

Universal Credit Conditionality Policy Briefing

Policy changes and timeline

- 15th March: Chancellor Jeremy Hunt announces increased childcare support and tighter sanctions for UC claimants. Details not yet clear.
- 24th July: [The DWP announces](#) the implementation of the new work coach policies:
 - Parents of one-year-olds to meet with a job coach every three months – up from every six.
 - Parents of two-year-olds must meet with their job coach monthly - up from every 3 months.
- 25th October: [The DWP announces](#) work requirements for lead carers of 3-12 year olds is 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).

Who will be affected?

The DWP reports 700,000 individuals will be impacted by these changes; 90% of these lead carers are women and 33% have a declared health condition. The Equalities Impact Assessment for this policy change has not been published. However, the Assessment for the increase in the AET (Administrative Earnings Threshold) to 18 hours (from 15) revealed single parents would be disproportionately impacted so a similar impact is likely. The group is comprised of four subgroups:

- 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 increase their work availability to 30 hours (from the current 16 hours)
- 385,000 lead carers of 5- to 12-year-olds will have to increase their work availability to 30 hours (from the current 25 hours)

Challenges with this policy change

Work availability – There is a shortage of jobs which can work around single parenting responsibilities. The number of [people wanting to work part-time outstrips available part-time jobs by 4:1](#) and only 3 in 10 jobs offer flexibility. One parent explained, *“[I] feel so sick about this and I haven’t slept in days. Got an appointment with work coach in 10 days, so I guess I will find out more.... My work cannot give me anymore hours.”*

Childcare access and affordability – Only [66% of local authorities reported sufficient childcare for 3–4-year-olds](#) before this policy was introduced and [40% of schools don’t have wrap around care available before and after school](#). Availability is worse in more deprived areas. Childcare that is available is expensive. The 30 hours childcare funding 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. One parent said, *“I have no childcare other than school as I haven’t any parents and my sister lives 800 miles away. I’m rural, so childcare in the summer holidays is virtually non-existent, which means I **have** to work a term time only job.”*

Mental wellbeing – [Research](#) shows that paid work only supports single parents’ mental health when it is balanced with their childcare responsibilities. Increasing pressure on lone parents to move into any work, or to work longer hours, could increase maternal depression and lead to increased incidents of burn out. As one single parent told us, *“I am already feeling immense stress just from the news breaking of this change...I suffer with mental*

health issues long term, I cannot work more than part time hours without having a breakdown and becoming on sick leave.”

Career progression – This policy will make accessing training and development even harder and prevent single parents developing meaningful careers. It will push single parents to accept jobs below their skills set, something [35% of single parents reported](#) prior to this policy change. One mother explained, *“I currently have a job in a primary school...The DWP are already hinting I move him 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.”*

Challenges in the workplace – [60% of single parents report](#) that ending single parent employment discrimination would enable them to find work. They also reported a lack of understanding from employers. Increasing work hours may exacerbate this disconnection as single parents have less non-working hours to fulfil their caring responsibilities. One single parent said, *“I believe that a number of development opportunities have been denied to me since being widowed which were previously offered to me when my husband was alive but received no response to when I tried to follow them up.”*

Lack of flexibility – [DWP’s own research](#) shows that even when lone parent flexibilities were regulated, job centre staff often did not mention them to claimants. [Concessions agreed under the old system](#), such as a 60-minute maximum commute time rather than 90 minutes, appear to have been removed. Single parents may in practice require 50 hours of childcare a week, not 30. Many report that work-coach meetings are unhelpful and arranged at short notice. One single parent said, *“I’ve got an appointment for Tuesday as I had lost my job but they won’t advise me on that even though I have told them I can’t make it due to childcare. It’s like they pick and choose the journal updates.”*

Sanctions – This policy disproportionately impacts those in lower income groups who face poorer working conditions and longer commutes. Single parents face greater rates of unfair sanctions, and this policy is likely to increase it further. The DWP have [announced that the current voluntary ‘In Work Progression’ offer will become mandatory for those in the light-touch group from 2024](#) risking even greater levels of sanctions for these 500,000+ lead carers who will now be placed into that group.

What would better help single parents?

- Affordable and accessible childcare for all, not tied to income or work status
- Flexible work opportunities for single parents with career progression
- Support for single parents wanting to undertake training and development
- More support and understanding from employers for single parents
- Dedicated work coaches for single parents who understand their realities
- An end to single parent discrimination in the workplace

Further information

For more information on this briefing please contact us on singleparentrights@gmail.com