Tailor-made?
Single parents’ experiences of employment support from Jobcentre Plus and the Work Programme

Executive Summary

Introduction

“It lifts your spirits a little bit thinking maybe this is different, maybe this is something that is more about me, because that’s how they sell it to you – it’s more personalised. But actually your experience isn’t that different.” – Jane, twins aged 12

There is urgent need for a step-change in the delivery of employment support to help single parents into work. As austerity measures hit low income single parents hard, securing sustainable employment at a decent wage represents single parents’ best chance of lifting their families out of poverty. And yet, despite years of government experimentation with welfare reform programmes, the employment rate for single parents still falls far short of that achieved by single parents across other European countries and of mothers in couples in the UK, and has little more than plateaued since 2007.

Most recent studies of into work support have focused either on Jobcentre Plus provision or on the Work Programme. Our research is therefore particularly important as it looks at both together, and is thus able to draw conclusions and recommendations that consider the complete package of government-funded employment support that single parents may experience.

The current coalition government approach to getting single parents into work is closely built on that of the previous government. Significant numbers of single parents have been subject to conditionality in return for out of work benefits since 2008, and in return have been offered employment support based on key principles of flexibility, personalisation, value for money and a welcome emphasis on sustainable job outcomes.

However, these principles are often poorly applied and inadequately delivered. This research shows that significant reform is required to both the Jobcentre Plus Offer and the Work Programme – and, crucially, that there must be a clear differentiation of their roles if the system is to stop failing single parents who are highly motivated to work but face significant barriers in a tough job market.
Key findings and recommendations

Employment support is failing far too many single parents.

Our research shows that:

• Single parents are largely invisible within the system. The lack of understanding amongst providers of the specific barriers they face – in particular finding work that fits around their caring responsibilities, the cost and availability of childcare, low skills and limited work experience – or of how to overcome these barriers, impedes the process of supporting them to find work

• Although promised personalised and tailored support, single parents are mainly receiving a very limited and basic offer of generic support, whether accessed through Jobcentre Plus or a Work Programme provider

• Job outcomes for single parents are well below that of other claimant groups, despite evidence that single parents are highly motivated to work

• Despite some moves to measure performance (of Work Programme providers at least) on ‘sustainable job outcomes’, the system of employment support overall is still more geared towards ‘any job’ than a job that lasts and provides an adequate income.

Most worryingly, not only has the overall single parent employment rate stalled far below that of mothers in couples but this research also shows that single parents are already falling significantly behind other claimant groups in achieving job outcomes under the Work Programme. This brings into serious question both the Work Programme’s effectiveness for single parents and its value-for-money for the taxpayer.

1. Tackling invisibility – putting the focus back on single parents

“I didn’t feel that my circumstances were going to make any difference to what I was going to have to do” – Mark, one child aged 14

Single parents, as a group, have particular needs and face particular barriers to work. And yet, despite the number of single parents on jobseeker’s allowance (JSA) increasing from around 5,000 in 2008 up to over 145,000 in autumn 2012, specialist provision tailored to their specific needs has actually decreased, replaced by a growth in generalist provision. Single parents, and their specific employment support needs, are falling under the radar – with significant consequences.

Our research provides evidence of poor understanding of single parents’ specific needs and of the flexibilities available for parents with caring responsibilities, and no access to specialist advisers. Moreover, on the Work Programme single parents are already getting consistently lower job outcome rates than other claimants: the first set of monitoring data showed that 3.5 per cent of referrals overall in the first year of the Work Programme resulted in job outcome payments, an already disappointing figure that was below the government’s minimum performance target for providers. However, for single parents the figure was 30 per cent lower at just over 2.5 per cent, and was lower still for single parents who are disabled or aged 18-24.
Government has made clear commitments to delivering a more personalised approach to employment support. This includes the promise to give “more responsibility to Jobcentre Plus advisers to assess claimants’ individual needs and to offer the support they think most appropriate”, as well as the Work Programme’s aim of “creating a structure that treats people as individuals and allows providers greater freedom to tailor the right support to the individual needs of each claimant”.

Our research shows that these commitments are firmly at odds with many single parents’ experiences. A significant number of the single parents we spoke to reported being offered only a relatively basic and generic core of training support by either Jobcentre Plus or Work Programme. Some had also experienced being ‘parked’ while on the Work Programme – that is, being left unsupported while others are favoured for support. This appears to have affected both those closest to and those farthest from the labour market, with provider energies focused on those they felt needed relatively low resource input to ‘tip’ their prospects of finding work.

Our research unearthed further system problems, with a lack of clear and tangible minimum service expectations communicated to single parents and a lack of accountability for what they are offered by way of support. This ranged from a lack of awareness of Work Programme minimum service guarantees, the all-too-common report that many single parents were not being told by either Jobcentre Plus or Work Programme advisers about the single parent JSA flexibilities (special rules that allow them to combine work with caring for their children), to limited use by any provider of more intensive interventions such as work experience or referral to specialist provision.

**Recommendations**

- The government must ensure that employment support providers put renewed focus on single parents as a discrete claimant group in order to deliver a significant increase in single parent employment, and as part of this focus should set a clear and ambitious target for single parent employment and an action plan to achieve it. This would also support existing priorities to reduce the number of workless households and tackle child poverty.

- The government should ensure that single parents receive consistent and reliable support for childcare costs incurred when preparing for work in order to ensure that they are on a level playing field with other claimants. Jobcentre Plus should guarantee access to the Flexible Support Fund to pay for childcare costs for single parents seeking work, and there should be an equivalent scheme provided by Work Programme providers.

**2. Providing a genuinely tailored service offer that can meet the needs of all single parents**

“There's never anyone there to help you actually find something. So you're just basically on your own really and it's just a hard thing actually to get to the interview stage.” – Aisha, two children aged 10 and 12

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**Recommendations**

- The Work Programme referral process should be amended to allow claimants to choose which of their local providers to go to. Consumer choice would improve competition both between the two or three prime providers per Contract Package Area and between the different providers in each prime’s supply chain, encouraging them to deliver high-quality personalised employment support.

- Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers must ensure that all advisers understand and inform single parents about the single parent JSA flexibilities, so that they are best able to balance job seeking with their childcare responsibilities.

- The government must build public and employer confidence in the value of work experience by developing a portfolio of well-managed work placement schemes available on a voluntary basis to improve job prospects.

- The government must place higher priority on claimant feedback within performance management and accountability frameworks.

**3. Clarifying the respective roles of Jobcentre Plus and the Work Programme**

“I don’t think the left-hand knows what the right-hand is doing... It’s almost like when I go to Jobcentre – ‘that’s what the Work Programme is for’, when you go to the Work Programme often they’re like, ‘oh, what did the Jobcentre say?’” – Shareen, two children aged 13 and 18

Single parents referred to the Work Programme following a period of support by Jobcentre Plus found that they were frequently being offered a very similar suite of basic support as before, such as generic courses on CV writing, job search and basic skills. This ‘groundhog day’ approach is not only deeply frustrating for individual claimants but is also a significant waste of time and resources on the part of both providers.

Our research also highlighted a number of communication problems between Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme advisers, particularly around initial referral to the Work Programme, duplication of job search requirements, responsibility for the provision of better-off calculations, and the process of signing-off JSA. This led, in some cases, to single parents being bounced between the two organisations multiple times before a problem was resolved.
Sustainability is not being given due priority. Our research shows that many advisers across Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers still take a ‘work first’ approach, pushing for rapid transitions into work irrespective of single parents’ needs or work aims. Although Work Programme providers are paid in part on the basis of sustained job outcomes (this is not currently the case for Jobcentre Plus), there appears to be very limited investment across both types of support for skilling up single parents. The lower job outcome rates already in evidence for single parents on the Work Programme reinforce our concerns, particularly when the primary aim of this programme is to support claimants into sustainable employment.

Recommendations

• The government must urgently undertake a rapid review to draw out the key differences between Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme provision, map out a seamless referral process between the two, and remove duplication in the services provided

• Once there is clarity between what is provided by each of Jobcentre Plus and the Work Programme, consideration should be given to developing a diagnostic tool for use at the start of a single parent’s JSA claim which identifies whichever employment support provision is most appropriate for their needs, matches those needs to providers within either Jobcentre Plus or Work Programme supply chains, and enables the claimant to choose to fast-track to that support.

4. Job that last – not jobs first

“No, no. I’m not doing a course or training because they are really pushing for the work” – Maria, two children aged 12 and 13

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Recommendations

• Jobcentre Plus should include sustainable job outcomes in its performance management and accountability framework so as to match the focus on sustainability that is intended in the Work Programme

• Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers must undertake early assessment of need for skills training, and provide adequate investment in vocational skills – not just basic skills and employability.