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UNIVERSAL CREDIT CONDITIONALITY CHANGES & THE IMPACT ON SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

Summary Report

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This is a summary report produced by Single Parent Rights. The full report is available at <https://www.singleparentrights.org/>



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	✓	✓	✓	✓		

THE CONTEXT: SINGLE PARENTS, BENEFIT CONDITIONALITY AND WORK BARRIERS

“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

BENEFIT CONDITIONALITY

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.¹

The recent conditionality changes for those on UC are part of a long trajectory stretching over 20 years as outlined in table 2 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 ² as standard job seekers
November 2008	12+	Required to work ³ for at least 16 hours per week ⁴
October 2009	10+	Required to work ⁵ for at least 16 hours per week ⁶
October 2010	7+	Required to work ⁷ for at least 16 hours per week ⁸
May 2012	5+	Required to work ⁹ for at least 16 hours per week ¹⁰
2016	5+	Required to work 25 hours per week ¹¹
2017	13+	Required to work 35 hours per week
2017	3+	Required to work 16 hours per week ¹²
October 2023	3+	Required to work 30 hours per week ¹³

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 5–12-year-olds. 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).

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.

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).

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 2024.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ Data also shows that single parents face greater rates of unfair sanctions.¹⁷ See our full research report for more details on each of these barriers to work and the role of employers within this.

During the 2023 Spring Budget, Chancellor Jeremy Hunt announced increased childcare support alongside the tighter conditionality for UC claimants,¹⁸ 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.¹⁹
- 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 1:5.²⁰

The table below outlines the current and proposed future childcare offer.

Table 3: Current and Planned Childcare Support²¹

Introduced	Age of Child	Eligibility Criteria	Support Provided
1984 <i>(Phased Out: New Applications ended in October 2018)</i>	From Birth	Childcare vouchers through specific employers	Basic rate taxpayer: Up to £2,860 a year Higher rate taxpayer: £1,488 a year Additional rate taxpayer: £1,320 a year
2003	From Birth	Entitled to Working Tax Credits	Up to 70% of costs up to £528 per month (or £910 for 2+ children)
2010	3 Years	Universal	15 hours, 38 weeks a year
2013	From Birth	Entitled to Universal Credit	Up to 85% of costs up to £950 per month (or £1,630 for 2+ children)
2015	2 Years	On Universal Credit with income <£15,400	15 hours, 38 weeks a year
2017	From Birth	Single/both parents are in work and earn between £8,668 and £100,000	Tax Free Childcare: Up to £2,000 a year or £4,000 for disabled children
2017	3 Years	Single/both parents are in work and earn between £8,668 and £100,000	30 hours, 38 weeks a year
April 2024	2 Years	Single/both parents are in work and earn between £8,668 and £100,000	15 hours, 38 weeks a year
Sept 2024	9 Months	Single/both parents are in work and earn between £8,668 and £100,000	15 hours, 38 weeks a year
April 2024	9 Months	Single/both parents are in work and earn between £8,668 and £100,000	30 hours, 38 weeks a year

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. 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.²²



METHODOLOGY

The study employed a four-fold approach as follows:

Desk Based Research on Work Coach Guidance

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.²³ Twelve responses were received from single parents via video/ messaging. These were then transcribed and thematically analysed.

Stories of Lived Experience

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

Information provided via a Freedom of Information request²⁴ and direct communications with the DWP highlighted three key points:

- 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.

These easements and the promise of flexibility 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.²⁵

PRIMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Overview of the Survey Sample

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% ²⁶
		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% ²⁷
	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% ²⁸
	Black	2%	8%
	Mixed/Arab/Other	6%	3%
	Asian	4%	4%
		Number of Respondents	518

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

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.

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.

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. Some groups faced greater challenges in meeting current work requirements than others. Specifically, those on a low-income (73%), racialised minority groups (69%) and sole carers (63%).

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 1: Are your Current Work Requirements Manageable?



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.

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.

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 2: 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.

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.

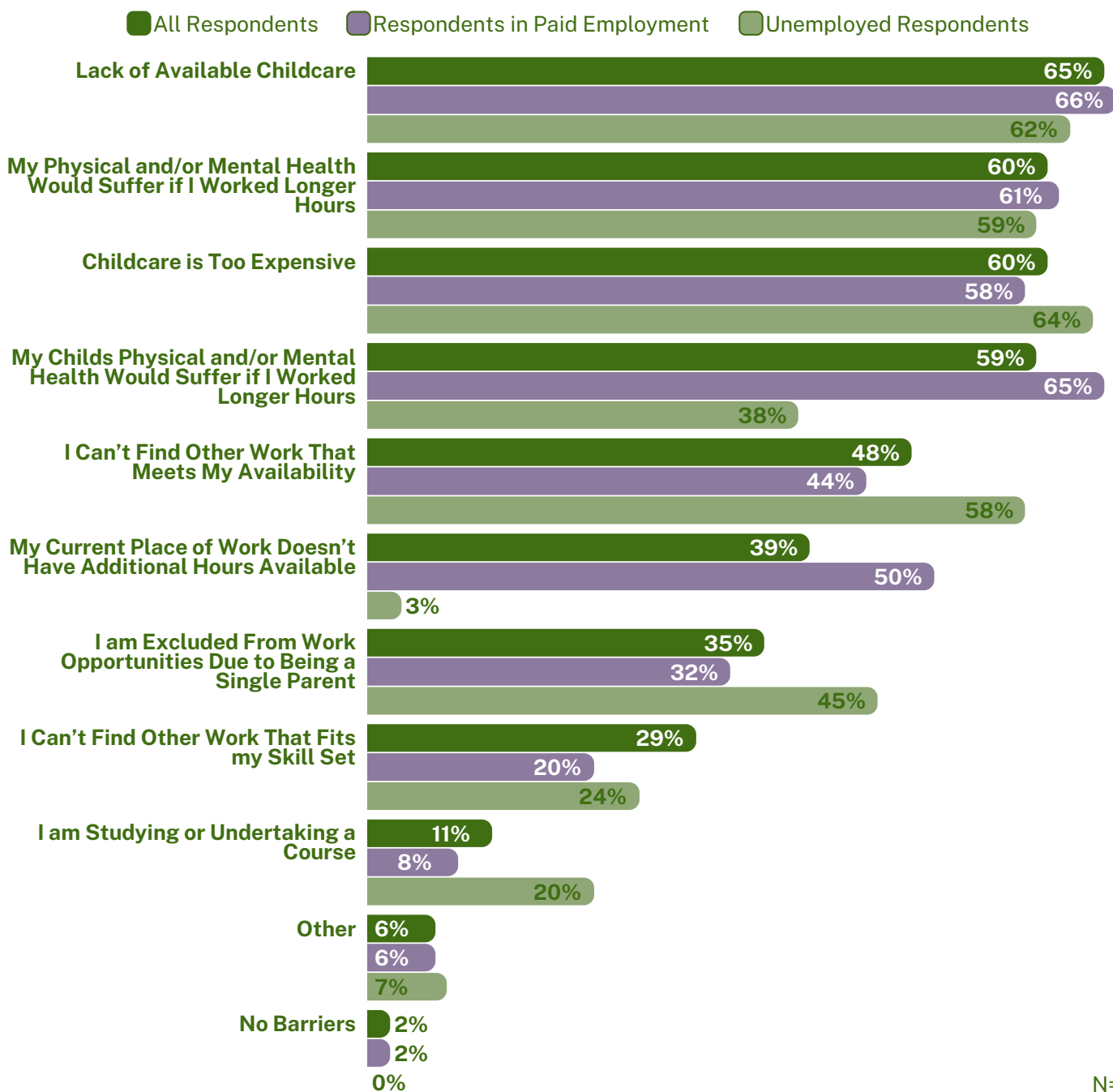
Only 3% of respondents stated they would be able to commute 90 minutes each way. The overwhelming majority of respondents who reported being unable to increase their commute stated it was due to not having access to, or finance for, additional childcare, alongside not having enough time, especially when 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.

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.

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 3: 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 responded,

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

Single parent survey respondent

For some unemployed survey respondents, a lack of childcare led to them turning down jobs. Childcare for parents working shift patterns or unsocial hours was a key challenge, as was childcare during the school holidays.

The lived experience story from Cathy below highlights how this barrier can play out in practice.

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.

Despite registering him 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."

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. Many respondents also reported that having poor mental health themselves impacted negatively on their children’s mental health.

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.”*

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.”*

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.

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

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.”*

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. As one respondent 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

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."

The lived experience story from Sally below 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

Having a disability or caring for a child with a disability should reduce/remove work requirements. However, this is not always the case. 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. 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.”*

Expected Impact of the New 30 Hours CET

Despite the new CET officially having come into force, 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.

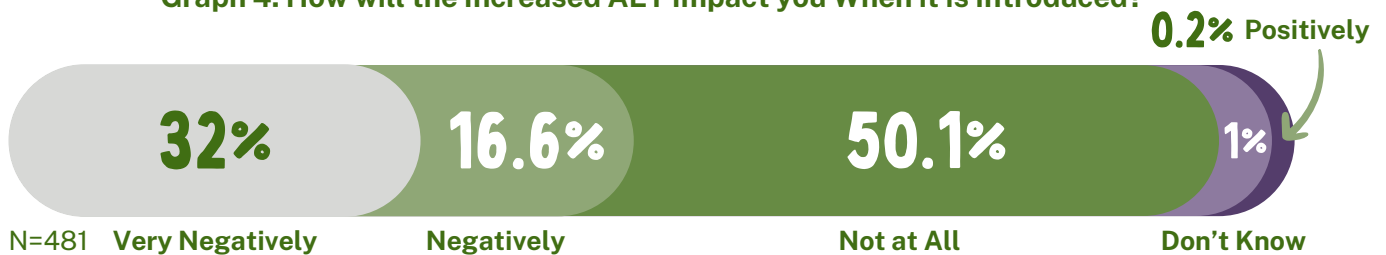
81% of respondents stated that the impact of the 30 hours CET rule would be negative for them, and 51% of these reported that it would be very negative. Most of the open-ended responses regarding the impact of this policy focused on the impossibility of doing everything and the resulting exhaustion single 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.”*

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.”*

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 4: 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, *“[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.”*

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.

Work coaches were described as unsupportive and lacking in empathy, inflexible, lacking in skills and inconsistent. 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.”*

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.

Overall, respondents reported wanting more practical job search support. One 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.”

Devaluing Care

Many research respondents reported that the policy devalues the caring work of single parents.

YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'RE CONSTANTLY CHASING YOUR TAIL...WHY DOES THE GOVERNMENT NOT VALUE THE UNPAID WORK OF PARENTING? *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. 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.”

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”. 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.”

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.

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.” Respondents repeatedly highlighted that single parents should have specific work requirements.

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.

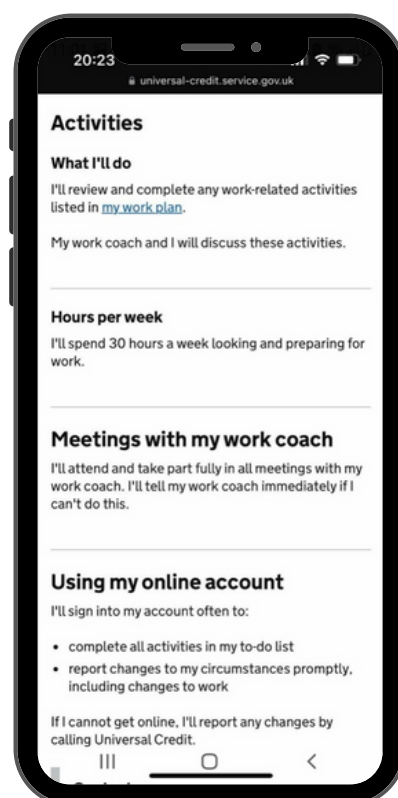
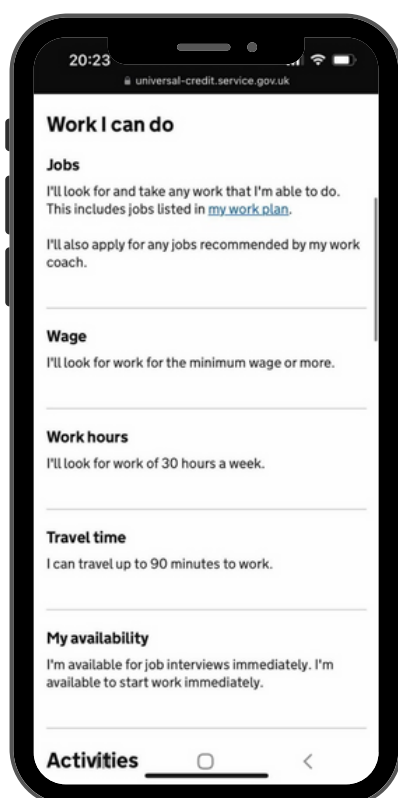
In October 2023, Ana was off sick for two weeks which meant her monthly income was under her 16 hours' earnings threshold (£677). This triggered weekly phone appointments with a work coach at her Job Centre. Ana spoke to a different work coach almost every time and found the calls stressful. Sometimes 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.



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”²⁹ 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

Work I can do

Jobs

For the first 4 weeks of my work search, I can narrow my work search down to jobs in my area of expertise. After this, I will look for and take any job that I can do. This includes jobs listed in [my work plan](#).

I'll also apply for any jobs recommended by my work coach if I believe they are suitable.

Wage

I'll look for jobs at minimum wage or above.

Work Hours

I'll look for 30 hours of work a week.

If I cannot do 30 hours of work a week I will inform my work coach. My work coach can tailor this requirement down based on my circumstances such as, my childcare commitments, childcare availability, health conditions and caring responsibilities (this is not an exhaustive list).

Travel Time

I can travel up to 60 minutes to work. Travel time to and from my place of work will count towards my work requirement hours.

If I am unable to travel up to 60 minutes, I will inform my work coach and they will discuss reducing this.

My Availability

I'm available for job interviews immediately. I'm available to start work immediately.

Activities

What I'll do

I'll review and complete any work-related activities listed in [my work plan](#). My work coach and I will discuss these activities.

Accessing Training and Learning

If I identify training or learning opportunities which will assist me in my career – including, taking on a volunteer role – I will inform my work coach. My work coach can reduce my work requirements to enable me to take on this opportunity if they agree it will improve my long-term career prospects.

If I have a child aged between 2 and 4 years, my work search requirements can be turned off for up to one year if my work coach can justify that the opportunities will help me gain work.

Hours per Week

I will be available for work of 30 hours a week.

If I cannot do 30 hours of work a week I will inform my work coach. My work coach can tailor this requirement down based on my circumstances such as, my childcare commitments, childcare availability, health conditions and caring responsibilities (this is not an exhaustive list).

Meetings with my Work Coach

I'll attend and take part fully in all meetings with my work coach. I'll tell my work coach immediately if I can't do this.

Using my Online Account

I'll sign into my account often to:

- Complete all activities in my to-do list
- Report changes to my circumstances promptly, including changes to work

If I cannot get online, I'll report any changes by calling Universal Credit.

Revising your Claimant Commitments

If my work coach wants to change my work requirement (as outlined in 'Hours per week' above) they will give me a minimum of one month's notice.

If I need to reduce my work requirements, I can request a Claimant Commitment Review meeting with my work coach. They can tailor my work requirements according to my personal circumstances.

If I am not happy with the agreement we reach, I can place a complaint through the DWP to change my work commitments.

If I receive a health or disability related benefit for myself (such as PIP – Personal Independence Payment), or my child (such as DLA – Disability Living Allowance), I will inform my work coach. This is because certain benefits – including DLA - can reduce or remove my work requirements.

Receiving Disability Living Allowance for a Child

If you are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance you should update the details for the child in your online account.

You should also send a note in your journal as this may reduce or remove your work requirements. If you are unsure you can request a Claimant Review Meeting to discuss this further (see above).

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- 4 CPAG (2011) *Labour market conditions and jobseeker's allowance*, available at Welfare Rights | Labour market conditions and jobseeker's allowance (askcpag.org.uk)
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- 22** Fawcett Society (2023) Paths to parenthood: Uplifting new mothers at work
- 23** More details about the project are available here www.changingrealities.org
- 24** The documents from the Freedom of Information requests are available on our website: <https://www.singleparentrights.org/current-campaign-action>
- 25** DWP (2012) Lone Parent Obligations: following lone parents' journeys from benefits to work, available at <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7ce0a8ed915d36e95f0354/rrep818.pdf>
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- 27** National statistics from ONS, 2022a
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- 29** IPPR (2022b) Towards a childcare guarantee, available at [towards-a-childcare-guarantee-sept-22.pdf](https://www.ippr.org/publications/towards-a-childcare-guarantee-sept-22) (ippr.org)
- 30** An alternative would be an online request form accessed via the claimant commitment where claimants can provide a summary of what hours they can manage and why they want to reduce their hours. Work coaches could then accept the request or arrange a meeting to discuss further. Having an online system in the first instance would reduce pressure on both claimants and work coaches. Work coaches should not be able to reject requests outright without a discussion.

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>