15%
	Non-Binary/Third Gender	0%	Data not Available
	Rather Not Say	1%	N/A
Number of Respondents			518
Ethnicity	White	88%	84% ⁶⁷
	Black	2%	8%
	Mixed/Arab/Other	6%	3%
	Asian	4%	4%
Number of Respondents			518
Sexuality	Straight/Heterosexual	86%	84% ⁶⁸
	Rather Not Say	6%	8%
	Bisexual	5%	3%
	Gay/Lesbian	2%	4%
	Other Sexual Orientation	1%	Data not Available
Number of Respondents			517
Educational Background (Highest Level Achieved)	GCSE or Equivalent	14%	32% ⁶⁹
	A-level or Equivalent	19%	16%
	Higher Education	13%	18%
	Degree Level	31%	18%
	Post-Graduate Level	20%	7%
	No Formal Qualifications	3%	9%
Number of Respondents			515

The country of residence data refers to the percentage of the UK population that resides in that nation.

Graph 1: Survey Respondents: Caring Responsibilities



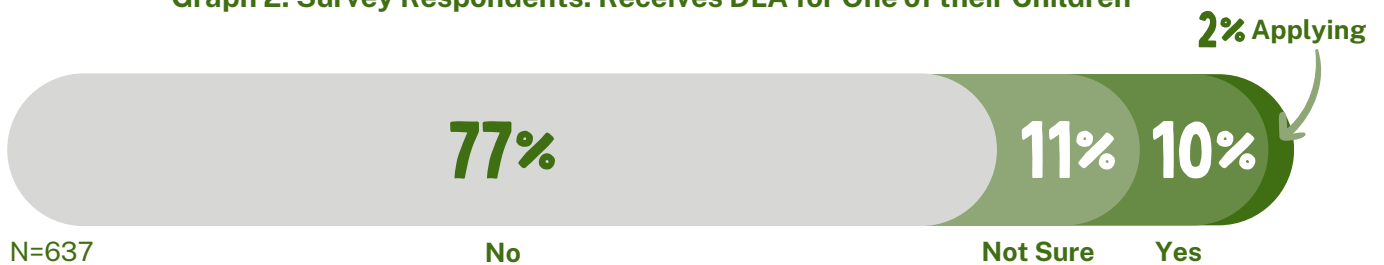
Infograph 3: Survey Respondents: Number of Children



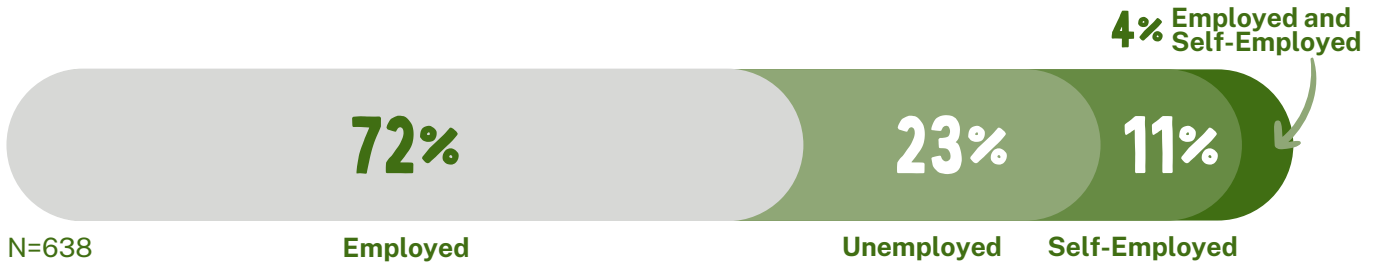
Infograph 4: Survey Respondents: Age of Youngest Child



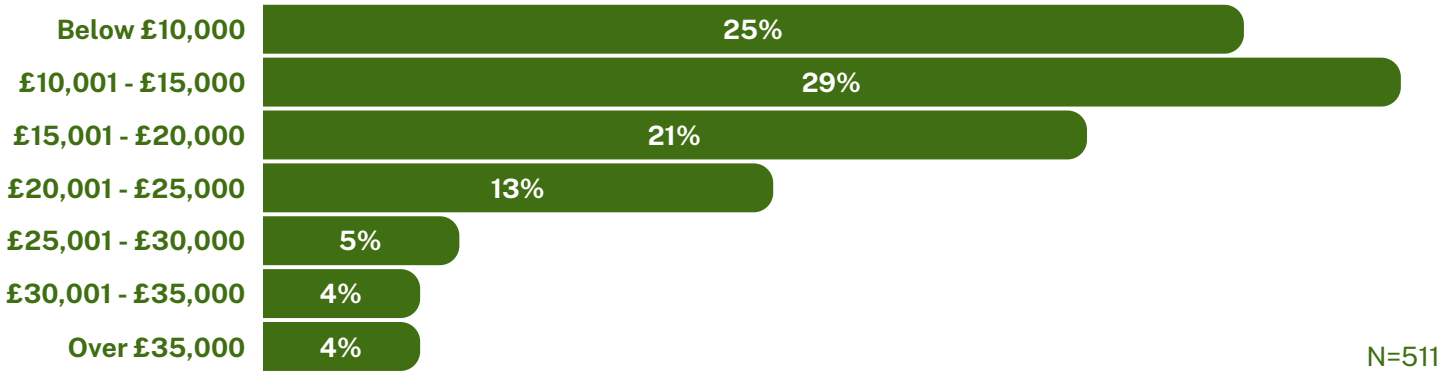
Graph 2: Survey Respondents: Receives DLA for One of their Children



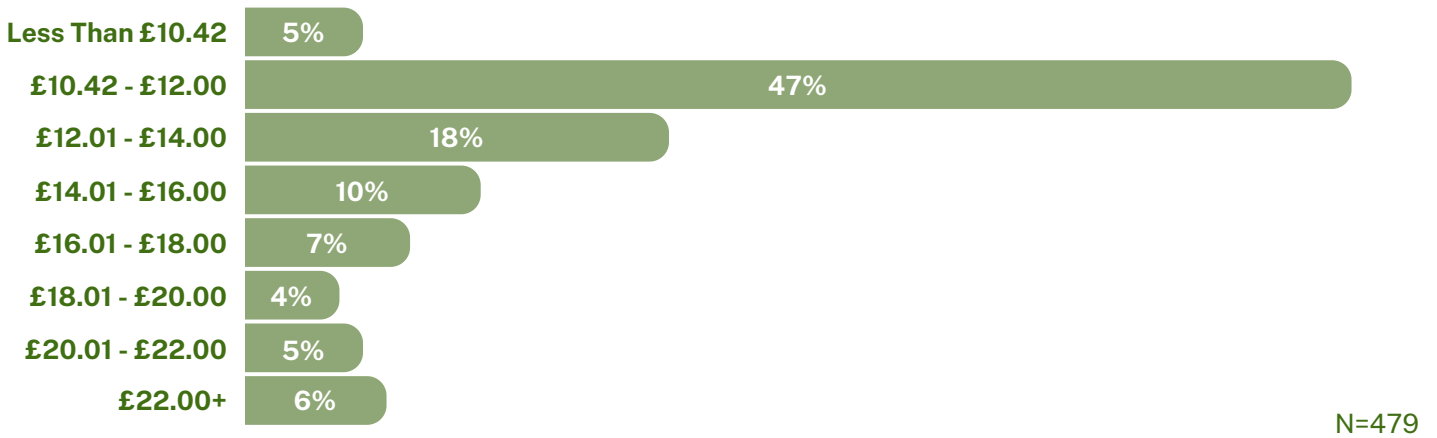
Graph 3: Survey Respondents: Employment Status



Graph 4: Survey Respondents: Household Income



Graph 5: Survey Respondents: Hourly Earnings



It is worth noting that while there is no data on how many single parents in the UK are sole carers/ majority carers, this survey only allowed responses from those in receipt of Universal Credit. No responses were received from anyone who was caring for their child less than 50% of the time. While this is not conclusive, it could suggest that work conditionality changes disproportionately impact those who have majority care.

Current Work Situation

77% of survey respondents were in employment, while 23% were unemployed. Of those who were employed, over half worked between 16 to 24 hours a week.

Graph 6: Number of Hours per Week Respondents Currently Work



Less than 50% of survey respondents reported that they were not meeting their current work requirements, 35% were meeting them, and 18% were exceeding them. It should be noted that this question was based on hours worked, not earnings. Had respondents been asked if they met their CET, it is likely that a higher percentage would have met and/ or exceeded their work requirements, given that 36% of those who worked less than their requirements, also earned over £12 an hour.

Graph 7: Current Hours Worked vs UC Work Requirements



When asked whether the current work requirements were manageable alongside single parenting responsibilities (prior to the 30-hour rule being introduced), 59% said no, 32% said yes and 10% were unsure. As one survey respondent explained,

I AM ABSOLUTELY EXHAUSTED ALREADY AND I AM STRUGGLING TO JUGGLE EVERYTHING. I AM ALREADY TOO BURNT OUT TO GIVE MY CHILDREN THE SUPPORT THEY SHOULD BE GETTING WITH HOMEWORK, READING, COOKING HEALTHY MEALS ETC AND SIMPLY SPENDING QUALITY TIME WITH THEM. I'M NOT KEEPING ON TOP OF HOUSEWORK AS I'M ALREADY WORKING MOST OF THEIR SCHOOL HOURS AND IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO DO WHEN THEY ARE AT HOME. THE WHOLE SYSTEM COMPLETELY UNDERVALUES THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING THERE FOR YOUR CHILDREN. I AM THE ONLY CARER FOR MY CHILDREN. I DON'T GET A BREAK, EVER. INCREASING MY HOURS FURTHER WILL DESTROY ME!

Single parent survey respondent

Graph 8: Are your Current Work Requirements Manageable?



Some groups faced greater challenges in meeting current work requirements than others. Specifically, those on a low-income, racialised minority groups and sole carers.

- 3% of those with an income below £10,000 reported that their current hours were unmanageable, compared with only 34% of those with an income over £25,000. This was significant to the 0.001% level.
- 69% of non-white respondents⁷⁰ stated that their work hours were not manageable compared with 54% of white respondents. This difference was significant to 0.1%.
- 63% of sole carers felt their current work requirements were unmanageable, compared with 48% of those who shared care. This was significant to 0.2%.

Current Work Patterns

25% of respondents stated that they worked during term-time only while 21% stated that their working hours fluctuated weekly. Patterns of working flexibly such as term-time working are a valuable way for single parents to balance working and caring and to save the high costs of childcare.

Some research respondents who were working term time only raised concerns that they would be unable to earn enough to meet the new CET, compounded by the fact that government funded childcare hours are term time only. As one survey respondent stated,

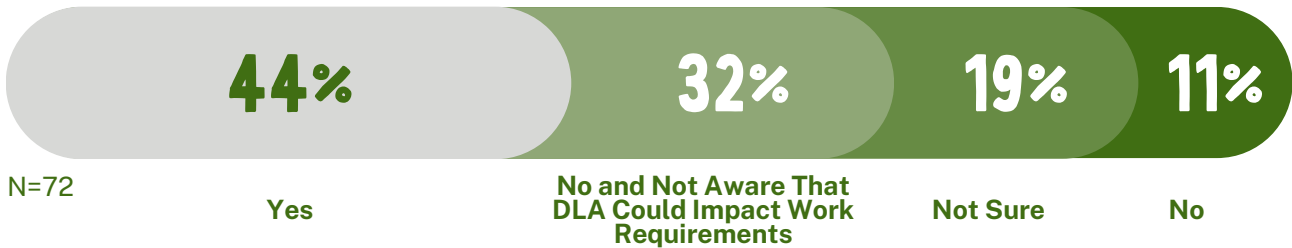
I WILL NEVER EARN ENOUGH WORKING PRO RATA AS TERM TIME ONLY. 30HRS PER WEEK IS MAXIMUM WORKING HOURS BUT THIS IS OVER 38 WEEKS A YEAR AND MY WAGE IS SPREAD OVER 12 MONTHS. SO IT'LL NEVER WORK OUT TO BE 30 HOURS A WEEK.

Single parent survey respondent

Lead Carers with Children Receiving Disability Living Allowance (DLA)

The number of respondents receiving DLA for their children was relatively small (N=72). However, only 44% of this group stated that this reduced or removed their work requirements. 11% of respondents stated that their work requirements hadn't changed due to receiving DLA, 19% weren't sure if they had changed and 25% stated that they had not changed and they were not aware that DLA could impact work requirements. These figures suggest claimants are not always aware of the link between DLA and work requirements.

Graph 9: Have your Work Requirements been Reduced/Removed due to Receiving DLA?



TERMINOLOGY BUSTER: DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE

Disability Living Allowance (DLA) is a non-means tested benefit paid by the DWP to a parent/ carer of a child with a disability. The level of DLA payment is based on the care needs of the child concerned. If the adult receiving the DLA is also in receipt of UC, they are required to inform UC via their online account, and in turn they can receive an additional payment via UC payments and their work requirements are reduced/ removed.

Increasing Work Hours

At the time of completing the survey, only 21% of respondents had been asked to increase their working hours while 28% were unsure if they had been asked. This highlights the lack of understanding of work requirements from a substantial minority of claimants.

Almost all respondents (81%) reported being unable to increase their hours as requested, while a further 13% reported being unsure whether they could increase their work hours as requested, suggesting that increasing work hours is not always a simple decision for single parents trying to balance work and caring responsibilities.

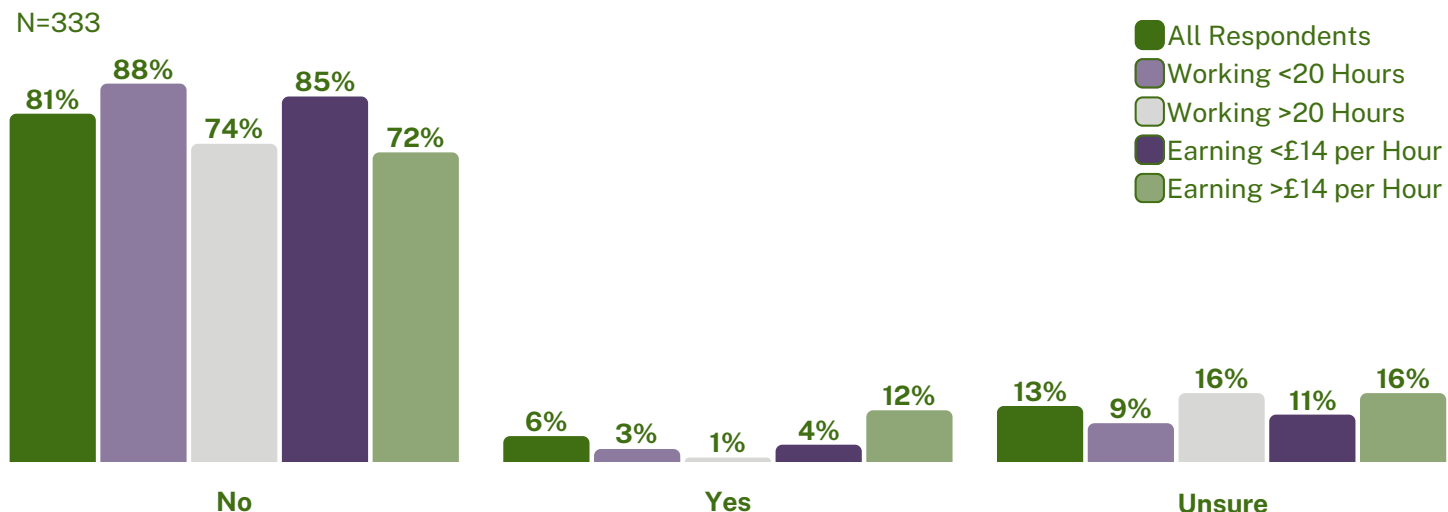
Graph 10: Are you able to Increase your Working Hours as Requested?



Two groups of respondents were even less likely to report being able to increase their work hours as requested. 88% of those currently working less than 20 hours a week reported they couldn't increase their hours compared with 74% of respondents who worked more than 20 hours a week. This difference was significant at the 1% level, suggesting the greater the expected increase in working hours, the harder this is for single parents.

Those earning a lower hourly wage (below £14 per hour) were also more likely to state they could not work longer hours. This was significant at the 5% level, suggesting higher hourly earnings increases a single parents' ability to work longer hours, although it should be noted that the vast majority of all respondents report the new 30-hour work requirement as unmanageable.

Graph 11: Are you able to Increase your Working Hours as Requested?



As one survey respondent explained, single parenting plus employment is already hard work: *“As a single parent, I have already what is like a full-time job at home. I do literally everything solely on my own....I wouldn't be able to be a healthy parent with the extra pressure and responsibilities, and my child would equally be suffering as a result by not having an emotionally and mentally present parent. I would literally have nothing left to give myself or my child. Financially, I would be worse off.”* Another respondent stated,

“THEY ARE EXPECTING SINGLE PARENTS TO BE ABLE TO WORK FULL TIME AND RUN A HOME ALONE. THESE JOBS ARE INTENDED TO BE SPLIT BETWEEN 2 PEOPLE.”

Single parent survey respondent

Commuting Times

50% of respondents currently had a commute of less than 30 minutes, while 32% had a commute of 31 to 60 minutes, 13% had no commute due to working from home, 4% had a commute of 61-90 minutes and 2% had a commute of over 91 minutes each way.

Only 3% of respondents stated they would be able to commute 90 minutes each way. The overwhelming majority of respondents who reported being unable to increase their commute stated it was due to not having access to, or finance for, additional childcare, alongside not having enough time, especially when that time would be unpaid. Some survey respondents also raised concerns around being too far away from their child – especially young children – in case of an emergency. As one survey respondent stated, *“I care for my child alone with no family nearby. I can't be 90 minutes away in case something happens to her.”* The costs of a longer commute – both petrol costs and public transport fees – were also raised as a concern.

The challenges associated with an increased commute were found to be even greater in rural areas: For example, Changing Realities participant - Bessie - stated, *“I would need to travel into the city for work on an unreliable bus service. Each winter, storms bring flooding, power cuts and cancellations of public transport. Who would pay me if I can't get into work?”*

While the DWP communications and guidance reviewed for this research states that commute times can be reduced, and that they will contribute to the 30 hours work requirement, our research has found empirical examples of where this wasn't happening, highlighting the inconsistencies with how the policy is implemented.

One survey respondent explained,

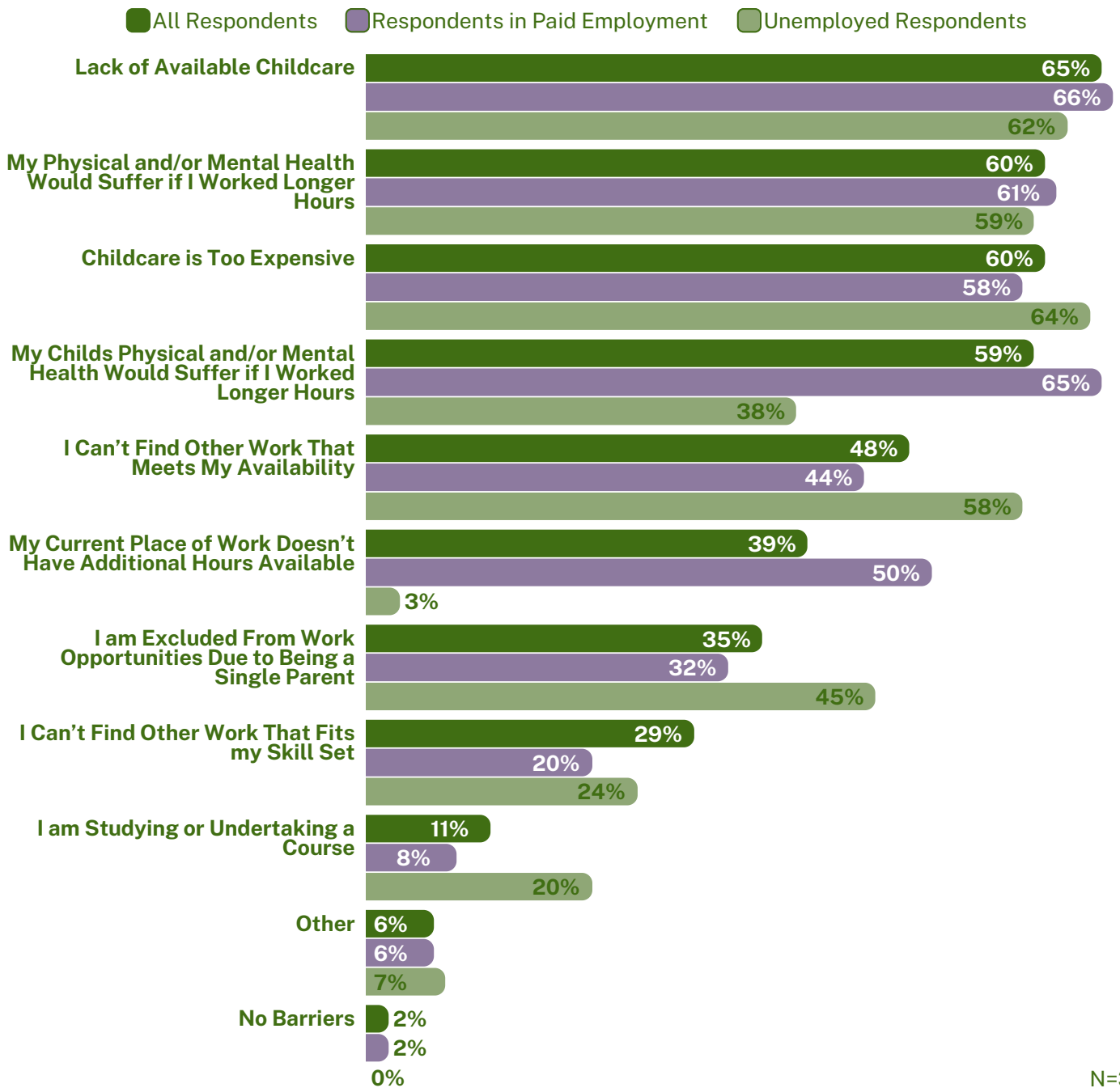
THE JOB CENTRE TOLD ME TO DO THIS [90 MINUTE COMMUTE] AND I LAUGHED. SO NOT ONLY 30 HOUR WEEK ALSO 90 MINUTES DRIVING! RIDICULOUS! WHEN AM I PARENTING?!

Single parent survey respondent

Barriers to Finding Paid Employment/Increasing Working Hours

Respondents were asked to identify barriers they face in accessing paid employment and increasing their hours (multiple barriers could be selected). The key barriers they identified were childcare, mental health impact on parents and children, lack of flexible work and single parent discrimination. Only 2% of respondents reported not facing any barriers.

Graph 12: Barriers to Accessing/Increasing Paid Employment



N=368

In the related open questions, respondents also highlighted single parenting-related issues as key barriers to work. This included managing single parenting responsibilities alongside paid employment and dealing with specific single parent experiences such as coping with the death of a partner, leaving an abusive relationship, and co-parenting.

Having a disability/ additional needs or caring for a child with additional needs was identified time and again as an added barrier to work. Many respondents were also disincentivised from working longer hours through a belief they would be financially worse off. These barriers are discussed in more detail below.

Childcare

Childcare was the most frequently selected barrier to work by all respondents; however, employed, and unemployed respondents differed in whether they reported availability or cost of childcare as a key barrier. 66% of employed and 62% of unemployed survey respondents highlighted childcare availability as a barrier to work. Conversely, 58% of employed and 64% of unemployed survey respondents highlighted childcare affordability as a barrier to work. As one survey respondent stated,

I HAVE ALREADY ENQUIRED WITH 15 NURSERIES AND ONLY ONE NURSERY HAS 15 HOURS AVAILABLE.

Single parent survey respondent

Childcare costs were seen as especially challenging during school holidays. One survey respondent explained, *“I work term time, however [I am] paid monthly so my wage is spread, I’d have to pay for 3 children to attend somewhere in school holidays, meaning upfront costs of at least 1500 before even claiming it back.”*

Some respondents highlighted issues with childcare payments through UC. One respondent stated, *“I am currently fighting DWP for under payment regarding childcare, as they are denying to pay back my childcare cost from half term holiday’s - however my employer is expecting me to attend work. This is really putting me off from increasing my hours.”* Another stated, *“My childcare costs claimed back from UC are always behind due to assessment period dates it’s a joke.”*

Childcare for parents working shift patterns or unsocial hours was also a key challenge. One respondent explained, *“I am a paediatric anaesthetic specialist nurse. The only paediatric hospital is an hour away from me...I have 4 children... Even if I had childcare for them, paying 15% of childcare for 4 kids would be unfeasible. Therefore I work weekends. Also my job starts at 7.30am and I need an hour to travel to work, but there are no creches open at 6am. I’m in a no win situation.”* Others highlighted challenges with finding Ofsted registered carers outside of weekdays.⁷¹ *“I had a job over the summer which meant I had to work on weekend. In order to claim the childcare back from UC I needed a registered childminder. There are 0 registered childminders that worked or were available on weekends.”*

The lived experience story from Cathy on the next page highlights how this barrier can play out in practice.

TERMINOLOGY BUSTER: UPFRONT CHILDCARE COSTS

Most childcare costs are payable in advance. Support with these upfront costs was first introduced in the 2023 Spring budget via the UC Flexible Support Fund (FSF). Individuals can apply for support with their upfront childcare costs via the FSF if they are starting a new role, or increasing their hours (e.g., moving from a part-time role to a full-time role). Final decision making lies with the claimant’s work coach.

Childcare costs during the school holidays are not covered. The FSF also explicitly excludes those returning from maternity leave from being supported with their costs.¹

LIVED EXPERIENCE: CHILDCARE CHALLENGES

Cathy, from Canterbury, is a single mum to three children aged 1, 10 and 14. She was in her third year of university when she had her youngest child. Since her youngest turned one Cathy has been trying to get back into paid employment.

Cathy is highly qualified with two degrees in healthcare and has worked in the sector for seven years. However, due to childcare challenges, Cathy is looking at alternative employment options, such as term time only jobs within the education sector.

Childcare has become a much bigger problem now for Cathy with her youngest as she doesn't have the support of a co-parent which she has with her older children.

Despite putting him down for her local village nursery when he was three months old she is yet to receive an offer for the two-year old funded place she has requested. She tried applying for two other nurseries too but the times she was offered didn't fit around her working day and she has ended up losing £170 in deposits for the places.

The challenges aren't just related to her youngest child. Cathy must consider the needs and childcare availability for her older two children as well. Given their different ages she is unable to have them in the same setting which means it takes time for her to drop them at their different childcare/ school settings, eating into the time she has available to work. Cathy is also worried about the children all being separated for the holidays at different settings.

"It makes me feel like I can't be a proper mum to them and that we are living separate lives just so I can work."

Cathy would love to stay in healthcare but feels she has no option anymore.

"My self-worth is low having studied and got student debt for nothing, and financially I'm stuck in a system where I am better off working part time as a single parent but also still struggling to find or afford holiday childcare and that's without considering sickness that myself or my children may have."

Cathy believes significant changes are needed to make the system work better.

"First and foremost childcare needs reform, if more affordable childcare was available for holidays and wrap around times then it would take so much pressure off. Additionally flexible working policies which support more working hours during term time and less in the holidays for single parents would make a world of difference."



Mental Health Impacts on Parents and Children

61% of employed and 59% of unemployed survey respondents highlighted the mental health impact on themselves from increasing their work hours/working as a barrier to work, while 65% of employed and 38% of unemployed survey respondents highlighted the mental health impact on their children as a barrier. One respondent explained,

IT'S REALLY DEPRESSING AND DEMOTIVATING BECAUSE I'M ALREADY DOING THE BEST I CAN WORKING SEVERAL PART TIME JOBS. I'M STILL IN TERRIBLE POVERTY AND MY MENTAL HEALTH IS SHOCKING ESPECIALLY IN WINTER. I'M SCARED BEING FORCED TO WORK MORE HOURS WILL BREAK ME.

Single parent survey respondent

The open-ended questions highlighted three ways in which mental health acts as a barrier. Firstly, the expectation to look for more work was impacting people's mental health. Secondly, single parents with poor mental health identified that it was impacting their ability to secure paid employment. Thirdly, where single parents worked longer hours, their mental health had taken a dip which made it harder to continue working.

One single parent described her situation, *"The mental stress of having to find more hours to work is big. That is on top of already struggling to maintain a house, work almost full-time hours already, commute to work, find childcare for school pickups when I am still at work and also find childcare during holiday term times."* Another stated, *"I feel isolated and lonely, and with time self-doubt is increasing."*

One single parent described how she had taken time off due to poor mental health. *"I have just been signed off with work related stress -that is working 19.5 hours per week. Working longer hours would leave me even more fatigued and stressed."* Another respondent explained her previous experience of working longer hours: *"When I first became a 50/50 co parent, I worked 40hrs a week full time and my mental health was at its worst in years, I was so overwhelmed and anxious all the time as I deal with vicarious trauma in work (in youth mental health)...After my contract ended I was renewed at 18.5 hrs and since then my mental health has been the best since having my daughter. I am a better parent and her tantrums and behaviour has subsided as I'm better at emotionally regulating her."*

Katie, a Changing Realities participant, said, *"I do get UC, but it's barely enough to cover my bills. My wages buy food, clothes, treats and everything from uniforms and dinner money for school. Mentally, I'm broken. I'm run down, stressed and feel like giving up. While I do like going to work, spending time with adults, I do struggle at times. I work 10-2 Monday to Friday, so all my time is with the children or at work. I don't feel like I get any down time, but when I burn out, I'm punished from work. It feels like a no-win situation."* Another Changing Realities participant, Beverley stated, *"You can't pour from an empty cup" they teach on parenting courses. Where or when is there likely to be opportunity to afford any downtime unless you count sleep?"*

Many respondents also reported that having poor mental health themselves impacted negatively on their children's mental health. As one respondent explained, *"There's no way I could cope with more hours. My kids already suffer due to me struggling with the balance. It wouldn't be fair on anyone if I was more stressed/ less available for them."*

Lack of Flexible Work

44% of employed and 58% of unemployed survey respondents highlighted a lack of flexible work as a barrier to increasing their hours/ finding paid employment. Additionally, 50% of employed survey respondents stated that their current employer didn't have additional hours available.

Securing additional hours of work with a current employer, or finding new work for the right number of hours, was repeatedly highlighted as a barrier. One survey respondent stated, *"I have not been able to take any hours in my zero hours job that work around my children since becoming a single parent."* Another explained quite simply, *"My job can't magically find me an extra 12 hours a week."* Some respondents stated that living in rural areas made this challenge even greater.

Many survey respondents also referred to employers only having set contracted hours available, *"My current employer only has 18.5 or 37 hour contracts, so when my commitments increase I will be forced to either find another job to stay part time or go full time. I cannot afford to go full time due to childcare costs, and our current nursery also does not have capacity."*

Single Parent Discrimination

35% of respondents reported being excluded from work opportunities for being a single parent. There was a significant difference in responses from those in employment (32%) and those unemployed (45%) and the difference was significant at the 1% level showing that for the unemployed, single parent discrimination is a greater barrier.

One survey respondent explained how she had been discriminated against as a single parent.

IN INTERVIEWS WHERE I HAVE MENTIONED THAT I'M THE SOLE CARER FOR MY SON IT HAS NEGATIVELY IMPACTED ME.

Single parent survey respondent

Another explained how discrimination during her pregnancy cost her her career, *“When I was pregnant with my second child I was made redundant, as they couldn’t offer me part time hours at all and I couldn’t afford childcare for full time at that point due to the lack of hours available so I’ve now lost my career.”*

Single Parenting Responsibilities and Experiences

Research respondents repeatedly referred to single parenting as a barrier to work. One survey respondent put it succinctly,

THERE ARE SIMPLY NOT ENOUGH HOURS IN THE DAY.

Single parent survey respondent

Another explained, *“Some days I am completely mentally exhausted - I would honestly struggle to work any more hours than I do. The list is never ending with having a home to run & a child to raise.”*

Respondents repeatedly highlighted the lack of a break as a significant barrier to increasing their work hours. Single parents often have sole responsibility, and many lack a support network due to isolation and social exclusion. 72% of survey respondents were sole carers and all respondents had 50% or more care for their child. It is reasonable to assume that sole carers face additional barriers to work, thus increasing their likelihood to be in receipt of UC. As one survey respondent stated,

SINGLE PARENTS CANNOT WORK 25 TO 30 HOURS A WEEK AND NOT HAVE A BREAK.... MY CHILDREN DO NOT SEE THEIR DAD...[I] NEVER GET A BREAK.

Single parent survey respondent

Another emphasised that the government need to *“See the difference between “lead” carer and “sole” carer.”*

Working longer hours was seen as creating greater challenges in work, which could damage relations with an employer, such as parents having to attend appointments for themselves or their child(ren) during the working day. The same concern was raised with having to take time off when a child was sick. As one respondent explained, *“I’m not working at the moment because I’m unwellif [I] went and got work when [I was] better I would be in and out of work and I would probably be getting the sack because if I need to be off work if my child is sick or going for appointments that...also might cause UC to sanction me because of me being sacked or in and out of work.”* Another explained, *“If the children are ill ...I need to take time off work. I’ve deliberately worked less hours so I don’t have to take time off work & can juggle things in a balanced way.”*

For many respondents, the journey into single parenthood involved trauma that plays out over many years, creating further barriers to work. This included the death of a partner/ the child’s other parent, navigating a challenging divorce, and leaving abusive relationships. These situations also create additional parenting challenges for the parent concerned as they must support their children to navigate and process the different circumstances.

One widow explained,

MY CHILDREN'S FATHER DIED. THEY STRUGGLE LEAVING ME FOR SCHOOL OUT OF FEAR I WON'T SEE THEM AGAIN. THE LITTLE TIME WE DO HAVE TOGETHER IS VERY IMPORTANT TO US.

Single parent survey respondent

Another respondent highlighted the challenges of having her children's father in prison: "[he] has left us all dealing with trauma. My youngest gets panic attacks when I leave him too long and my daughter [is] self-harming. Mentally I'm overwhelmed and struggle to cope often."

The impact of abusive relationships was a recurrent theme in the survey responses, from the challenges of having to start over in a new area, to the impact of supporting children with the long-lasting trauma. One respondent explained,

I HAVE TRAUMA FROM THE ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP AND ALREADY STRUGGLE. I CURRENTLY WORK 15 HOURS TERM TIME ONLY. MY FEAR IS THAT IF I HAVE TO WORK 30 HOURS, MY MENTAL HEALTH WILL DECLINE.

Single parent survey respondent

Another respondent highlighted the impact of supporting children who have experienced abuse alongside single parenting. "I am sole responsible carer for our children, who are damaged from domestic abuse. My daughter made 2 suicide attempts last year...I need to be available to help her with her stress ... Due to being a single parent & being a survivor (but not free of) domestic abuse my skills have become out dated. ...All of my children ...have been subject to domestic abuse & witnessed it & need the love, care and availability of a parent."

Another felt the support for survivors of abuse was lacking: "They claim to support victims of domestic abuse, but where is [their] understanding, let alone support for navigating the turmoil following leaving an abusive relationship at the same time as trying to find your feet financially, and running a house, and solo/co parenting, and dealing with your own emotional trauma. It's a devastating life change and if they say they offer support they need to actually do that." For some respondents, the needs of their children don't disappear once they get older. "My 16 year old son has had a really difficult few years, including a lot of police and social worker involvement and I wouldn't feel comfortable leaving him alone at evenings or weekends."

Co-parenting respondents highlighted challenges created by sharing care and concerns that they wouldn't be able to spend sufficient time with their child if they increased their work hours significantly. One survey respondent stated,

IT'S HARD TO SEND THE CHILDREN TO CHILDCARE WHEN I ONLY HAVE THEM HALF THE WEEK, I FEEL LIKE I'M MISSING SO MUCH OF THEIR CHILDHOOD.

Single parent survey respondent

The lived experience story from Sally on the next page highlights how hard it can be to start over again after surviving domestic abuse.

LIVED EXPERIENCE: STARTING AGAIN AFTER DOMESTIC ABUSE

Sally, a single mother to her nine-year-old daughter, recently left an abusive relationship. She was meeting the 16 hours work requirement, but has been told must increase this to 30 hours.

Sally is highly motivated to build up skills to improve her career and has undertaken training in digital marketing. However, starting again at 53 years old as a single mother and domestic abuse survivor is challenging.

“[I am] desperate to be independent, but I really am starting again at 53 years old with a 9 year old...My situation is so very difficult....I have the stress of money (or lack of it). My course is supposed to end just before Xmas but I'm so far behind on it...How can I work 30 hrs, get my cv and portfolio ready, get up to speed on essential software ... and job search?”

Sally has found the system isn't designed to support people based on their individual circumstances. She also wasn't told about the flexibility available with the new 30 hour work requirements. Sally believes a work requirement of 18 hours would be much more reasonable.

“UC should take a person's situation into consideration. My current situation impacts on my mental and physical wellbeing. Parents escaping abuse need to be allowed time and opportunity to start over and reach their potential.”



Additional Needs, Health Conditions and Disabilities

Throughout the research, respondents highlighted that where they – or their child – lived with additional needs, a health condition, or a disability, this increased their barriers to work. This acts both as a barrier in and of itself, and as a factor which further exacerbates other barriers such as access to childcare and mental health impacts. One survey respondent explained,

MYSELF AND ONE CHILD HAVE ADHD (NO CURRENT DLA/PIP AWARD) I WOULD STRUGGLE WITH MORE HOURS AT WORK AND MY CHILD WOULD STRUGGLE WITH MORE HOURS IN CHILDCARE.

Single parent survey respondent

Another stated, *“I have had chronic fatigue and my current work/parenting arrangement is only just manageable. Any more hours would push me over the edge.”*

Having a disability or caring for a child with a disability should lead to a reduction or removal of work requirements. However, this is not always the case if the individual/ their child is not in receipt of a qualifying benefit, or if the claiming parent is unaware of the adjustments that can be made. 36% of survey respondents stated that their work requirements had not been adjusted despite them being in receipt of DLA, whilst 25% of these respondents were unaware that their work requirements could be altered due to DLA. One survey respondent reported that despite having her own health conditions and her son being awarded the highest DLA component on care and mobility, *“I’ve been called into the jobcentre on numerous occasions regarding increasing my hours... none of these things are taken into consideration...and [they] still want me to increase my hours.”*

Expectation of Being Worse Off

Some respondents were worried they would be financially worse off if they worked more hours as their costs for childcare and transport would increase, while their entitlement to benefits – including UC - would decrease or end altogether. The survey did not gather data on individual childcare costs, so it is not possible to verify the amounts families would lose, but it is clear that concerns around this issue acts as a barrier to people taking on additional work. It is also worth noting that research from IPPR highlighted that the combination of the taper rate and childcare costs support through UC means that some parents can face exceptionally high effective tax rate on every additional pound they earn, meaning for some, working longer hours can make them worse off.⁷² As one survey respondent stated, *“I don’t want to spend the early years of my children’s’ lives spending all my time working, to be worse off after putting them in full time childcare.”* Another stated, *“if we earn a certain amount, we lose our benefit, so already we can’t pay rent, council tax, tv license, water, as the extra wage goes on childcare and we work for nothing - it makes us not want to work.”*

Expected Impact of the New 30 Hours CET

Despite the new CET officially having come into force, the survey revealed that many people were not yet clear if or how the policy change would impact them, as they had not received any communications from the DWP. One survey respondent explained, *“It’s unclear to me how the change works - it’s never been mentioned to me by UC. There are all sorts of rumours flying about.”*

Most respondents had not yet received notification that their Claimant Commitment was changing. 51% said their work requirement hours had not changed, 28% were unsure if they had changed and only 21% stated that they had changed.

Graph 13: Has your Claimant Commitment Changed to Reflect the Increased Work Requirements?



81% of respondents stated that the impact of the 30 hours CET rule would be negative for them, and 51% of these reported that it would be very negative. Most of the open-ended responses regarding the impact of this policy focused on the impossibility of doing everything and the resulting exhaustion single parents feared. As one survey respondent stated, *“It’s a recipe for total burn out for a solo parent with no other help, it’s just not possible to function properly doing all of that on your own.”* Another respondent stated,

“AS A WIDOWED PARENT AND WORKING 21 HOURS PER WEEK, LIFE IS STRESSFUL ENOUGH HAVING TO JUGGLE WORK PLUS ALL MY OTHER COMMITMENTS. I PHYSICALLY HAVE NOTHING MORE TO GIVE.”
Single parent survey respondent

Just 17% of respondents reported that the change would have no impact on them primarily because they already met the higher work requirements. As one respondent stated, *“I work enough for requirements but I am lucky to have a job that works.”* While another in the same situation stated, *“My earnings are just above the minimum wage x 30 hours per week thankfully. Although if the minimum wage is increased in 2024, it may affect me.”*

Graph 14: How will the Increased Work Requirements Impact you?

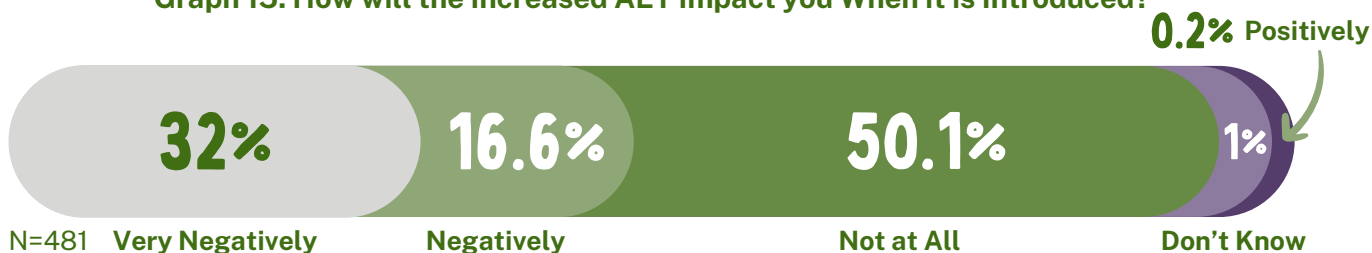


The lived experience story from Georgia on the next page highlights how difficult meeting the increased work requirements are alongside the responsibilities of single parenting.

Expected Impact of the New 18 Hours AET

Almost half of respondents stated that the impact of the rise in the AET from 15 hours to 18 hours would be negative, with 32% stating the impact would be very negative. For the majority of respondents who stated it would not impact them, this was due to them already meeting the proposed AET.

Graph 15: How will the Increased AET Impact you When it is Introduced?



Respondents repeatedly raised concerns around sanctions and the risk of being pushed out of their current work to move into something new if they didn't meet their AET. One respondent stated, *“when I was looking for work previously, I was made to feel inadequate and the stress of looking for work through fear of being sanctioned put me in a state of depression and anxiety. To be put in this position again when the only option would be to leave a job I love to look for a job that probably doesn't exist could literally break me.”*

Another respondent explained, *“[raising the AET] will only increase my stress and damage my health and my ability to parent. I'm already looking for work. Looking more "intensely" under high pressure and threat of sanction will not make more work appear. I was sanctioned unfairly many years ago...and the experience was cruel and inhumane, and has meant I am terrified of that happening again especially being a single parent.”*

LIVED EXPERIENCE: WHY I WON'T BE ABLE TO MEET THE NEW WORK REQUIREMENTS

Georgia is a single mother to two young children. Before the recent change, her claimant commitment was 25 hours a week which she was not quite able to meet (she averaged around 20-24 hours a week). Access to childcare was the biggest barrier to increasing working hours for Georgia.

“Childcare is hard to find let alone during holidays... I'm worried what will happen during holidays when I'm not able to earn because I work in a school and also there isn't available childcare.”

Georgia finds balancing her caring responsibilities alongside work challenging, even before any increase in her work requirements. Georgia wakes at 6am, takes the children to school for 8:30am before commuting an hour on a bus to work which starts at 10am. Georgia works until 2pm when she takes another hour to commute back to the school to pick up her children. They usually get home at 4pm when Georgia makes dinner before the bedtime routine. Georgia has an hour or two to herself before going to bed early so she is ready to start it all again the next day.

By the weekend Georgia and her children are all exhausted, but Georgia still has to do errands to ensure the home runs smoothly.

Georgia's claimant commitment has already been increased to 30 hours. Georgia believes this will be hugely negative for her and her children. With no support from friends and family, Georgia will lack time to spend with her children after school and the weekends will be spent on household tasks.

“I won't be able to see my children as much [and it] will affect mine and their mental health.”

Georgia finds the pressures of single parenting alongside paid work make it impossible for her to have time for herself. As Georgia explains, ***“I do not have a social life whatsoever and so my mental health is now on a heavy decline which is also going to affect my physical health.”*** She believes that the 30 hour work requirement is unfair to everyone, ***“but especially single parents!”*** Georgia is worried that ultimately she will be sanctioned because she can't earn enough to meet the new thresholds.

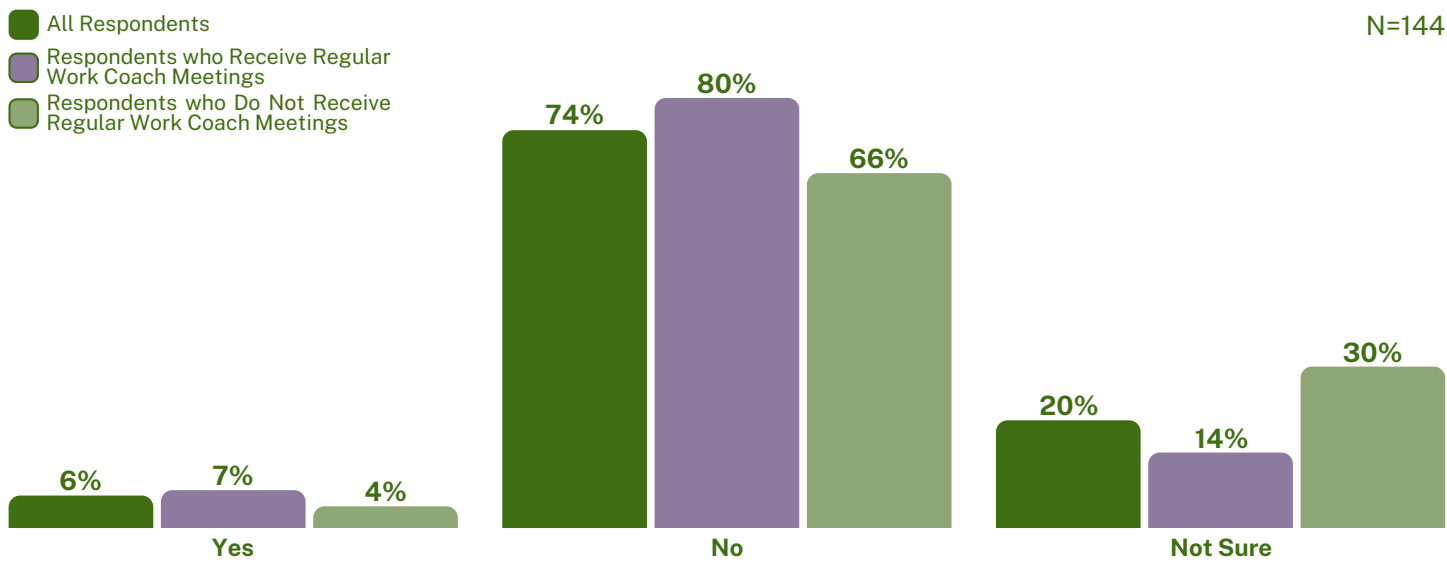


DWP Work Coach Support

Work Coach Meetings

Only those respondents who stated they were unemployed were asked about work coach meetings. Of those who answered, 60% stated that they had regular work coach meetings, while 40% said they did not. Out of all the unemployed respondents, 74% stated that they did not find the meetings useful, while 6% found them useful. 20% of respondents were unsure if the work coach meetings were useful or not, suggesting claimants aren't sure what the purpose of the meetings are or what they (stand to) benefit from them. The more frequent the meetings, the less useful respondents found them. 80% of those who had regular meetings stated that they did not find the work coach meetings useful, compared with 66% of those who did not have regular work coach meetings.

Graph 16: Do you Find Work Coach Meetings Useful?



One respondent who found the meetings useful stated, *“I feel I am informed appropriately regarding my circumstances.”* However, most of the remaining responses highlighted the issues respondents had with the work coach meeting system. The issues identified centred around five key areas, each of which is elaborated on below.

Firstly, work coaches were often described as unsupportive and lacking in empathy. One respondent stated, *“[I’m]finding the work coach patronising and not sympathetic to single parenting.”* Another stated, *“they bully me and make my anxiety through the roof. I keep getting ‘you signed up for this’, I signed up for help not to be bullied.”*

Secondly, work coaches were seen as inflexible. One survey respondent stated, *“They don’t listen or care about your personal circumstances or difficulties while searching for work. Mental health is never taken into consideration.”* Another stated, *“I have explained my personal situation, they lack any form of understanding with regards to raising children alone. I was asked if I had any neighbours that could help with childcare...but when I questioned such a suggestion it was implied that I am seeking out problems rather than solutions.”*

Thirdly, survey respondents highlighted that work coaches lacked the relevant skills or knowledge to assist them into meaningful employment. One survey respondent explained that,

THE MEETINGS ARE NOT FOR THE CLAIMANTS BENEFIT WHATSOEVER. THEY ARE VERY VAGUE, VERY BRIEF, YOU DON’T GET THE ADVICE OR HELP YOU NEED.

Single parent survey respondent

Respondents reported that the focus of their work coach was on pushing claimants into any work. As one respondent stated, *“I am a part time student and the work coach keeps pressuring me to consider jobs which would be way below my skill level and take away from the time spent studying, which would detract from future earnings and success.”* Another explained, *“Job support is not geared to help people who are not looking for entry level jobs. I knew what I wanted to do and I found it myself as soon as my youngest started full time school.”*

Fourthly, respondents highlighted a lack of consistency with work coaches. One respondent explained, *“I see a different work coach every time and they don’t know anything about me or my circumstances.”*

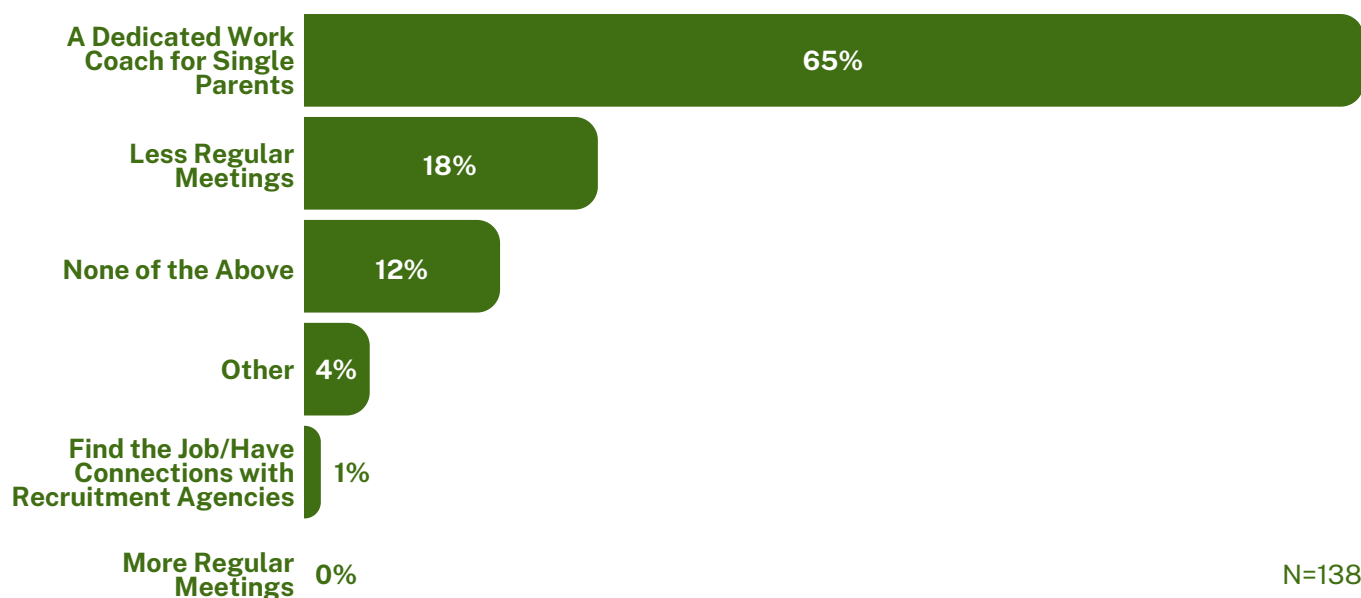
Fifthly, there were problems with people being called for meetings unnecessarily. One respondent stated, *“I have been told I have to attend weekly meetings at the local job centre. I have to repeatedly tell UC through the journal function that I am working/studying so cannot make the meetings. Every week they set up a new meeting and then I have to explain. They send me automated messages saying my UC will be affected if I don’t keep up my “commitments” but these have never been set. Then on the day they send a message saying my reason for not attending has been accepted. Then the whole process starts again.”*

Changing Realities participant Izzy had a similar experience, *“I have chronic illnesses and [have been] assessed as having limited capability to work. I am still being given appointments for work search even though my conditions are gone worst over the past year. Despite explaining many times, I still have to go to the job centre every now and then to explain how I am struggling.”*

Improving Work Coach Support

Respondents identified ways to make work coach meetings more useful. From the options provided, the most popular response by far was to have a dedicated work coach for single parents (65% selected this answer). Meanwhile 18% of respondents wanted ‘less regular meetings’ and no respondents selected ‘more regular meetings’ despite it being an option.

Graph 17: How to Make Work Coach Meetings Useful



Overall, respondents reported wanting more practical job search support. One respondent stated, *“We just talk about whether I’m searching for jobs, which I am, but they don’t give any help at all.”* Another respondent stated, *“the person who is helping the claimant to find a job should be [a] qualified work coach because being a single parent who is out of work is a daunting experience.”* A survey respondent who reported that the work coach meetings were useful attributed this to the practical support provided, *“[they] help with training for future work opportunities.”*

We spoke with one single parent – Jamie - who reported having a very positive experience with the support the job centre provided via an outsourced employment programme.

Read his lived experience story on the next page.

LIVED EXPERIENCE: DEVOLVING WORK SEARCH SUPPORT

Jamie is a single parent to two children aged ten and eight. In October 2023, Jamie's job ended and so he submitted a claim for UC.

When Jamie first attended the job centre, he explained that he had lost his previous role due to challenges connected to him being neurodivergent and having poor mental health. He also highlighted that these challenges were preventing him from finding a new role.

Jamie's work coach then referred him to their work and health programme called Better Working Futures. From there, Jamie was referred to the employment agency Reed who subsequently referred him to Ingeus, who had been sub-contracted by Reed to support individuals facing complex barriers to work.

The support from Ingeus began around six weeks after Jamie first claimed UC. They provided a holistic package of support, which included one-to-one coaching, help in identifying his skills, updating his CV, and supporting him via sessions with a wellbeing advisor. They also designed an exercise programme for Jamie, paid for his travel to their office and offered him funding for interview clothes, relevant short courses, and exercise equipment.

Jamie has found the scheme incredibly positive:

"This has been much more beneficial than the rather austere approach the jobcentre take - being treated as an individual and having the help to really figure out how I should best approach my job search has made a huge difference to my confidence."

Although Jamie has not yet secured employment, he is hopeful that he will soon be successful and believes this scheme has been hugely helpful.

The support Jamie has received will continue until he has earned £4,000 in a new job. Jamie believes this is a positive approach because if a new role doesn't work out, he will have the support immediately available rather than having to start from scratch again.



Devaluing Care

Many research respondents reported that the policy devalues the caring work of single parents. One respondent who worked part-time stated,

YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'RE CONSTANTLY CHASING YOUR TAIL...WHY DOES THE GOVERNMENT NOT VALUE THE UNPAID WORK OF PARENTING THAT IS BRINGING UP OUR FUTURE GENERATIONS?

Single parent survey respondent

Another stated, *"I want to be a parent to my children and take them and pick them up from school, so I only want to work during school hours."* For many, working part-time was seen as the only way to balance their responsibilities as an employee with single parenting. Changing Realities respondent, Donnie C, stated, *"Being able to work part time means I can provide for my daughter, spend time with her, attend school sessions and stay and plays. Not only that, I am able to give her my devotion without having to worry about the pressures of working full time...I need to work part time to be the best mum I can be."*

Some respondents were concerned at the impact of working longer hours on their children. One respondent stated, *"Please don't separate families like this. Lots of children are not ready to be forced into long hours of childcare. It is cruel. Lots of these children are already dealing with their parents' separation and then to be forced into long hours childcare away from their parent."* Another said, *"I fear that this will massively impact the relationships between single parents and their children... it will become riddled with stress, anxiety and a decline in mental health for all the family."* While another stated,

IT TAKES PARENTS AWAY FROM BEING JUST THAT - WITH AN UNFAIR DISADVANTAGE TO THE POOREST AND SINGLE PARENTS, WHO ALREADY STRUGGLE.

Single parent survey respondent

The 'balancing act' between providing financially and being present for their children was repeatedly raised by respondents. Many viewed the increased work requirements as tipping the balance in the wrong direction. One respondent stated, *"It's particularly challenging for me as a single parent, especially when Universal Credit expects me to work full-time. I worry that I'd be working primarily to pay for someone to look after my child, and I'd miss out on crucial time with them, which is crucial for their development and my role as a parent. It's a difficult balance to strike, as I want to provide for my child while ensuring their well-being, but the current circumstances make it an uphill battle."*

Changing Realities participant Beverley said, *"lone parenting is work. Being a positive role model is work. Running a home is work. Being a good citizen, living a life of decent moral standards and values is work. Trying to do all this on top of sustaining low paid unfulfilling employment without the back up of reliable dependable practical and financial support is madness. It leads to burn out."*

Career Progression

Research respondents were concerned that increased work requirements would negatively impact their career progression, due to having less time to undertake learning and development activities, and because they may be forced to accept 'any' job to meet their requirements. One respondent stated,

UC DON'T RECOGNISE MY OPEN UNIVERSITY (OU) COURSE, THEY THINK I SHOULD BE WORKING FULL TIME AND NOT STUDYING AT ALL.

Single parent survey respondent

Another stated, *"I'm a student with the OU...these new regulations will make it very difficult for me."* Single parent PhD students face particular challenges, *"I'm doing a PhD but that doesn't count towards my work hours. I get a scholarship for it, which is deducted from my UC. This means my family is in abject poverty."*

The fear of being pushed into ‘any’ work at the cost of career development is compounded by the ‘Way to Work’ campaign, which limits UC claimants ability to narrow their work searches, and the DWP’s guidance on this policy which states, *“For claimants who are able to work, and who are placed in the Intensive Work Search regime, the aim is to encourage them to undertake as much work (and earn as much) as they reasonably can do as quickly as possible”*.⁷³ One respondent explained, *“I currently have a job in a primary school...The DWP are already hinting I move [my son] into a private nursery...so I can then work a 30 hour minimum wage job in line with the new policy coming out. I would earn a little more than I do now if I do this... so... I’d have to leave a job I just finished qualifying for, my son would lose the nursery he loves (an invaluable resource to a child who only has one parent), I’d spend more time away from my son, I’d be financially worse for it but working longer hours.”*

Other respondents referred to volunteering to help their career development and raised concerns that they would not be able to do this if their work requirements increased. One respondent explained, *“If I can’t volunteer on my day off, how can I progress into that chosen career?”*

Flexibility Within the System

Communications with the DWP and the work coach guidance show that the policy is intended to be implemented flexibly. While one respondent reported that her work coach reduced her claimant commitment from 30 hours to 20 hours to take into account the time spent on the school run, this wasn’t the case for most. For example, another single parent stated, *“I am being pressured by my work coach to do extra hours and he is also telling me I need to increase before my little girl is 3 as I need to work 30 hours which is not viable as I’ll have no one to pick my children up from school.”*

Ana’s lived experience story on the next page shines a light on how the lack of flexibility can play out for single parent claimants.

LIVED EXPERIENCE: THERE'S NO FLEXIBILITY WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Ana is a single parent to a 3-year-old child living in Newcastle. She initially returned to work for 9 hours a week when her child turned one, and her mother assisted with childcare.

When Ana's child turned three in June 2023, Ana was happy to increase her work hours to 16 hours a week and assumed she would be able to stay working these hours until her child started school.

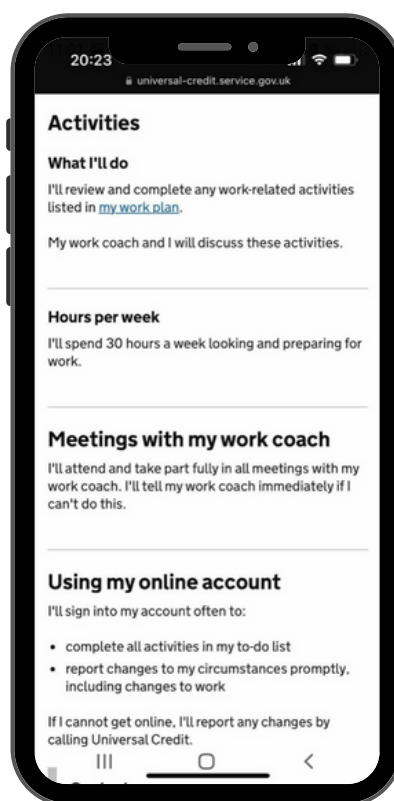
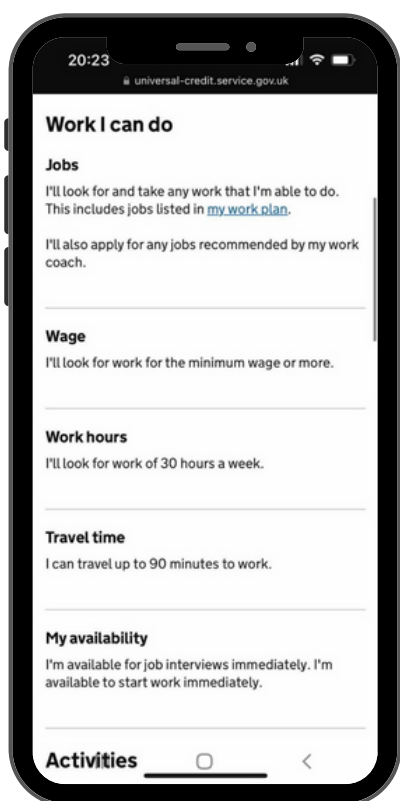
In October 2023, Ana was off sick for two weeks which meant her monthly income was under her 16 hours' earnings threshold (£677). This triggered weekly phone appointments with a work coach at her Job Centre. Ana spoke to a different work coach almost every time and found the calls stressful. Sometimes the appointments were scheduled when Ana was working - when she requested to reschedule, she was told to speak to her employer and get permission for the call at work. All this added to Ana's stress levels. When Ana recovered around the end of October 2023, she confirmed to a work coach that she was working longer hours again and would meet the earnings threshold. She was informed that she didn't have to attend weekly appointments.

In November 2023, Ana was asked to accept a new claimant commitment (see image below) that stated she had to work 30 hours and be available for travel to work up-to 90 minutes each way. She was told the 30 hours equated to earnings of around £1300pcm.

The work coach suggested that Ana take on additional hours with her current employer, but Ana knew there were none available and that she would also struggle with childcare costs. Although Ana's child receives the 30 hours of funded childcare, this is only during term time, so equates to 20 hours through the year, and Ana cannot afford the additional costs.

Ana feels unable to work further afield given the age of her child and the need to be in the local area in case of an emergency. Ana also felt it was unrealistic to find an additional part time job for 10 hours to match her current work schedule and childcare arrangements.

During Ana's claimant commitment meeting the work coach didn't ask about family circumstances, childcare concerns, or commute times. Ana felt there was no flexibility to tailoring her commitment and that she had no choice but to accept her new claimant commitment. Furthermore, she was offered no help with her job search. Ana is now anxious as she waits for her next UC payment as she cannot meet her work requirements.



Single Parents in Self-Employment

There were many concerns raised by self-employed respondents around the new MIF level. One respondent explained how earning less than the National Living Wage through self-employment impacted them:

I WORK OVER 50 HOURS A WEEK AND STILL CAN'T MAKE ENDS MEET.

Single parent survey respondent

Another explained, *“for me the MIF will almost double. ...[I] work well over 35 hours building the business. A business I had to create as there was no way I could find work in a normal job within school hours or childcare during the 12 weeks of school holidays. With this business I can take them with me to work. This now means I will have a deduction come April⁷⁴ of £260 per month. I don't know where I am going to find that money.”* Another respondent stated, *“If my benefits are reduced again...I will get into more debt with my bills.”*

Changing Realities participant - Marcie – explained, *“The looming spectre of work requirements and the MIF influences how I make decisions about what's best for myself, my son, and my company - and not in a positive way. It feels as though the goal of the UC work requirements is to push everyone into minimum wage jobs, regardless of whether that's financially worthwhile or appropriate for our circumstances. I'm sure I could go out and find a job for 30 hours a week paying minimum wage. I'm also sure that within a year, I'd have lost that job because I wouldn't be able to manage the hours and the shift patterns, and probably made my health much worse...it doesn't make sense that the system would prefer for me to stop working on building up my business sustainably and instead get a part-time job in retail.”*

Discrimination Within the Policy Design

TREATING SINGLE PARENTS LIKE SECOND CLASS CITIZENS IS DISCRIMINATORY. WE ARE MADE TO FEEL LIKE WE ARE SLACKERS FOR NOT WORKING FULL TIME/NEEDING HELP. AT THE SAME TIME, WE'RE MADE TO FEEL LIKE BAD PARENTS FOR NOT HAVING LOADS OF TIME TO SPEND WITH OUR CHILDREN. WE CAN'T WIN.

Single parent survey respondent

Many respondents highlighted that they considered the policy itself to be discriminatory towards single parents, especially those on a low income. One survey respondent explained; *“[This is] yet another way that single parents are discriminated against - why are the work requirements the same for a couple combined as it is for a single parent.”* Another highlighted, *“To be a single parent in this country is to be a second-class citizen... Instead of engaging with social and economic problems, the government quietly push through policies that widen inequality and send more families into poverty.”*

Another explained how she felt she was treated unfairly, *“My brother is a two parent family, he works a 40 hour week, his wife stays home full time with four kids, and they have the same requirement for work as I do as a lone parent.”* Another respondent described the policy as, *“Discriminative to single parent families...2 parent families are not expected to work 60 hours between them.”* Some survey respondents also highlighted the disproportionate impact on women which is indisputable given the DWP data states 90% of impacted lead carers are women. For example, one respondent stated,

IT FEELS LIKE A SEXIST CHANGE THAT DISCRIMINATED AGAINST SINGLE MOTHERS MUCH MORE THAN FATHERS BY DEFAULT.

Single parent survey respondent

Respondents repeatedly highlighted that they believed work requirements for single parents should reflect the reality they face. One stated, *“they need to have a separate group which caters to single/sole parents, as single parents/primary carers face different difficulties compared to a two parent household - eg- shared childcare, splitting holiday allowances, increased chances of rising income and avoiding childcare costs.”*





CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION

I CAN'T MAKE IT ALL WORK. THEY [MY CHILDREN] ARE SO YOUNG FOR SUCH A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME, THEN I CAN INCREASE MY HOURS. I DON'T WANT TO NEVER SEE THEM. I DON'T WANT TO BE CRIPPLED BY CHILDCARE COSTS. I DON'T WANT TO STRUGGLE CONSTANTLY BECAUSE IT'S JUST ME PAYING FOR EVERYTHING. I DON'T WANT TO CONSTANTLY FEEL SICK ABOUT MONEY.

Single parent survey respondent

This research has reinforced the fact that single parents face multiple barriers to increasing their working hours, most notably, a lack of affordable childcare and flexible work, and single parent employment discrimination. While the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Mel Stride MP claims increasing work requirements will “[pull] down barriers that stop parents working and fulfilling their potential”⁷⁵ the reality is that doing so merely risks increasing these barriers, as lead carers face ever greater pressures.

It's not about single parents not wanting to work; it's about how much work is manageable and under what circumstances.

Any system which wants to support single parents must first recognise their unique circumstances. However, in its current format, the Conditional Earnings Threshold policy disregards the needs and realities of single parent families. This is not surprising, given that the High-Level Equality Analysis into the planned changes to the CET failed to mention the disproportionate impact the change would have on single parents.

For single parents on a low-income, this policy represents a double whammy. Lower pay means more hours of work are needed to meet the earnings threshold. Furthermore, those on lower earnings report being less able to increase their work hours.

If the government is truly committed to breaking down barriers to work, they first need to recognise the unique circumstances of single parents. This requires the introduction of a single parent lead carer category which has lower work requirements than lead carers in couples. Doing so would acknowledge the additional caring responsibilities of single parents and the extra challenges they face in managing those responsibilities alongside paid employment.

Secondly, the government must address the broader barriers single parents face in accessing paid employment.

Creating a system which genuinely dismantles barriers to work for single parents could be life changing for families. A social security system which supports the career development of single parents alongside their parenting responsibilities – through implementing the recommendations outlined below – will ensure all families can thrive and not merely survive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the findings of this research, we recommend that the 30 hours rule for lead carers is reversed and the previous work requirements of 16 hours for carers of 3-4 year olds, and 25 hours for lead carers of 5-12 year olds is reinstated.

However, if this is not immediately possible, we recommend the following as a minimum to ensure that the policy is implemented in the least detrimental way possible.

Conditionality Earnings Threshold Policy Design

- Introduce a single parent lead carer category for UC claimants.
- Stagger work requirements for single parent lead carers (including the associated Minimum Income Floor) as follows:
 - 18 hours for lead carers of 3 to 4-year-olds
 - 20 hours for lead carers of 5 to 6-year-olds
 - 25 hours for lead carers of 7 to 9-year-olds
 - 30 hours for lead carers of 10 to 12-year-olds
- Conduct a review of how this policy is impacting single parent claimants.
- Revoke plans for mandatory in-work progression support.

Communications With Claimants

- Communicate the policy change with all lead carers, outlining the flexibility available and the easements around reduced commute times and the option for lead carers of 2 to 4-year-olds to pause work requirements to undertake training.
- Create a more user-friendly claimant commitment [**See images on the next page for how this could look**], which should include:
 - Outline details to request changes to work requirements within the online UC account by adding 'Request a Claimant Review meeting' as a section under 'How to manage your Universal Credit claim' section with explicit details of what factors are acceptable for reducing a claimant commitment, how claimants can initiate this, and what to do if they disagree with the outcome.
 - Outline available easements and commute times.

Work Coach Support

- Provide dedicated single parent work coaches.
- Reduce mandatory work coach meetings.
- Focus work-coach support on practical job search assistance.

Childcare Support

- Expand upfront childcare costs support to parents returning from maternity leave.
- Remove the lower threshold for funded childcare hours for working parents.
- Expand the funded childcare hours to those in training or education.
- Support single parents with holiday childcare costs.

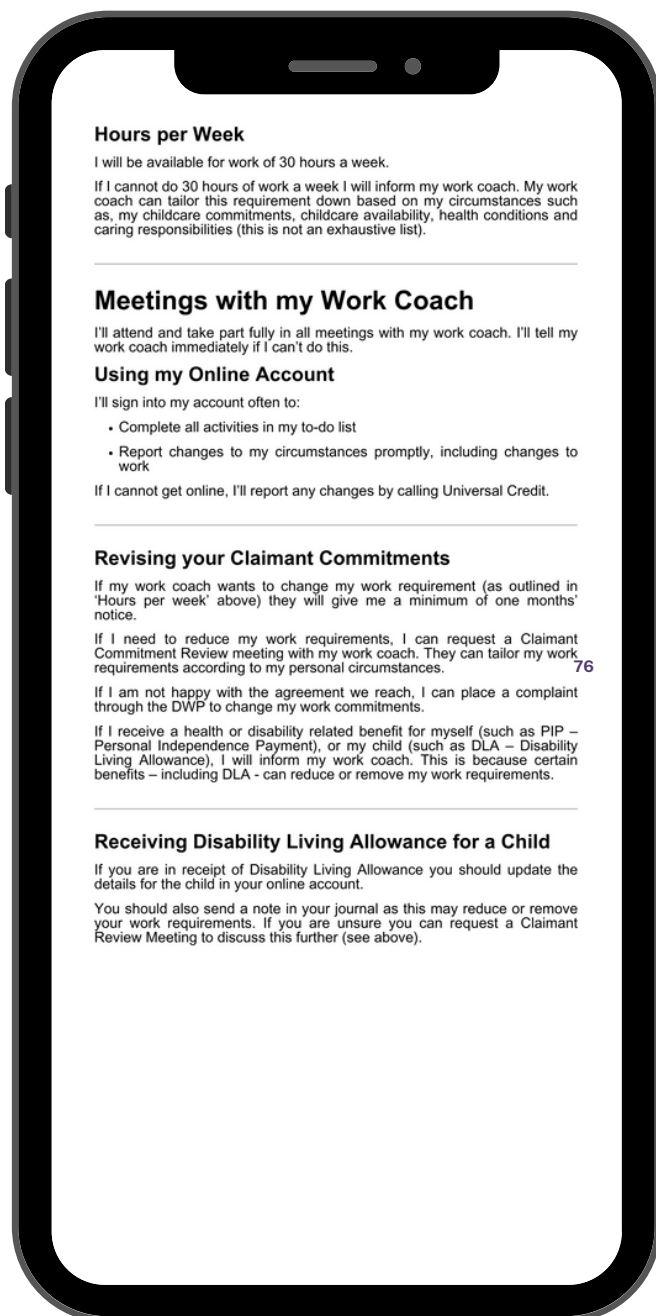
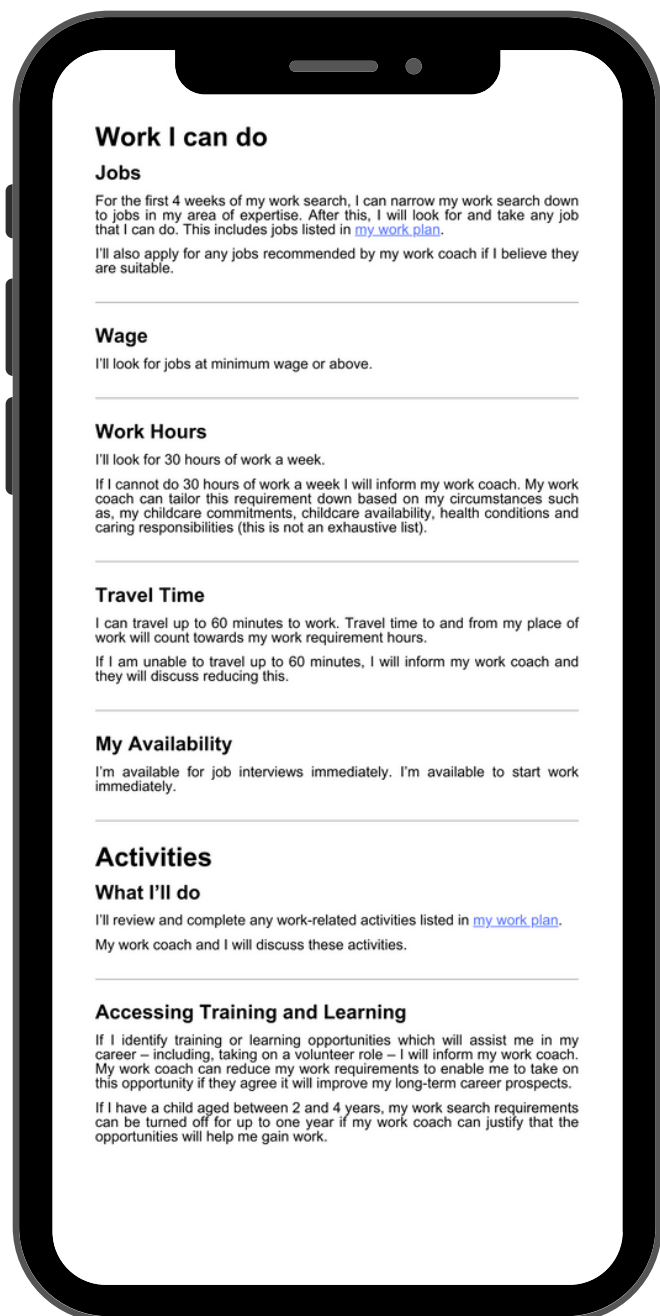
Universal Credit Systems and Processes

- Link DLA payments and work requirements automatically.
- Decrease the UC taper rate to 50 pence.

Legal Protection for Single Parents

- Introduce legislation to prevent single parent discrimination within employment by expanding the Equality Act to include single parents as a protected characteristic.

SUGGESTED CLAIMANT COMMITMENT





APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: UNIVERSAL CREDIT CONDITIONALITY SURVEY QUESTIONS

Universal Credit Conditionality Changes

This survey is to understand how single parents will be impacted by the increase to Universal Credit work requirements for lead carers of 3-12 year olds to 30 hours a week. The findings will be shared anonymously with policy makers and media to campaign against these changes/ ensure they are implemented in a way which works for single parent families. It will take around 5 minutes. Find out more at www.singleparentrights.org/current-campaign-action

Consent

1. Data Protection

The data you provide will be stored confidentially in accordance with GDPR, no identifying information will be shared with a third party. If you agree to the conditions outlined here please select 'I agree' below to continue.

- I agree to the conditions above.

2. Are you currently in receipt of Universal Credit?

- Select your answer

3. Which part of the UK do you live in?

- Select your answer

Your Family

4. How would you describe your family set up?

- Select your answer

5. How many children aged 18 or under do you have?

- Select your answer

6. What is the age of your youngest child?

- Select your answer

7. Do you receive DLA for your child(ren)?

- Select your answer

Your Current Work Situation

8. How many hours are you expected to work as set out in your claimant commitment?

- Select your answer

9. Do you think your work requirements are manageable alongside single parenting?

- Select your answer

10. What is your current working status?

- Select your answer

11. Do you usually work the same hours each week?

- Select your answer

12. Do you work term time only?

- Select your answer

13. How many hours do you work a week? (If your hours fluctuate just estimate an average week)

- Select your answer

14. Do you want to increase your working hours?

- Select your answer

15. Has your claimant commitment been changed since the new rules to ask you to work longer hours?

- Select your answer

16. How much do you earn per hour (approximately)?

- Select your answer

17. Are you able to increase your hours to the amount requested?

- Select your answer

18. What barriers do you face to increasing your work hours? Please tick all that apply.

- Lack of available childcare
- Childcare too expensive
- My current place of work doesn't have additional hours available
- I can't find other work that meets my availability
- I can't find other work that fits my skills set
- My physical and/ or mental health would suffer if I worked longer hours
- My child's physical and/ or mental health would suffer if I worked longer hours
- I am excluded from work opportunities due to being a single parent
- I am studying/ undertaking a course
- I do not face any barriers

19. Please explain how these barriers impact you?

- [Open question]

20. How will the new 30 hours a week work requirement for lead carers of 3 - 12 year olds affect you? N.B. This means to be placed in the 'no work search requirements' group, you need to earn the equivalent of 30 hours at National Minimum/ Living Wage (approximately £1300 pcm).

- Select your answer

21. Please explain your answer to the above question.

- [Open question]

22. The DWP plan to increase the Administrative Earnings Threshold from 15 to 18 hours. This means it will increase from earnings of £617 a month to £812. Once the change is introduced, anyone earning below £812 will be placed in the intensive work search group. How will this change impact you?

- Select your answer

23. Please explain your answer to the above question.

- [Open question]

Commute

24. How long is your daily commute each way?

- Select your answer

25. Would you be able to undertake a commute of 90 minutes to work each way?

- Select your answer

26. Please explain how a 90 minute commute would impact you?

- [Open question]

Your Views

27. Is there anything else you would like to say about the new UC work requirements?

- [Open question]

28. Would you be willing to speak with a journalist/ policy maker about your answers? If so please share your email or phone number below.

- [Open question]

29. It would help us to know a little bit about your background to understand if some groups are more impacted by this change than others. Are you happy to answer these questions? If you select no you will be able to submit your completed answers and taken out of the survey.

- Select your answer

About You

The following questions will help us understand how people's experiences are impacted by their identity and their circumstances. This will be kept confidential. If you do not want to complete these questions please skip to the end and press submit to save your existing answers.

30. Do you consider yourself to have a disability or a long term condition that affects your day to day life?

- Select your answer

31. How would you describe your ethnicity?

- Select your answer

32. Which of the following best describes your gender?

- Select your answer

33. What is your annual household income?

- Select your answer

34. Which of the following best describes your sexuality?

- Select your answer

35. What is your highest qualification?

- Select your answer

36. To stay up to date with news from Single Parent Rights please provide your email address below. We will not share this with any third parties and will only contact you regarding our campaign activities, you can be removed at any time by emailing us on singleparentrights@gmail.com

If you do not want to share your email please press submit below to save your answers.

Additional Questions for Unemployed Respondents

Work Search

11. Do you have regular work coach meetings?

- Select your answer

12. Do you find your work coach meetings useful?

- Select your answer

13. Please explain the answer above.

- [Open question]

14. What would make your work coach meetings more helpful?

- Select your answer

15. What barriers do you face to finding work? Please tick all that apply.

- Lack of available childcare
- Childcare too expensive
- My current place of work doesn't have additional hours available
- I can't find other work that meets my availability
- I can't find other work that fits my skills set
- My physical and/ or mental health
- My child's physical and/ or mental health
- I am excluded from work opportunities due to being a single parent
- I am studying/ undertaking a course

16. Please explain how these barriers impact you?

- [Open question]

17. What would help you find employment?

- [Open question]

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Photography

All photographs in this report have been sourced from the following websites:

- *Freepik* - <https://www.freepik.com>
- *Pexels* - <https://www.pexels.com>
- *Unsplash* - <https://unsplash.com>

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