

Untapped talent

Single parents and in-work progression – the national picture



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About Gingerbread

Gingerbread is the leading national charity working with single parent families. Our mission is to champion and enable single parent families to live secure, happy and fulfilling lives.

Since 1918 we've been supporting, advising and campaigning with single parents to help them meet their family's needs and achieve their goals.

We want to create a world in which diverse families can thrive. We won't stop working until we achieve this vision. Whatever success means for a single parent – a healthy family, a flexible job, stable finances or a chance to study – we work with them to make it happen.

Our 2018-2021 strategy focuses on four core areas:

- **Stability for single parents;**
- **Families can thrive;**
- **Families are valued; and**
- **Fit for the future.**

As set out in Gingerbread's Change Framework, which underpins this strategy, supporting single parents to improve their financial optimism, build on their long-term interests and pursue their employment aspirations as their children get older – all of which can be supported through in-work progression – are key ways in which we will enable single parent families to thrive.



**Our vision
is a world
where
diverse
families
can thrive**

Executive summary

Policy context

While interventions in employment have traditionally focused on job entry, there is a growing policy focus in the UK on low pay as a problem and in-work progression as a potential solution.

The government policy plan within universal credit (UC) is to encourage people in work to increase their pay. In-work progression will become increasingly relevant, as receipt of UC could be linked to a conditionality earnings threshold – determining not just the number of hours, but the hourly rate of pay which single parents must seek to achieve. Under the conditionality earnings threshold, a single parent would be expected to work a specified number of hours, dependent on the age of their youngest child, multiplied by the National Living Wage. As of August 2019, a high number of single parents, over 664,000, had already moved to UC under natural migration¹; it is estimated that, under continued natural migration and managed migration, once introduced, 90% of single parents will move onto UC by September 2024².

At Gingerbread we want single parents to thrive at work by securing flexible jobs that make the most of their skills and allows them time with their children. We are keen to influence policy to increase opportunities for single parents to progress at work. However, progression at work is not just to fulfil single parents' obligations under UC. We know that many single parents have a desire to progress in work but currently face a range of obstacles that prevents this becoming a reality. We want this to change for single parents and our report sets out positive policy recommendations for government and employers to enable this to happen.

Our research

To explore single parents' attitudes, aspirations and experiences of in-work progression, we reviewed the academic literature examining work trajectories and evaluating interventions in this area; analysed quantitative data from the government's Labour Force Survey (LFS) and undertook qualitative interviews with 14 working single parents, with a diverse range of family circumstances. A number of consistent, linked themes emerged from these data, which shape single parents' experiences of in-work progression, and will continue to do so in the future. Our intention is that this backdrop of evidence will inform the future work of government and employers around in-work progression for single parents.

1 Analysis undertaken of 'Households on Universal Credit' via DWP's Stat-Xplore, available at <https://stat-xplore.dwp.gov.uk/webapi/jsf/dataCatalogueExplorer.xhtml>

2 This estimate is based on the proportion of single parents who were in receipt of tax credits prior to the roll-out of UC, and is broadly consistent with figures produced from other analysis or modelling.

Findings

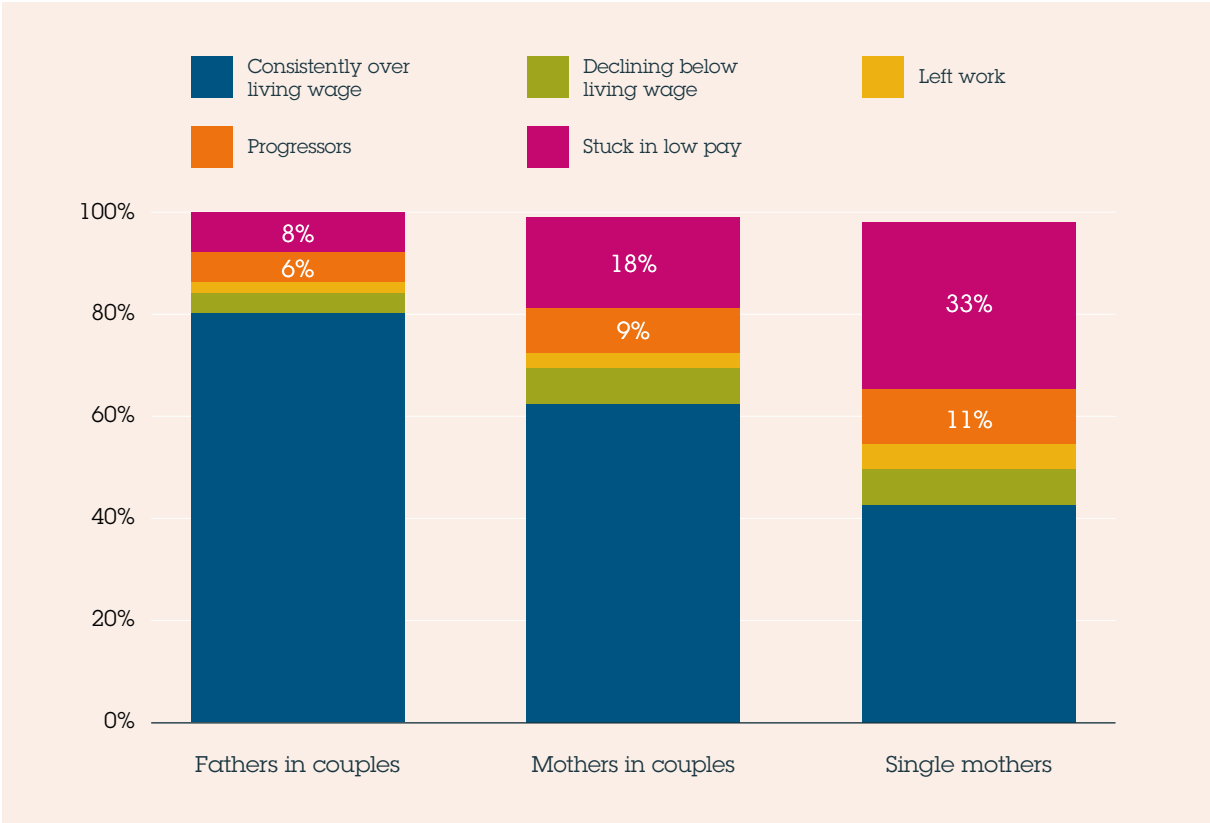
Single parents are less likely to progress at work than parents in couples; however, they should not be treated as a homogenous group.

The evidence and our own analysis show that single parents are more likely to be low paid and less likely to progress out of low pay, compared with other groups, including parents in couples.

However, single parents are far from being a homogenous group in terms of their pay and progression:

- Single fathers are more similar to fathers in couples than single mothers in the rates of their pay and the extent of their part-time working.
- Aspirations regarding progression evolve over time, in line with children’s ages, school stages and needs. Children starting primary or secondary school are often viewed as key milestones in terms of single parents’ aspirations for and ability to progress. Those with the youngest children are the most likely to be in low-paid work and the least likely to progress.

Figure 1: Parents’ work progression in relation to voluntary Living Wage, over a one year period



Source: Labour Force Surveys, 2013-2018 data-sets

Progression is viewed in a broader context of family lives and financial circumstances.

Single parents' attitudes to and aspirations for progression are located in a broader range of inter-linked concerns and considerations regarding their family lives and financial circumstances. Single parents consider progression in relation to its potential impacts on their children's well-being and financial situations, as well as in relation to more personal goals, with evidence that the former considerations frequently take precedence.

"I had to turn a job down which was absolutely gut wrenching because, in terms of my personal progression and satisfaction, that was what I would love to get back into and I had the perfect job offer...but I could not really justify it because it would have changed my daughter's life and I wouldn't have been that much better off financially."

– Single parent with pre-school aged child³

Five main inter-linked barriers limit single parents' opportunities to progress.

1. A lack of flexibility

Single parents have sole responsibility for caring for and arranging childcare for their children, including managing illnesses and holidays, rather than sharing these with a partner. This results in a lack of flexibility which impacts on their ability to progress in a number of ways. It limits their ability to work towards progression by taking on extra responsibilities and shifts or to undertake training. For some, it necessitates part-time working or working more locally, constraining the range of progression opportunities that can be pursued.

"I think of those men, and these are six figure salaries, ...their career progression had often been quite quick, but they had someone at home, they did not have to rush home, they did not have to [make] all those arrangements. I think it's quite impossible if you are the person trying to do both."

– Single parent who previously had a full-time senior role in a private company but has moved into a more junior job

3 The quotes in the Executive Summary are drawn from the qualitative interviews with single parents.

2. Working part-time

Single parents are substantially more likely to work part-time than the working-age population in general and other parents. Working part-time is associated with poorer progression outcomes, due to a lack of quality part-time jobs. Single parents report that working part-time limits the range of progression opportunities that can be pursued, chiefly through moving to other organisations, as the right to request flexible working is only open after six months working in a role. There is a widespread perception that part-time working does not lead to progression, with many jobs being perceived as being designed with a full-time worker in mind.

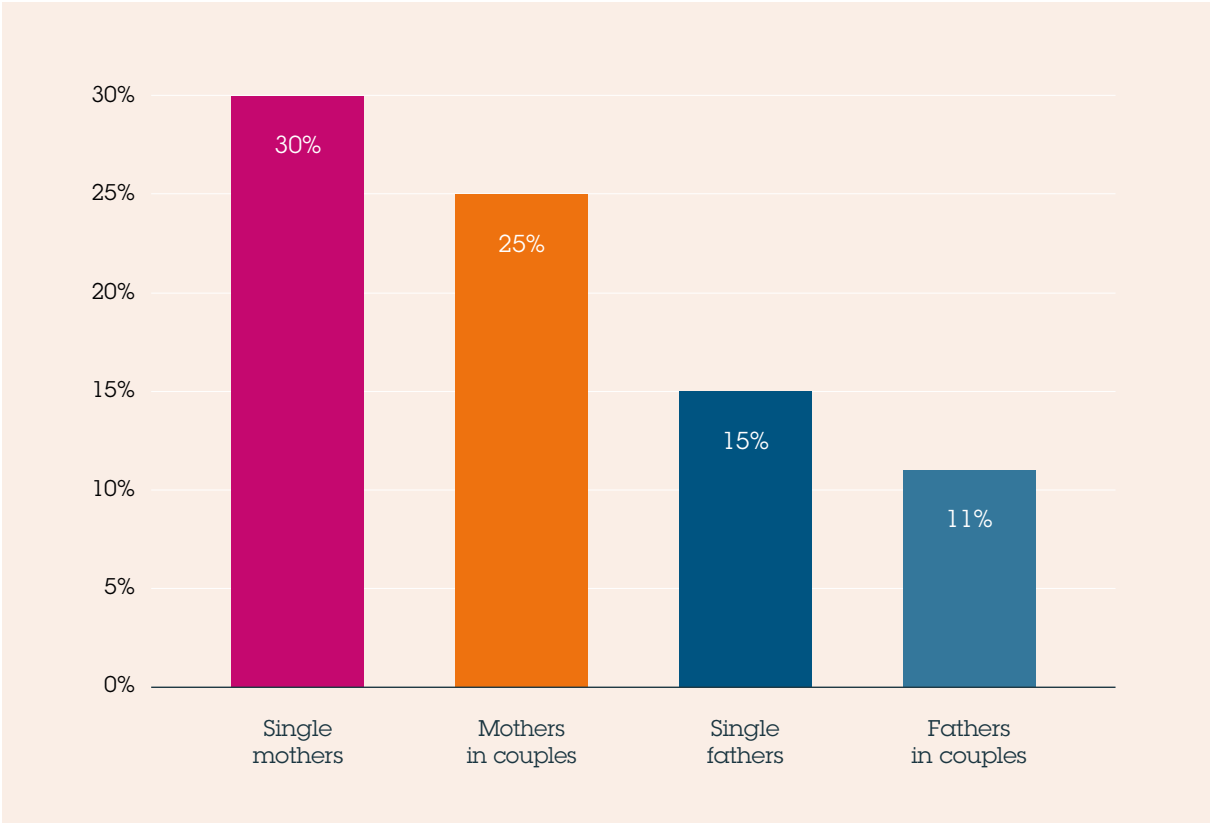
“Make part-time work become just accepted as normal as opposed to being seen as a second-rate worker”

– Recommendation from single parent with pre-school aged child

“I wanted a part-time role, but it is very difficult to get back into unless you already had the job prior to going on maternity leave”

– Single parent with children in primary and secondary school who moved into retail work

Figure 2 Prevalence of part-time work among different groups of parents



Source: Labour Force Surveys, 2017-2018 data-sets

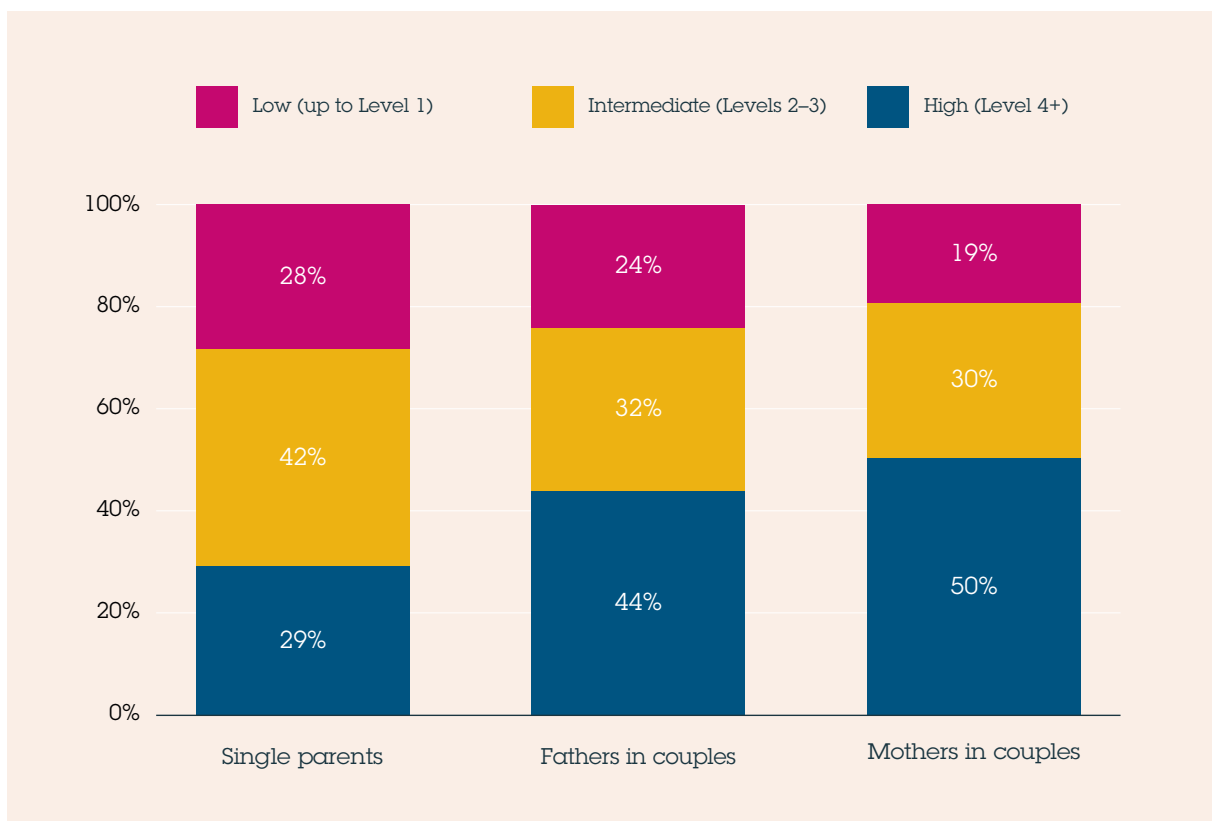
3. Level of education

When compared to the working age population as a whole, single parents tend to be less educated; consistent evidence shows that progression is harder to achieve for those with lower levels of education. However, there are still a high number of single parents who have achieved a high level of education, but even where they are highly-educated single parents work in jobs below their skill-levels, compared to coupled mothers and fathers, in order to access part-time, local or flexible roles that give them sufficient flexibility around their caring responsibilities but, at the same time, limit their opportunities to progress.

“I’ve ended up doing part-time work for which I am probably over-qualified, in terms of experience as well as education. I have found that along with that has come quite a drop in confidence which affects future progression.”

– Single parent with two secondary aged children

Figure 3 Parents' levels of education



Source: Labour Force Surveys, 2017-2018 data-sets

4. Childcare

The costs of childcare and logistics of organising it around work were identified as major barriers to progression by all of the parents we interviewed; this was consistently identified as the area where government intervention would enhance their ability to progress.

“I really wanted to go back full-time but I cannot because I’m not going to be able to afford the childcare...I’ve already started looking at basically working as a teaching assistant or something like that in a school so I can get my holidays to be with him, because I couldn’t afford the childcare for it.”

– *Single parent with pre-school aged child who prior to having her child worked in a managerial role*

“If I was to go into an office you’ve got to factor in the driving and also I’ve got the problem that my daughter’s afterschool [club] closes at 17:45, so I would have to have a job that’s literally very local or finishes at 17:00...there are lots of jobs I see and they work until 17:30 at night which [means] I cannot get back to the after school club for 17:45.”

– *Single parent with primary school aged children*

5. Time out of the labour market

Time out of the labour market impacts on an individual’s ability to progress at work. There is a common concern among single parents about losing skills due to time taken off work or spent working in jobs below one’s skill level.

“The longer I am at this lower level, the harder it is going to be, both in terms of my confidence but also technology changes.”

– *Single parent with pre-school aged child who prior to having her child worked in a managerial role*

“I don’t seem to get the roles because I think they look at my CV and think – ‘oh she has worked in retail for 8 years, she’s had no recent experience in an office’.”

– *Single parent with children at primary and secondary school who used to work in an office and would like to again*

A range of 'enablers' of progression, specific to single parents, were identified.

Removal of structural barriers

When discussing factors that would facilitate progression, single parents focused on interventions to address the structural barriers outlined above – most frequently around the cost and availability of childcare. The concept of introducing flexibility or part-time working to a greater range of jobs was also identified. Emerging evidence suggests that 'job re-design' has the potential to open up progression opportunities for those who tend to work part-time, including single parents.

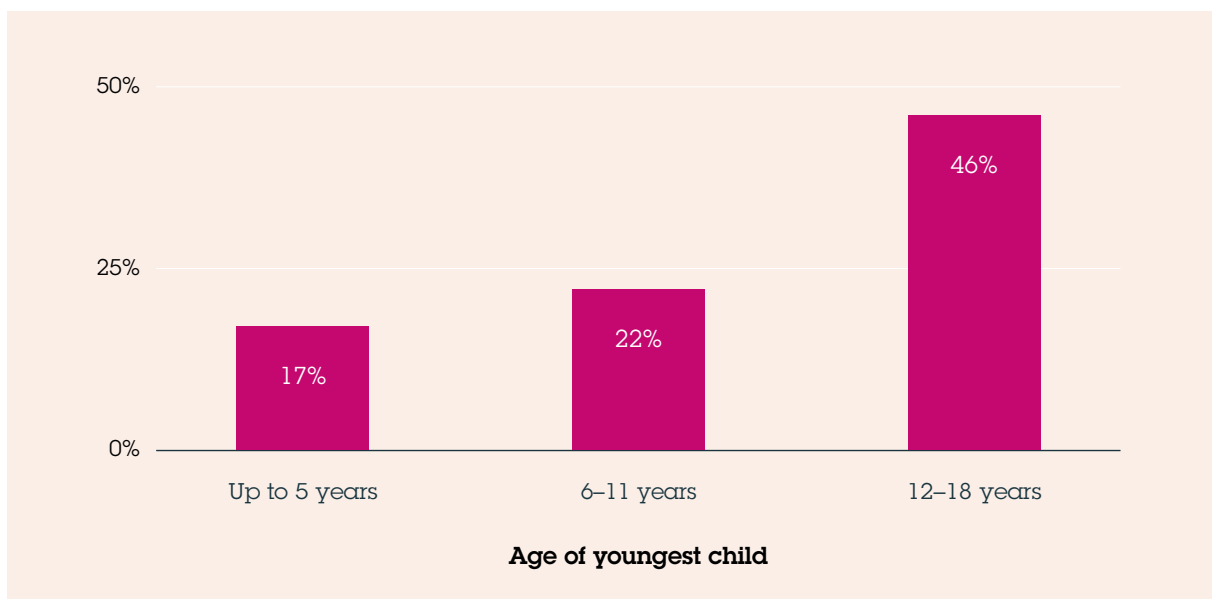
Life-stage

Single parents viewed their children getting older and moving into different school stages as key to opening up a greater range of progression opportunities, by reducing their caring responsibilities or financial commitments in terms of childcare. Reflecting this, those with older children were less likely to be stuck in low pay and more likely to progress.

"I don't feel I can work full-time until she is older. I'm stuck. I don't feel I can progress at all really."

– Single parent with child at primary school

Figure 4 Proportion of single mothers working full-time, by age of youngest child



Source: Labour Force Surveys, 2017-2018 data-sets

Role of employers and support networks

Few initiatives to increase in-work progression have been aimed exclusively or primarily at single parents, while those that have been delivered provide limited evidence of long-term success in securing sustained progression. However, the positive role employers can play should not be under-estimated; a number of single parents pointed towards the input provided by their employers as having been pivotal in facilitating the progression they had achieved. Single parents spoke about the importance of information being available to help them learn about progression in their particular sectors. A number had, or would have liked to have, a mentor; this role was seen as enabling not just practical support to help with work plans, but help with building the confidence needed to progress.

“My company are incredibly thoughtful and understanding, because obviously things like when [the kids are] ill I cannot go in...some employers could be funny about it, mine...they are really understanding...they (also) made a job for me to come back to.”

– *Single parent with a pre-school aged child*

“[My mentor’s] big thing is helping people to break through their personal barriers”

– *Single parent with children at primary and secondary school who has a mentor from the private sector*

Recommendations


The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should be cautious in the development of in-work progression requirements for single parents, developing a better evidence base for what works for this group and moving away from a punitive approach including sanctions that are unfair and counterproductive in promoting progression.

Gingerbread would like to see more employers utilise the untapped pool of talent and skills that single parents possess both from their existing staff but also in their external recruitment to roles. Such a move would help many more single parents to progress with their existing employer and help single parents to have the confidence to move to a new job role at a different organisation, which can be a vital way for people to progress in their career.

To remove or reduce the barriers to in-work progression facing single parents, Gingerbread suggests a range of solutions are needed requiring action and collaboration from a number of government departments and employers:

Increase the availability of part-time and flexible work

- It is positive that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has consulted on a duty on employers to consider if a job can be done flexibly and to make that clear when advertising a role. We would like this to go further to introduce a duty on employers to publish flexible working options in job adverts and give workers the right to take up the advertised flexibility from day one. In the meantime employers should voluntarily consider whether a job can be done flexibly and this should be made clear in job advertising through the use of the Working Families 'Happy to Talk Flexible Working' strapline.
- Employers should open up more roles in management and senior levels with part-time and flexible hours for both internal and external recruits. In addition we would urge employers to learn from the good practice examples on in-work progression which support and develop existing staff. For instance the Pets at Home project led by Timewise which opened up more



**Increase
availability of
part-time and
flexible work**

management roles for part-time workers and the Institute for Employment Studies project which shows the positive role of employers in providing up-skilling and pathways to progression for lower skilled workers.

Cheaper and more accessible childcare

- The DWP must loan the upfront costs of childcare for single parents (not through the Flexible Support Fund) including deposits and the first month advance payment, so that single parents do not need to cover this substantial upfront cost. This could be modelled on the Childcare Deposit Loan Scheme that Gingerbread developed with the Greater London Authority.
- The DWP should review the operation of childcare payments under universal credit around evidence of payment and the monthly payments being made in arrears.
- The Department for Education (DfE) should reconsider the current operation of the 30 hour childcare offer to make it more compatible with the realities of working life including offering this provision throughout the year.
- The DfE needs to urgently review the childcare cap which limits the total amount that parents can receive and was set back in April 2003. This level has not kept up with rising childcare costs and prevents the promised 85% support for childcare under Universal Credit.

**Make childcare
cheaper
and more
accessible**

Offering timely careers support

- The DWP should target career support and advice to single parents at key stages of their children's lives, in particular when their youngest child begins primary or secondary school.
- Employers should use their appraisal system to encourage single parents within their workforce to consider progression and offer coaching to build the confidence of single parents to progress.
- The Government Equalities Office (GEO), BEIS and employers should set up networks for single parents to access information and support in different work sectors and at different levels of roles. In addition a mentoring programme, which includes single parents as a priority group, should be piloted and evaluated by the GEO along similar lines to their returners programme.

**Offer careers
support at the
right time**

Section 1: Literature review

Introduction

This review summarises what is currently known about in-work progression for single parents in the UK.

The first section outlines why recent changes to government policy mean that this is an increasingly important issue facing single parents. The second section draws on studies exploring the work trajectories of different groups within the workforce and evaluations of interventions designed to improve in-work progression. It sets out what is known about the factors that promote (and inhibit) in-work progression which relate to single parents specifically and examines which interventions and policy changes work (or have the potential to work) in promoting in-work progression for single parents in particular.

In-work progression: definition and measurement

There is no single accepted definition of 'in-work progression'; this has been defined and measured in the research and evaluation literature in a range of different ways. Studies have variably measured progression on the basis of monetary definitions, primarily relating to earnings, either in isolation or benchmarked against a range of baselines including the National Minimum Wage, the Minimum Income Standard, the Living Wage threshold, and relative to the median wage. From a policy perspective, in-work progression has also traditionally been defined in monetary terms (Green et al, 2016). Non-monetary definitions have included the number of hours worked, job titles, job security, skills levels and career development.

In-work progression: a particular problem for single parents?

Under legacy welfare benefits, support and work search are directed to claimants who are out of work. Universal credit (UC) moves away from this model where requirements will also be placed on those who are in work but in low pay. The government's ambition for those on low pay and receiving in-work financial support is that they will progress into better work and ultimately become financially more self-reliant. The aims of the policy include a saving to the public purse, helping to address in-work poverty and a low

productivity economy. The in-work progression policy was developed in the context of the high number of workers in the UK who are in low pay, with 16.2% of employee jobs being low paid, based on hourly earnings (Office for National Statistics, 2019a) – a figure known to be higher for single parents, as shown in Section 2.

The government plan within UC is to encourage people in work to increase their pay. In work progression will become increasingly relevant, as receipt of UC could be linked to a conditionality threshold – determining not just the number of hours, but the hourly rate of pay that claimants must seek to achieve. For a single person, this threshold equates to full-time hours multiplied by the National Living Wage. For single parents, expectations regarding the number of hours worked are dependent on the age of the youngest child (DWP, 2019). UC guidance for families already specifies, for job seekers with caring responsibilities, that they should be looking for work for up to a specified number of hours⁴. Within the legacy benefit system this was set out as a minimum amount of hours that the single parent was expected to work, irrespective of the hourly rate of pay. Under UC in-work progression rules, as noted previously, the conditionality earnings threshold will be linked to the National Living Wage.

It is calculated that one million claimants will fall below the conditionality earnings threshold and will need to seek more (or better-paid) work as a condition of receiving UC. Given single parents' employment rate is at a record high at 69% (Office of National Statistics, 2019a), and their concentration in low paid jobs, as detailed in Section 2, progression out of low pay is a significant issue for single parents.

Progression can be achieved through increasing the number of hours worked (either in the existing job, or taking on an additional job) or through increasing hourly pay (by promotion within the current organisation or by moving organisation). Linking benefit receipt to wage levels rather than having an hours rule means that getting better per hour work becomes more appealing. Conversely, there is a danger that single parents, who are on average in lower skilled poorer paid work, will find it harder to comply with the conditionality earnings threshold unless they increase their hours of work.

This model has been piloted by the DWP in a series of trials. Single parents in the DWP's in-work progression pilot, delivered between April 2015 and March 2018 were under pressure to secure more hours⁵. These single parents were expected to look for work until their earnings reached the earnings threshold that applied to them. Single parents who were on the pilot who did not carry out mandatory actions to increase their hours or hourly rate risked losing benefits through the sanctions system. A low level sanction can last for seven days but higher level sanctions can last up to six months⁶ (Rabindrakumar and Dewar, 2018). Meanwhile, calls to Gingerbread's Helpline indicate that single parents, beyond those who were included the pilot, are being wrongly advised to increase their hours. There are regulations in place that will allow the DWP to further pilot in-work progression.

4 This is specified as 16 times the National Minimum Wage (NMW) for a single parent with a three or four year old, or 25 times the NMW for a single parent with a child aged between five and 12 or 35 times the NMW for a single parent whose young child is aged 13 or older.

5 Information on the evaluation of the pilot is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-in-work-progression-randomised-controlled-trial>

6 Amber Rudd MP the then the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions cut the maximum sanctions penalty from 3 years to 6 months in October 2019.

Achieving the level of in-work progression that will be required by UC is going to be particularly challenging for single parents, as opposed to standard claimants, as they disproportionately have the characteristics, and experience the barriers, historically associated with lower rates of in-work progression, as discussed in the next section.

What factors influence in-work progression for single parents?

There is consistent evidence that single parents, as a sub group, are less likely to progress in work than the working-age population as a whole. In their analysis of those who managed to ‘escape’ low pay between 2001 and 2011, the Resolution Foundation found that the number of years spent being a single parent was negatively associated with escaping (Resolution Foundation, 2014). Similarly, an analysis of those who were ‘stuck in low pay’ between 2012 and 2013 found that this was more likely to be the case for single parents – 41 per cent of single parents were ‘stuck in low pay’ nationally, compared with 33 per cent of the UK working-age population as a whole. The same study also found single parents to be 19 per cent more likely than the general population to be ‘cycling’ in and out of low pay (Wilson et al, 2013). Section 2 demonstrates that, in 2017-2018, single parents were both more likely to be stuck in low pay and disproportionately less likely, among those in low pay, to progress, compared with parents in couples.

However, it is important that we do not just consider single parent status in isolation. A number of other characteristics, both at the individual and employer levels, have been found to be associated with lower rates of progression, many of which are concentrated among or disproportionately affect single parents. In other words, the in-work progression rates of single parents cannot be understood on the basis of their single parent status alone⁷.

Individual characteristics

There is a considerable degree of consistency in the literature regarding the individual characteristics associated with lower rates of in-work progression. The majority of these characteristics are known to be more prevalent among single parents.

(a) Working part-time

Current figures show that the proportion of low-paid part-time employee jobs is more than three times as large as that of full-time employee jobs (Office for National Statistics, 2018). The concentration of low-paid jobs among part-time workers reflects widespread evidence that it is much more difficult for this group to progress, in monetary terms.

⁷ Other characteristics consistently found to be associated with in-work progression, but which are not necessarily associated with single parent status, are: personal motivation; enthusiasm and resilience; having a disability; age; ethnicity; and various measures of deprivation. While these may not be influencing experiences of in-work progression for single parents as a whole, they will be highly relevant to sub-groups of this population, for example single parents with disabilities.

In their analysis of those who escaped low pay over a ten-year period, the Resolution Foundation found that the number of years spent working part-time was negatively associated with 'escaping'. When this issue was explored in greater depth through qualitative research, it was concluded that "perhaps the most pervasive issue was the ingrained idea that "part-timers don't progress"". This view was found to be underpinned by a variety of assumptions – including the fact that managing part-time workers was seen to be more work for supervisors and a feeling among part-time workers of being removed from some processes and elements of the job (Resolution Foundation, 2014). Research by Timewise in the retail sector indicated that workers on the shop floor encountered difficulties in progressing to management roles – crucially because many of these jobs were designed with a full-time worker in mind and tasks could not be carried out in fewer than full-time hours. While, across the five retailers examined by Timewise, between 6 per cent and 25 per cent of promotions were awarded to part-time staff, this sub group made up between 50 per cent and 75 per cent of each store's overall staff. Indeed, around half of the part-time staff (52%) across the five retailers said that they would be interested in progression if they could take their current (part-time or flexible) working arrangements with them. (Timewise, 2016b)

Part-time working is a significant issue for a greater proportion of single parents. As detailed in Section 2, 30 per cent of single mothers and 11 per cent of single fathers of working age worked part-time in 2017-2018, compared with 12 per cent of the working-age population as a whole. Moreover, under the conditionality earnings threshold, it is not expected that single parents with younger children will work full-time, meaning that they will need to achieve 'progression' within the constraints of part-time working (DWP, 2019).

Part-time working is likely to be a particular barrier to progression because it inhibits the ability of individuals to move to jobs in other organisations. The 'right to request flexible work' is enshrined in legislation meaning that all employees are entitled to request a change to their working hours if they have been employed with the same employer for at least 26 weeks. This enables many to alter their working hours once in work – but will be a barrier to single parents and others wishing to move to jobs outside of their current organisations (because of a lack of certainty around gaining the same flexibility with a new employer and the need to wait for six months in order to potentially secure this). This barrier is particularly relevant to in-work progression; research has shown that progression is more likely to be achieved, and to a significant degree, by moving between (rather than within) organisations. The evaluation of the West London Alliance's Skills Escalator Pilot (designed to improve in-work progression for residents in private rented and temporary accommodation in two London boroughs, one third of whom were single parents) demonstrated that external progression to a new employer was by far the most common type of outcome achieved (58 per cent of all earnings outcomes), and led to larger financial gains, compared with other progression routes. Internal progression within an existing job resulted in much lower earnings increases (Colechin et al, 2017). This relationship is confirmed by broader quantitative analysis, which found that low-paid workers that changed jobs saw far greater wage progression than those that did not (Wilson et al, 2013).

During 2019, the government undertook a consultation regarding whether there should be a duty on employers 'to consider' whether a job can be done flexibly and to make this clear when advertising (we are currently awaiting the publication of its results). This duty 'to consider' could go some way to helping single parents to move to a new

employer if it resulted in a significant increase in the number of advertised flexible job roles on offer. However, we do not think that the proposals go far enough. Gingerbread and other organisations in the Flex for All campaign consider that the government should introduce a duty to publish flexible working options in adverts and give workers the right to take up the advertised flexibility from day one.

Meanwhile in terms of existing employment law the right to request flexible working does not cover those looking for work. Single parents looking for new or alternative part-time work must rely on advertised vacancies and the demand for these roles outstrips supply. Timewise research has shown 15.3 per cent of job adverts offer flexible working options, a proportion which still “falls well short of the extremely high demand – an estimated 87% of employees want to work flexibly”. Timewise describes this problem as particularly “acute” for those wishing to progress out of low pay; while 23% of jobs where the salary is lower than £20,000 are offered with flexible working, this proportion drops to 14% for the next wage band (£20,000-£34,000) (Timewise, 2019). The lack of quality part-time roles and the implications for single parents downgrading their job search were illustrated in recent Gingerbread research exploring the requirement to work under UC (Dewar and Ben-Galim, 2017). This research found that, while some single parents were well qualified and had a solid work history, they found it difficult to use their skills in the narrow range of jobs that were advertised flexibly, with the vast majority of jobs being advertised with full-time hours.

Working part-time also limits an individual’s ability to participate in training (as discussed further in Section 3) – an activity which may have the potential to increase their options for progression – given that attending training is known to increase progression rates (Wilson et al, 2013). Gingerbread’s recent research report on apprenticeships highlights that, while apprenticeships are the cornerstone of the government’s work skills agenda, single parents are largely locked out due to very few part-time apprenticeship opportunities, along with the low hourly pay and the lack of fit with available and affordable childcare (Dewar and Clery, 2019).

(b) A lack of flexibility

Frequently prompting the decision to work part-time in the first place is what has been termed as having ‘less than total flexibility’. Highlighting the impact of flexibility on progression, the Resolution Foundation’s analysis concluded that,

“People who were willing to work hard, often ‘beyond the call of duty’, doing unpaid overtime or covering shifts of people who were sick or hadn’t turned up were more likely to be chosen to progress....this revealed one of the most difficult barriers to overcome. Without the flexibility to be able to work later than planned or to take a shift at the last minute, it was difficult to build up a positive relationship with your manager”

– Resolution Foundation, 2014

While part-time workers, by definition, are less likely to have flexibility, due to only being present in the workplace for some of the time, this presents a particular issue for those with caring responsibilities, with time-specific commitments (such as school and childcare pick-ups) outside of the workplace. Moreover, this issue is exacerbated for single parents in particular, who would not have a partner with whom to share childcare

responsibilities, enabling extra flexibility. Interestingly, the Resolution Foundation research found no significant effect of being a woman or having young children in the household on the probability of escaping low pay. Considering the negative impact of being a single parent in light of this finding, it concluded that single parents, “will most likely face the barriers that other mothers do around part-time work, childcare and travel but these may be exacerbated without the help of a partner” (ibid).

This finding is supported by the results of recent proof of concept trials for in-work progression projects, commissioned by the DWP. Timewise’s UC Progression trial (in which 99 out of 102 recipients were single parents) found that having a young child was a barrier to progression, with childcare costs and having enough time to balance work and care also being highlighted. In the telephone survey conducted six months after project delivery, 13 (out of 67) participants mentioned how they perceived their caring responsibilities to be their main barrier to progression, whether balancing the costs of childcare or having sufficient time to manage their work and caring roles (DWP, 2017). In the longer-term, the evaluation of this intervention found that, “some clients reported that prioritising family life over their career goals and aspirations acted as a barrier as they had previously chosen roles or sectors that were convenient, easy to access or were compatible with family circumstances or needs” (Colechin and Bennett, 2017).

There are a number of ways in which the availability of childcare might limit parents’, and single parents’ in particular, flexibility and thus their ability to progress at work. Its location, availability (including outside of term-time) and opening times would logically impact on the range and types of job options that are available, once commuting times have also been factored in. Section 3 explores in detail how the need to use childcare limits the abilities of single parents in a range of circumstances to pursue progression opportunities.

c) Level of education

There is consistent evidence from analysis of work trajectories and interventions to promote progression that this is harder to achieve for those with lower levels of education. The Resolution Foundation found initially having a degree or getting one in the subsequent period were both positively associated with escaping low pay over a ten-year period (Resolution Foundation, 2014). Timewise’s evaluation of the Skills Escalator pilot similarly found that those starting with qualifications at level 3 and upwards had larger earnings gains than those starting with lower qualifications, while the evaluation of its UC Earnings Progression Trial reached a similar conclusion (Colechin and Bennet, 2017). Such research supports the findings of an earlier study by Gingerbread, which showed that single parents with a Level 3 qualification tend to have longer periods of sustained employment, secure better wages and are more likely to work longer hours (Gingerbread, 2014).

This trend is significant for single parents, who tend to have fewer educational qualifications than the working-age population as a whole. As detailed in Section 2, just 29 per cent of single parents in 2017-2018 had a ‘high’ level qualification (at Level 4 or above), compared with 44 per cent of fathers in couples and 50 per cent of mothers in couples. The impact of level of education on progression rates will therefore be experienced by a larger proportion of single parents, compared with other sections of the population. It should be noted that single parents are not a homogenous group, as single parents who have achieved a high level of education are still more likely to work

below their skills levels compared to coupled mothers and fathers. Moreover, as detailed previously, single parents are more limited in their ability to undertake training in order to improve their skills levels because of their caring commitments, tendency to work part-time and the lesser available degree of flexibility.

d) Work history

Due to having taken maternity leave or electing not to work for a period when their children were young (with Section 2 showing that around half of single mothers and one third of single fathers were not working in 2017-2018, when they had a child aged five years or less), single parents are, by definition, more likely to have gaps in their work histories. Recent research has found that raising a child without a partner who lives with you makes it more difficult to work. In particular it found that the proportion of mothers who returned to work or took up employment was much higher among women who lived with a partner when their child was born, than among single mothers. Single mothers who had a job before the birth of their baby were less likely to return to work – in both full- and part-time roles – compared to mothers who lived with their partner (Coram Family and Childcare Trust 2019).

The Resolution Foundation's analysis found that the number of years in employment across the ten-year period examined was significantly and positively associated with escaping low pay (Resolution Foundation, 2014). While parents are inherently more likely to have 'work gaps', the fact that the employment rate for single parents is lower than for parents in couples, indicates that they are even more likely to experience the impact of this characteristic on their progression at work. In Section 3, a number of single parents detail the impacts of taking time out of the labour market on their skills levels, confidence and perceived ability to progress.

Characteristics of organisations

In addition to individual characteristics, a number of the characteristics of the organisations in which individuals work are known to link to levels of in-work progression⁸. For single parents, the impact of occupational sector is most relevant, as single parents' employment is known to be disproportionately concentrated in a number of key occupational groups in which research has shown that work progression is particularly challenging. Most notably, analysis of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) shows that single mothers in 2017-2018 were more than twice as likely compared to the working-age population as a whole to be in a caring, leisure or other service occupation (24%, compared with 9%), and were almost twice as likely to be in sales or customer services (12%, compared with 6%) or in elementary occupations (16%, compared with 9%). (The proportions of single fathers in different occupational groups tended to be more similar to those found in the working-age population as a whole).

In their analysis of those who escaped low pay over a ten-year period, the Resolution Foundation found that, while no sectors were positively associated with progression,

8 These include the size of the organisation, whether it is a public or private sector body and the availability of various human resources structures and practices – none of which are necessarily more prevalent among organisations where single parents work.

remaining in a sales occupation or within the hospitality sector were both negatively associated (Resolution Foundation, 2014). Other research has found that occupations with the highest proportions of low earners stuck in low pay are: customer services (where 49% of low earners had annual wage growth less than the national average); and elementary administration and service occupations (where 44% of low earners were stuck in low pay) (Wilson et al, 2013). Clearly then, the disproportionate concentration of various characteristics, associated with lower rates of progression, among single parents is compounded by the fact that single parents are also disproportionately concentrated in areas of work where outcomes are also known to be less positive.

From the evidence reviewed in this section, it is clear that in-work progression is a particular challenge for single parents, due to the fact that the experience of being a single parent, and many of the characteristics more prevalent among this group, are associated with lower rates of in-work progression. In the second part of our review, we examine what is known about interventions and policies to improve in-work progression for single parents.

What interventions improve in-work progression for single parents?

There is currently limited generalisable evidence regarding what interventions work in supporting people in low pay to progress at work (Wilson et al, 2013). Furthermore, in-work progression policies are largely untested internationally. The DWP has identified instances in Canada and the Netherlands of small scale state supported projects to increase earnings. However, the DWP recognise that UC is “the first time that any country has made a significant commitment to supporting people through the welfare system to seek to increase their earnings in work” (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2016). While the current evidence base is limited, there has been an upsurge in recent years in policy interest in the issue of in-work progression, and low pay more generally, which has resulted in a range of new initiatives that should significantly strengthen the evidence base in the future (Green et al, 2016). This has, to some extent, been prompted by the roll-out of UC and the future progression requirements, with a number of interventions being trialled by the government and others, responding to this shift in the policy landscape specifically.

Those interventions that have been undertaken in recent years, while limited in number, have been delivered by individual employers or groups of employers, sectoral or voluntary-sector organisations with a specific interest in this area. A systematic review of national and international literature focusing on the retail, hospitality, social care, construction, transport and logistics, financial and professional services, and manufacturing sectors identified relatively few sectoral initiatives aimed specifically at progression. (Green et al, 2016)

Very few of these interventions have been aimed at single parents specifically, although single parents have been the dominant or a key recipient group in a minority of cases:

- Launched by the DWP in 2003 and delivered until 2007, the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) Demonstration was aimed at three groups with historically weak links with the labour market – two of which were single parents – those who had volunteered for the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) programme and those who were already working part-time and receiving Working Tax Credit. Adapting a programme from the US, ERA provided a mix of support for participants, including job coaching, support for skills development, and financial incentives to encourage (full-time) work retention (Sianesi, 2010).
- The West London Alliance Skills Escalator Pilot, undertaken in two London boroughs from late 2014, was aimed at those in rented or temporary accommodation, one third of whom were single parents. It aimed to “support working people on low household incomes in West London to gain better-paid and more stable employment through a programme of personalised advice and skills acquisition” (Colechin et al, 2017).
- Timewise Foundation’s UC earnings progression Proof of Concept, aimed to support and increase 102 low-income parents’ incomes beyond proposed UC income thresholds while maintaining flexible working, with support lasting between a month and up to a year. The model provided one- to-one tailored support for parents, alongside employer facing support (DWP, 2017).
- The GOALS UK Step Up model, aimed to motivate and support 80 low-income part-time workers towards progression in work and greater financial independence. The model was based on a motivational coaching programme. 66 of the 80 participants were female, with many having caring responsibilities (Ibid).

These, and other interventions aimed at in-work progression, variably involve combinations of elements including the provision of advisor or work coach support, the provision of training, careers advice and job brokering, peer mentoring, employer engagement and the availability of financial support or incentives.

To date, there have been few attempts to synthesize the evidence on in-work progression in relation to single parents and other disadvantaged groups arising from such interventions, a notable exception is the recently published work by the Institute for Employment Studies, which presents evidence and insights regarding the progression of low-skilled workers from six European countries and seeks to share this with employers via a designed toolkit (Institute for Employment Studies, 2019).

However, it should be noted that the levels of in-work progression associated with the interventions and pilots aimed largely or exclusively at single parents, outlined above, were somewhat limited:

- The evaluation of the ERA Demonstration project found few long-term outcomes for either group of single parents, and none associated with progression. It concluded that, “Indeed, for either lone parent group no lasting nor temporary impact could be detected on hourly wages, on weekly earnings, on job quality, on yearly earnings or on the time spent in employment, all outcomes that one would expect to see increase if there were an effect on retention and advancement” (Sianesi, 2010).

- Just one in five of those who participated in the West London Alliances' Skills Escalator Pilot between the last quarter of 2014 and first quarter of 2016 had increased their earnings by March 2016, with this outcome being more common among younger more highly-educated participants (those aged under 40 and with qualifications at Level 3 and above) (Colechin et al, 2017).
- At the end of the delivery period for Timewise's UC earnings progression trial, 28 of the 102 participants had achieved a progression outcome, with 21 participants having increased their earnings specifically (Colechin and Bennett, 2017).
- Five participants in GOAL UK's Step up programme achieved positive employment outcome; two had increased their working hours, two had been promoted in their jobs and one was starting a second job. However, this represents a very small proportion (fewer than 10%) of the 80 participants who took part (DWP, 2017).

While a considerable number of single parents will have participated in the DWP's in work progression trial, undertaken between 2015 and 2018, to date only population-level analyses of its impacts have been published, with no breakdowns by sex, age or parental status included, for example (DWP, 2019). While these analyses show modest long-term improvements in progression rates, it is not clear whether these reflect the experiences of the sub group of single parent participants specifically (this seems less likely, given the additional challenges faced by this group, discussed in this report).

The qualitative research undertaken alongside the impact assessments of these interventions sheds some light on the relatively poor rates of progression achieved – with many of the causes identified linking back to the characteristics of single parents associated with poorer progression outcomes, discussed previously. The evaluation of GOAL UK's Step Up programme found that having a young child was a barrier to progression. Childcare costs and not having enough time to balance work and care were highlighted in the telephone survey conducted six months after the trial; 13 (out of 67) participants mentioned how they perceived their caring responsibilities to be their main barrier to progression, whether balancing the cost of childcare or having enough time to balance work and caring roles (DWP, 2017). This correlates with findings from the DfE's Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents; in 2019, 40% of single parents reported having difficulty paying for childcare, compared to just 24% of parents in couples (DfE, 2019). This was the highest rate of difficulty reported by any group defined by working status, number and age of children. Meanwhile, the evaluation of Timewise's Earnings Progression trial reported that many single parents with young children were reluctant to give up the time with their children required for applying for or taking on higher-level jobs (Colechin and Bennet, 2017).

While interventions designed to improve in-work progression, including the use of work coaches, can provide one means to reach and support those in low pay, researchers have emphasised that “universal credit support can only be part of the answer” (Wilson, 2018). Tony Wilson, of the Institute for Employment Studies, has talked of three different approaches to in-work progression that can include support to individuals to help increase their earnings, skills acquisition and employer initiatives that better design the pathways to progression. The third approach is of particular relevance to single parents, many of whom work part-time.

Rather than undertaking interventions with single parents to increase their chances of progressing to different roles, a range of projects have been delivered to re-design the actual roles those who wish to progress might apply for and processes by which they might do so – to make them fit more closely with the requirements of single parents and other part-time workers. In May 2017, Timewise launched a Retail Pioneer Programme with five retail partners, seeking to understand what was getting in the way of flexibility at store management level, and identifying key changes to break down the barriers. Their report indicated that employers were making some changes to facilitate this, including reviewing recruitment processes and branding to ensure that flexibility is clear, developing part-time job descriptions and delivering training to managers (Timewise, 2016a). On the basis of another Timewise project, undertaken with Pets at Home to develop and pilot career progression pathways into flexible management roles for women in entry-level part-time jobs, it was concluded that successful flexible working results from three key tenets: culture change needs to be driven by the leadership team; job design must routinely consider flexible working possibilities; and organisations need to communicate successes in flexible working (Timewise, 2016b).

It may therefore be that approaching in-work progression from the angle of available job opportunities, as well as from the suitability of the available candidates, would be fruitful in removing some of the barriers to progression commonly experienced by single parents, primarily around part-time working and a lack of flexibility. Such an approach might yield very positive outcomes; data from DfE's latest Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents reveals that, among those mothers working part-time, if there were no barriers, 38% of single mothers said that they would increase their hours and 22% said that they would work full-time. Just 40% would not change their working hours, compared with 57% of mothers with partners (DfE, 2019). These figures reveal considerable appetite among single parents to progress, in terms of the number of working hours worked, that is currently being circumvented by the presence of the structural barriers discussed above.

Conclusion

With the government's intended employment progression policy and the roll-out of UC, achieving progression at work will become increasingly important to a growing proportion of single parents. The research literature clearly demonstrates that this will be a particular challenge for single parents because they disproportionately possess the characteristics and experience the barriers, some of which are inter-linked, associated with poorer rates of progression. Despite this, there is comparatively little evidence regarding 'what works' in improving in-work progression for this group, with the small number of initiatives aimed predominantly or exclusively at single parents having achieved very modest outcomes. Clearly, the factors that have contributed to relatively poor progression rates for single parents to date will need to be addressed in order to improve this situation, either in the design of interventions introduced to increase progression (such as those in the area of job re-design) or in wider policy changes to remove or reduce some of the structural barriers identified.

Section 2: Quantitative analysis: employment, earnings and progression for single parents

Introduction

This section presents quantitative analysis of employment patterns and outcomes for single mothers and fathers, compared with parents in couples⁹, in recognition of the fact that both groups share some of the same constraints in terms of their caring responsibilities.

Methodology

Analysis was undertaken using data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Labour Force Survey (LFS)¹⁰, comparing single parents with parents in couples on a number of characteristics – employment rates and work patterns, hourly pay and pay progression. More detailed analysis was undertaken by qualification level, age of the youngest child and number of children, and geographic area.

9 Analysis was undertaken for ‘couple heads’ (fathers in couples or the higher earner in same-sex couples) and couple wives / partners (mothers in couples or the lower earning partner in same-sex couples). For simplicity, these groups are termed ‘fathers in couples’ and ‘mothers in couples’ in the text.

10 Survey datasets were analysed in several groups, as the sample sizes for the analyses differ, so that the sub-group analyses are reasonably robust. The ONS statistics based on a single quarter’s data would not permit this level of analysis. The employment rates and patterns are based on two years of data (eight datasets), the earnings estimates are based on 20 datasets, and the progression estimates are also based on 20 datasets. 20 datasets is five years for earnings, and as the progression analyses compares two annual earnings interviews, this covers six years.

Employment rates and work patterns

As shown in Figure 1, the employment rates of single mothers and single fathers are similar to those of mothers in couples. However, single mothers and mothers in couples are more likely to work part-time than their male equivalents. Single fathers are much more likely to work full-time than either group of mothers – though considerably less likely to do so than fathers in couples. While mothers in couples are slightly more likely to work full-time than single mothers, they are also more likely to work in mini-jobs.¹¹

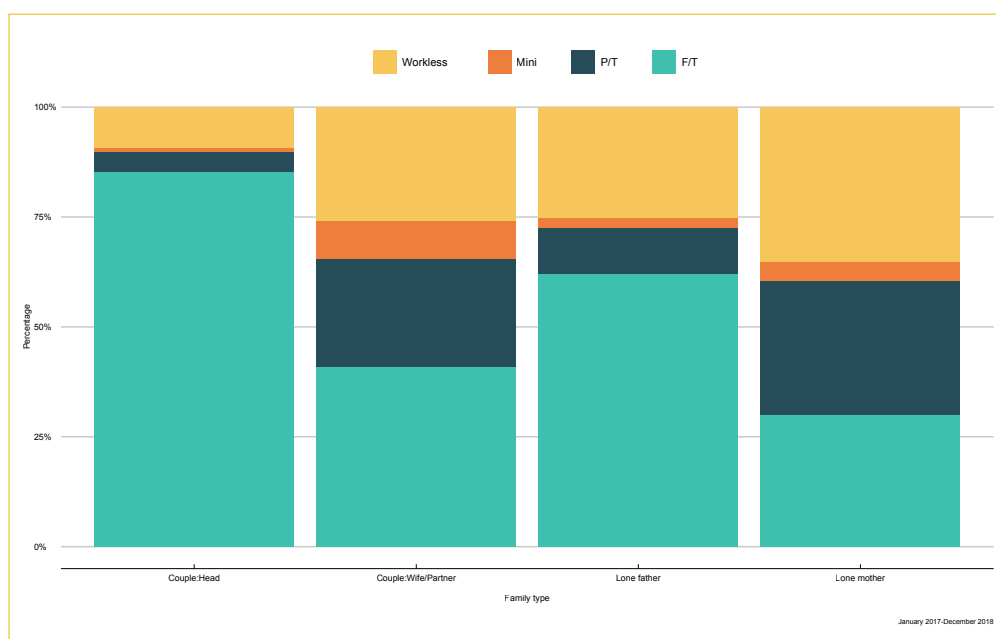


Figure 1:
Employment of parents by family position and hours

Source: Labour Force Survey data

The ‘legacy’ benefit system treated 16 hours a week (our minimum cut-off for a ‘part-time’ job) as a boundary between benefits (from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)) and tax credits (from HMRC). Single parents who worked fewer than 16 hours, had earnings deducted from their benefits if they earned over £20 a week (two hours 26 minutes at National Living Wage). Once they worked over 16 hours, they could claim working tax credit, which also provides childcare support. Therefore, there was a severe disincentive for single parents to work in mini-jobs, which did not apply to parents in couples. It is anticipated that universal credit (UC) will change this pattern, as there will no longer be a 16 hour boundary, although single parents who do not earn enough (by DWP standards) will be subject to in-work conditionality to seek more hours or higher pay (or both).

Figure 2 shows the same data, on the basis of the numbers, rather than proportions, in the different groups¹².

¹¹ A full-time job has been defined as one involving 30 hours or more work per week, part-time as 16-29.9 hours, and mini-jobs as under 16 hours

¹² The LFS data (weighted to overall population estimates) assumes there are 2.06 million single parents, 92% of whom are single mothers.

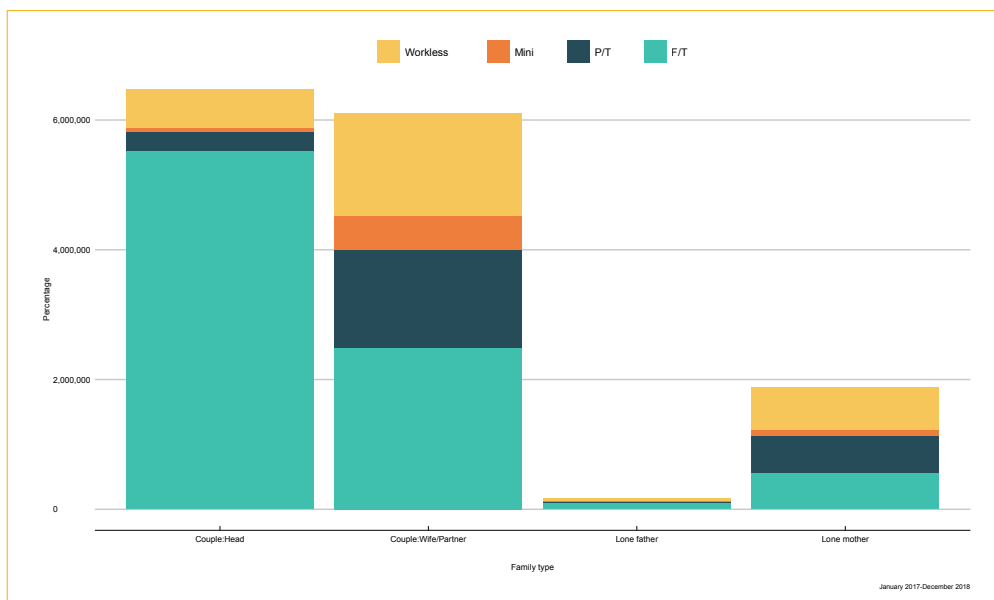


Figure 2:
Employment of parents by family position and hours: absolute numbers

Source: Labour Force Survey data

In addition to single parent status, several key factors affect employment, pay and progression patterns for single parents. Some of these are shared with others with caring responsibilities for children; the data shows that these effects largely affect mothers in couples, rather than fathers.

The labour market for part-time workers differs from that for full-time workers in the relationship between supply and demand. People who are time-constrained by caring responsibilities so that they can only apply for or work in part-time jobs are not able to apply for full-time jobs, while those seeking full-time work may also be able to work part-time, possibly in multiple jobs. These patterns are associated with lower pay per hour (on average) for part-time workers, and lower progression in pay terms.

Parents who are time-constrained also tend to work within a smaller commuting time radius from home than people who do not have these constraints. This affects the number and quality of job opportunities open to them. This affects the balance of supply and demand for part-time work.

The time constraints from caring responsibilities mean that there are regular patterns of employment relating to the ages and number of children in the family.

However, the issue of how much their qualifications are a barrier to getting work that is paid appropriately to their skill level is also affected by the time constraints.

Hourly pay

We analysed hourly pay within the groups defined by work patterns, because working patterns affect hourly pay for all groups¹³. The analysis relates to the median hourly pay,

¹³ We have used five complete years of surveys, so that the estimates are robust. Particularly for lone fathers, the small numbers in each survey would mean that estimates would not be robust if we used a single survey dataset, or indeed, fewer. However, using five years of data means that we have presented the hourly pay in relation to the National Minimum Wage (which is presented in hourly terms) at the time. Over the course of the five years, the National Living Wage (for over 25 year olds) has been introduced in addition to the National Minimum Wage, which is now restricted to 21-24 year olds.

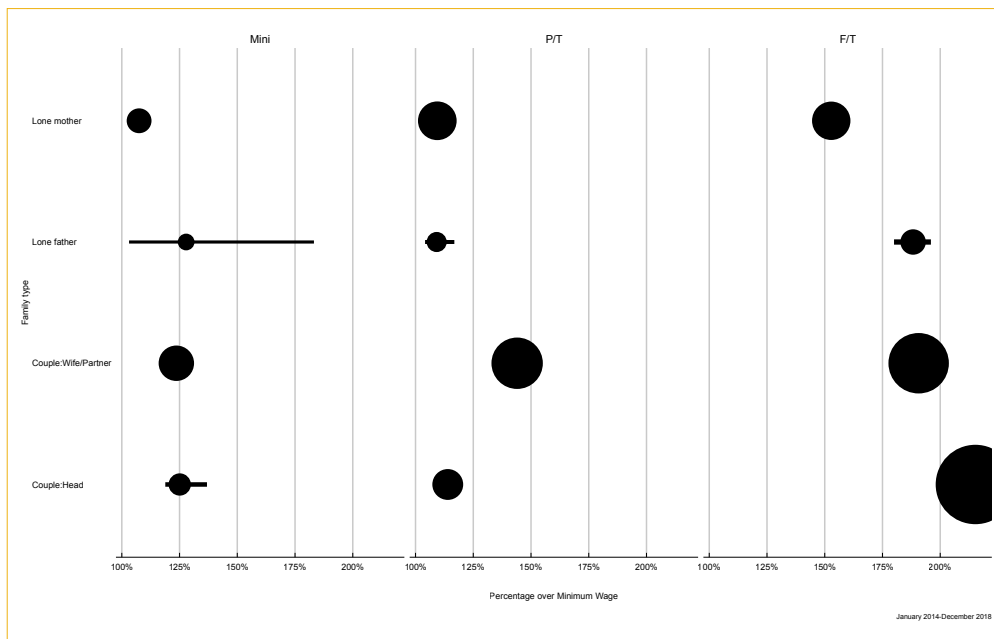


Figure 3: Median premium of hourly pay over concurrent National Minimum Wage of parents by family position and hours

Source: Labour Force Survey data with confidence levels

which is the hourly pay of the person half way up (or down) the earnings distribution¹⁴. The horizontal bars in Figure 3 show the confidence intervals associated with our estimates, while the size of the bubbles indicates the relative number of workers in each group (for example, there are fewer part-time fathers in couples than part-time single mothers).

In each group, single mothers have the lowest median hourly earnings. The hourly pay for single fathers is more closely in line with other groups, though the confidence intervals are still wide, despite using five years of data.

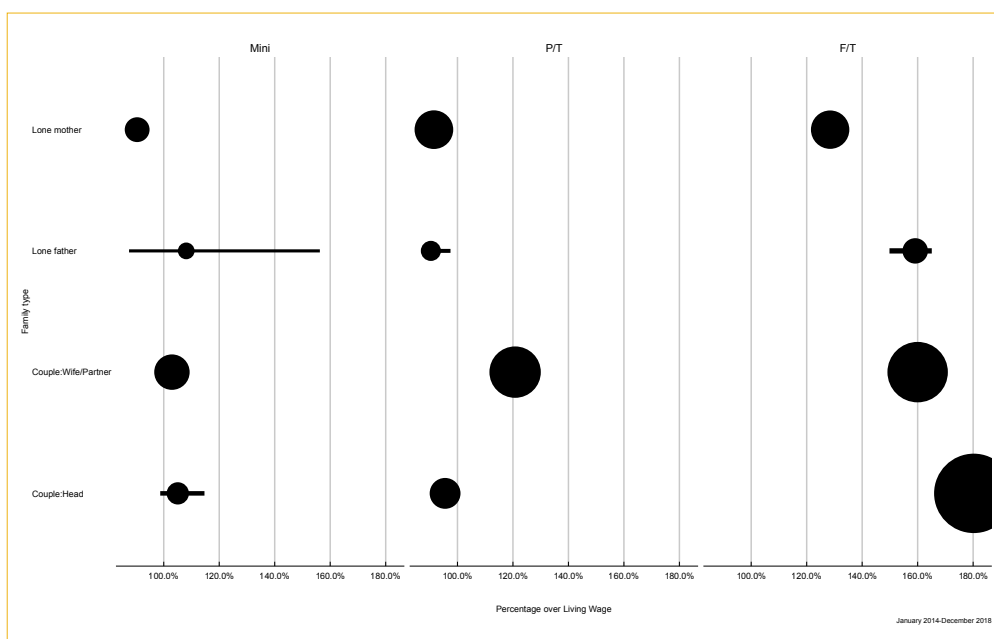


Figure 4: Median premium of hourly earnings in relation to the concurrent voluntary Living Wage

Source: Labour Force Survey data with confidence levels

¹⁴ Earnings distributions are very skewed, with a small number of high earners and a large number of low earners, so the median is used to give a better view of the generality than the mean (which is particularly affected by the introduction of the National Minimum Wage; the earnings distribution has very large numbers at, or very closely above, the relevant legal minimum). However, the employer-based statistics used by the Office for National Statistics to demonstrate this do not contain information on the family position of workers, so the Labour Force Survey we have used is better suited to this purpose.

Given the low premium over the legal Minimum Wage for single parents, it is not surprising that the median single parent in part-time and mini-jobs is below the voluntary Living Wage (as shown in Figure 4).

Pay progression

In Figure 5, we use the voluntary Living Wage to define whether workers are stuck in low pay (below the voluntary Living Wage at successive annual interviews), above (at both interviews), have progressed (were below the voluntary Living Wage in one interview and above in the next), or had left work between interviews.

When we look at pay progression in this way, there are stark differences by family position, with single mothers by far the least likely to be consistently above the voluntary Living Wage, and by far the most likely to be stuck in low pay¹⁵.

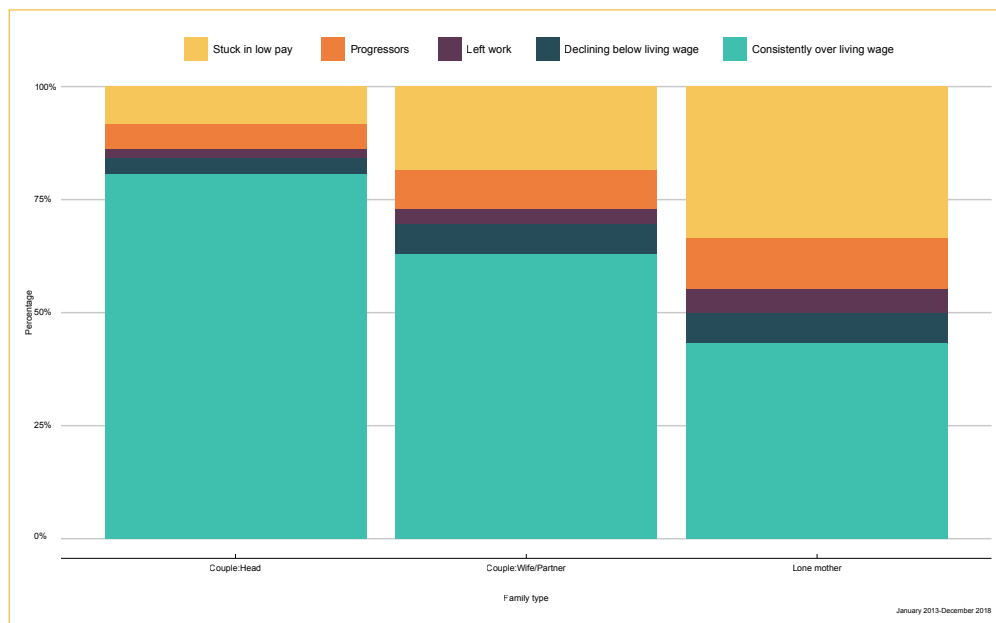


Figure 5:
Hourly pay progression patterns of parents by family position

Source:
Longitudinal Labour
Force Survey data

The analysis presented in Figure 6 follows the same methods, but excludes those who were above the voluntary Living Wage when first interviewed (those in Figure 5 who were consistently above the Living Wage and those who were above, but declined below (while remaining in work)).

It shows that low-paid single mothers were both the most likely to be stuck in low pay and the least likely to progress. The proportions who left work were similar for single mothers and mothers in couples. Fathers in couples were the most likely to progress if they were low paid, with mothers in couples in an intermediate position.

¹⁵ For this analysis, we are unable to produce publishable figures for single fathers, due to small sample sizes. The sample size for analysis in this case is less than half the number for the analysis of hourly wages, as people need to respond to earnings questions twice rather than once, and some people are unable to be contacted for the survey at the second earnings interview.

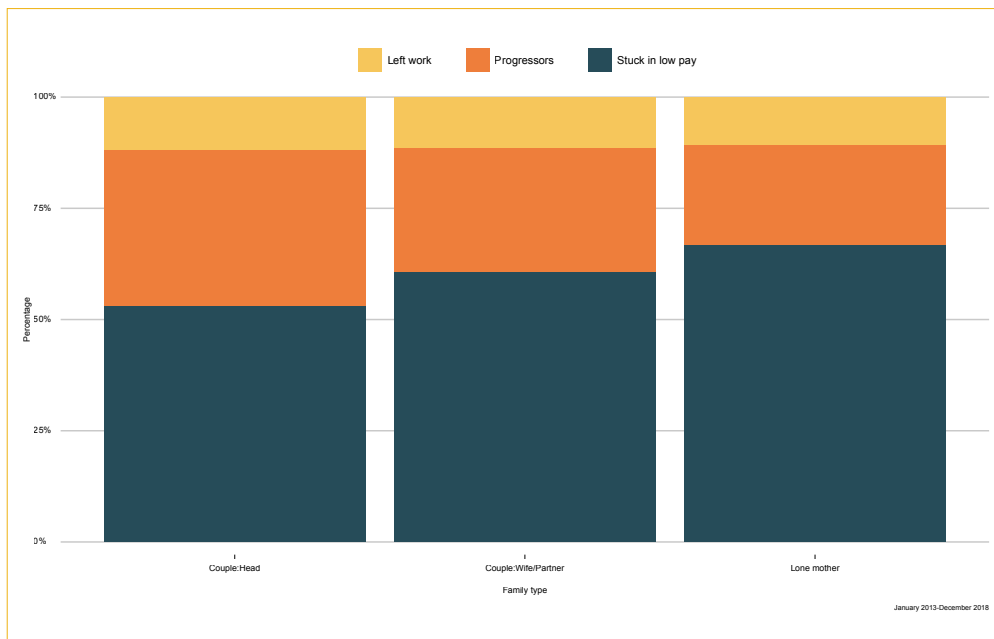


Figure 6:
Hourly pay progression patterns of low-paid parents by family position

Source:
Longitudinal Labour Force Survey data

Patterns by qualification

Single parents are lower qualified than both fathers and mothers in couples. Table 1 shows this pattern, in simplified form.

Table 1: Patterns of qualification by family position

	High	Intermediate (2-3)	Low (inc other)
Single parents	29%	42%	28%
Couple: Head	44%	32%	24%
Couple: Wife / partner	50%	30%	19%

Employment

Analysis was undertaken of patterns of employment by qualification level, for the groups defined by patterns of work and by family position.

While the overall qualification pattern for single parents is below that for the other groups, this does not mean that all single parents are low qualified, as the largest single group is highly qualified (with a qualification at Level 4 or above).

In Figure 7, mothers in couples and single mothers are shown on the right in each Figure element, and fathers in couples and single fathers on the left. The Figure includes some groups with small numbers (particularly for single fathers and for

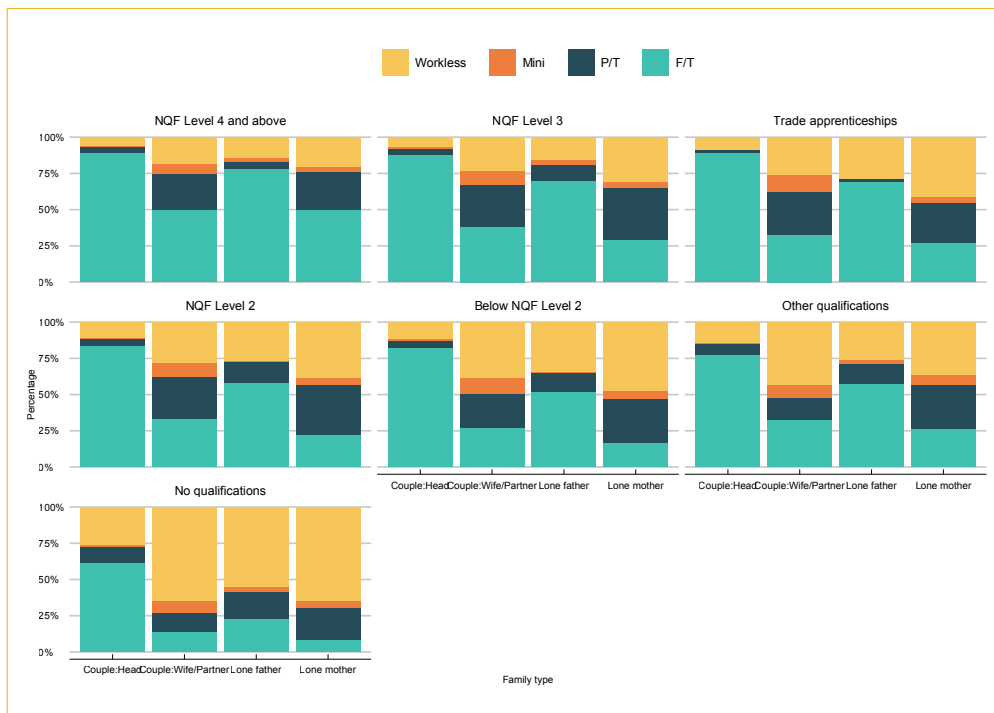


Figure 7:
Employment of parents by qualification, family position and hours

Source: Labour Force Survey data

trade apprenticeships) which are not as robust as the other estimates. If trade apprenticeships are ignored, then the proportions workless (yellow) are similar for single mothers and couple mothers, though, given the large size of the group, noticeably higher for single mothers with Level 2 qualifications.

The employment rates for single mothers, within each qualification group, are fairly similar to those for mothers in couples. In this case, it is the balance between qualification groups that is driving the overall employment rate difference rather than there being very large differences between employment rates between single parents and mothers in couple within each qualification level.

Earnings

Figure 8 shows the average (mean) premium over the legal minimum hourly wage for the four groups defined by family position, then by qualifications (the rows in the Figure)¹⁶. Qualifications are grouped into four groups (high, intermediate, low (including no qualifications) and other). The size of the bubbles shows the relative size of the groups. Full-time workers show a pattern of higher earnings for higher qualifications. This is less evident for single mothers, especially for those without high qualifications, where there is little premium for intermediate over low/no qualifications. For part-time workers, the extent of premia for high qualifications is lower than for full-time workers. For single mothers, there is little earnings difference below high qualifications, and even for the high qualified, there are lower earnings than for fathers and mothers in couples.

¹⁶ We have used five full years of data (20 datasets) to get robust estimates and shown the confidence intervals

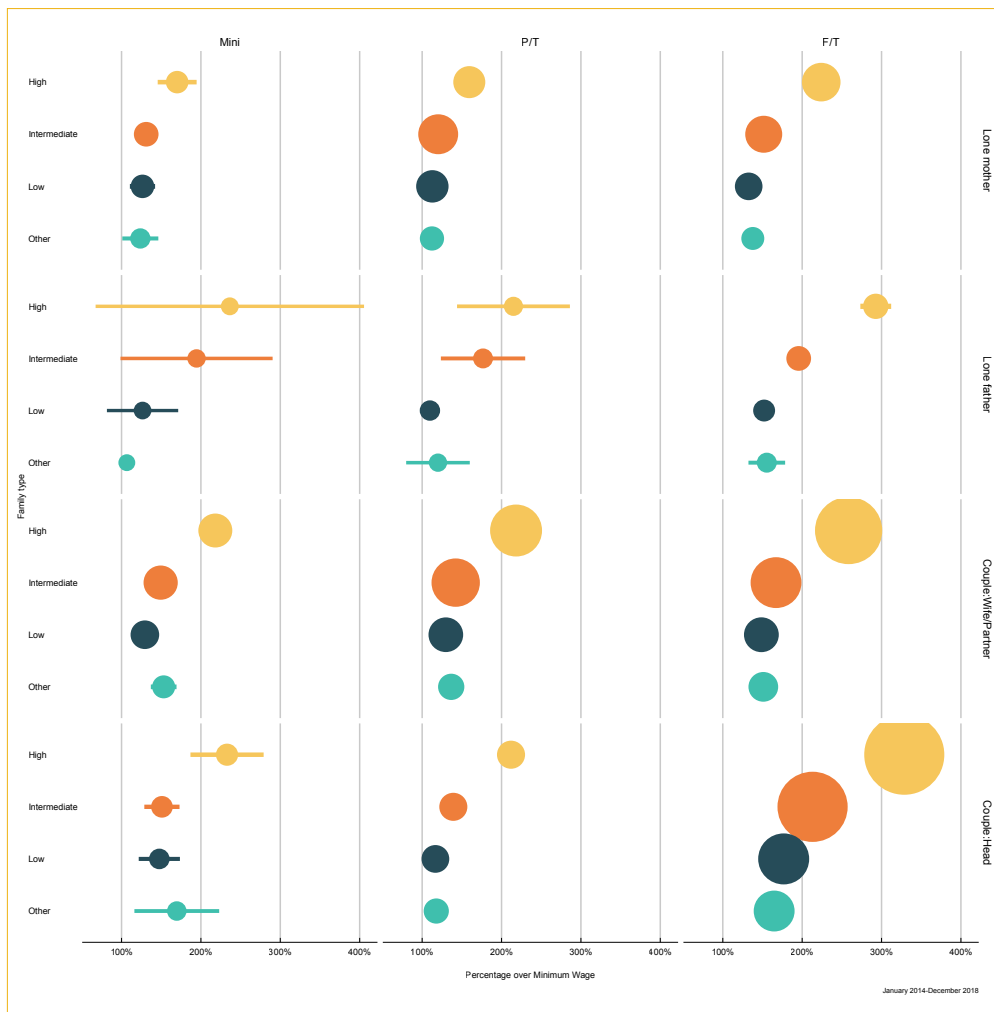


Figure 8:
Mean premium over concurrent National Minimum Wage, parents by family position, hours and qualification level

Source: Labour Force Survey data with confidence intervals

Patterns by age of youngest child

The age of the youngest child is often used as an indicator of the care needs of the family; in addition, we subsequently examine the number of children in the family as another indicator of care needs. These are both simplifications, as they may interact, when getting children to childcare and school involves several trips to different places. They also do not account for the impact of having a child with a disability or other special needs as this is not recorded by the LFS.

Employment rates¹⁷

As shown in Figure 9, there is little difference in the employment patterns of fathers in couples, by the age of the youngest child. However, for the other three groups, substantially higher proportions are workless, and for the mothers, large proportions working part-time, when children are younger. There are higher proportions of single fathers working part-time when children are younger, but these are lower than those associated with single mothers and mothers in couples. For single mothers,

¹⁷ This analysis uses LFS data from 2017 and 2018.

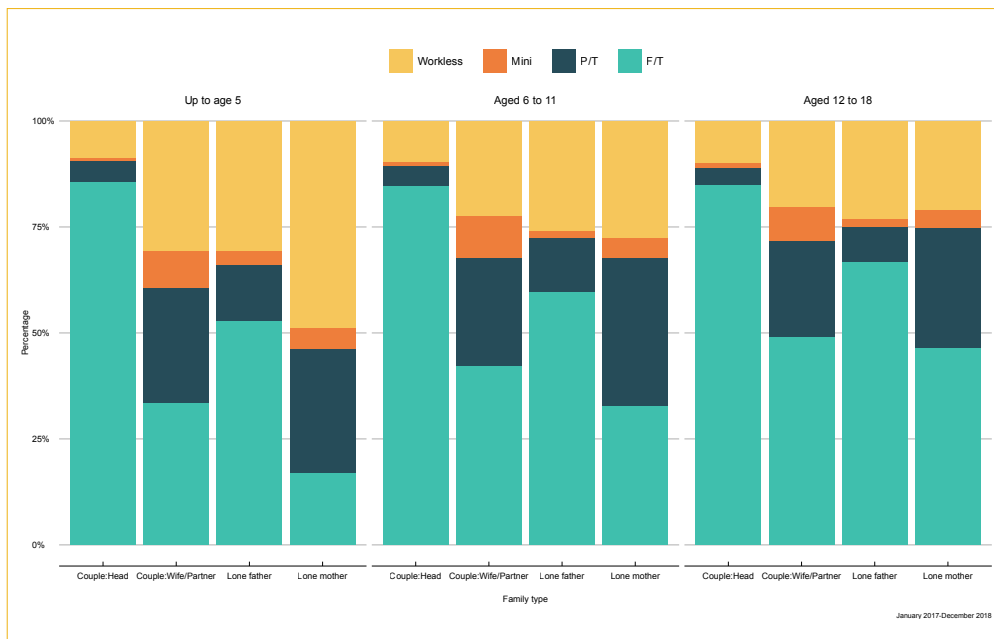


Figure 9:
Employment of parents: by family position, hours and age of youngest child

Source: Labour Force Survey data

employment is lower for those with a youngest child under five than for couple mothers. These patterns have been affected by a series of changes to benefit rules so that now single parents who claim benefits are expected to look for work when their youngest child reaches the age at which 'free'¹⁸ childcare places are available. The latest two years used in the analysis includes the roll-out of UC to single parents with the youngest children, which affected the stringency of administration rather than the existence of rules on when they needed to prepare for or seek work. As noted previously, mothers in couples are more likely to work in mini-jobs than any of the other groups.

Earnings¹⁹

For single mothers, there are no strong differences in hourly pay (relative to the current minimum wage) by the age of youngest child, as depicted in Figure 10. Such an effect does occur for fathers in couples, with hourly pay rising with the age of youngest child (and, presumably, with their own age), and actually falling hourly rates for mothers in couples within each pattern of work. It is likely that this is associated with falling numbers (particularly for part-time working) so some move to full-time working as the youngest child reaches secondary school age.

Progression²⁰

Figure 11 shows limited evidence of progression over a year long period, but it is evident that single mothers with a youngest child of secondary school age are substantially more likely to be consistently above the minimum income standard for single parents

18 There are limits on what is meant by free.

19 As with the other earnings analyses, five years of datasets were used to obtain robust estimates, and analysis was undertaken by working hours groups, as hours of work affect hourly pay as well as weekly earnings.

20 This analysis uses the change in weekly pay for single mothers only, rather than doing a comparison with other family types. As with other progression analyses, a full five years of data are used, and, as each dataset includes two annual interviews, the start point is January 2013.

than those with younger children. There is an opposite pattern for those stuck in low pay. These patterns are likely to be related to changes in hours of work and, possibly, occupational change as the single mothers are more able to return to or pursue careers in higher paid roles once their youngest child is of secondary school age.

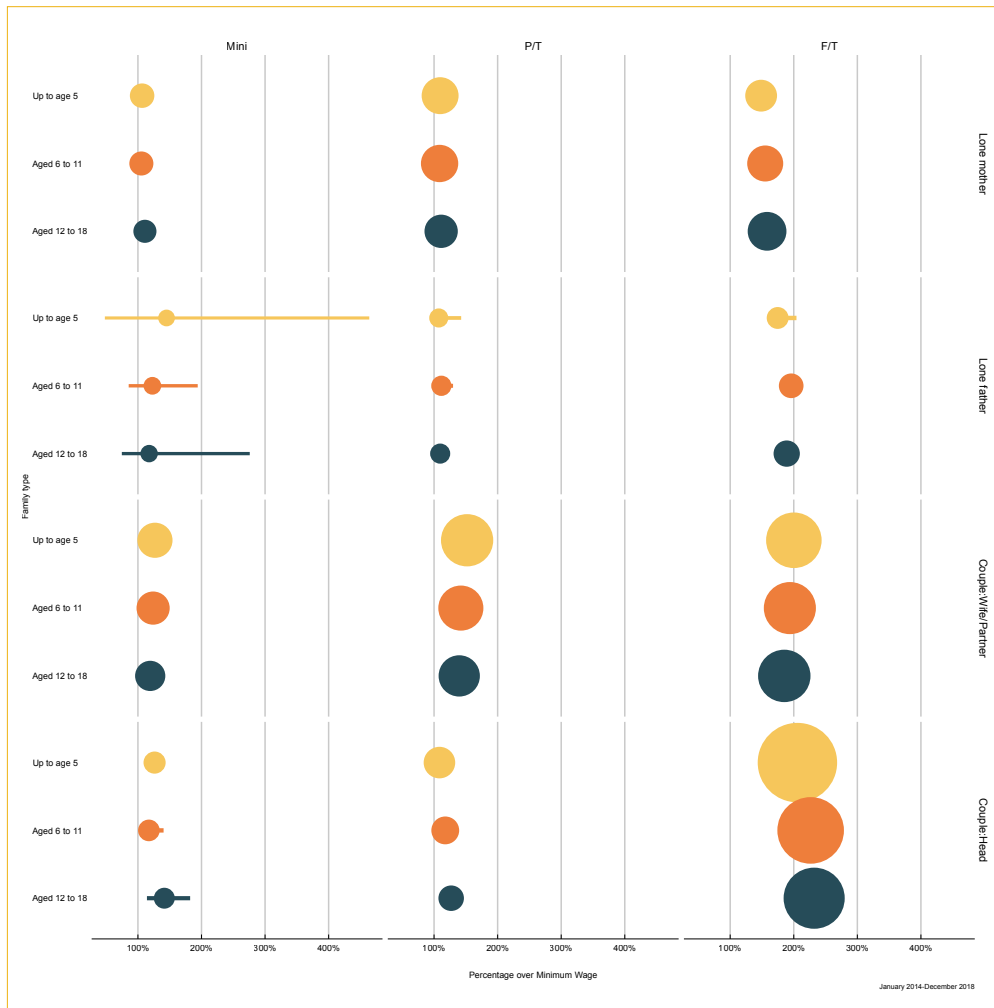


Figure 10: Median hourly pay premium over National Minimum Wage, by age of youngest child, family position and hours, parents

Source: Labour Force Survey data with confidence intervals

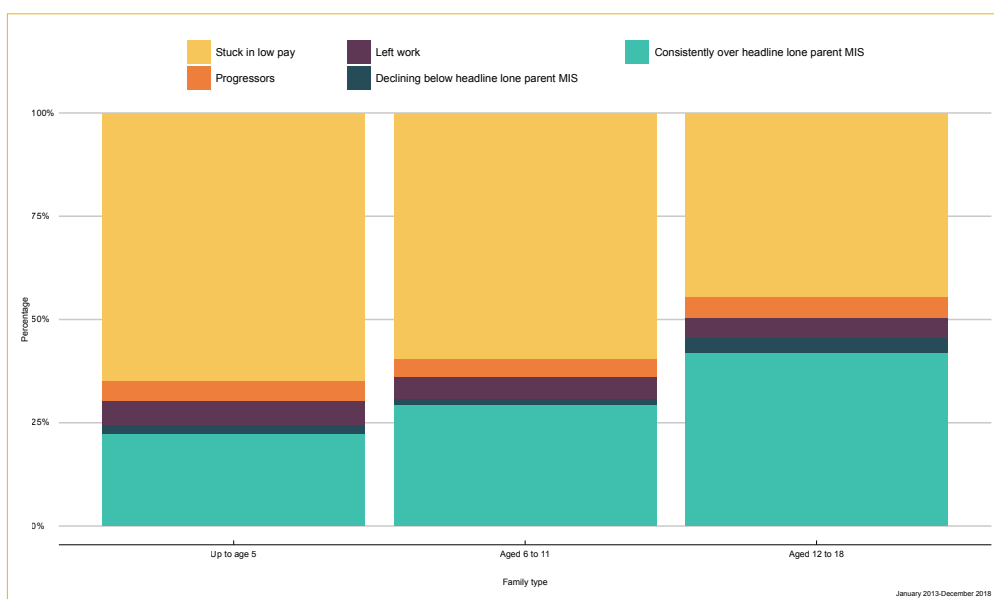


Figure 11: Weekly pay progression by age of youngest child

Source: Labour Force Survey data

Patterns by number of children

Employment rates

The employment rates of single mothers are the lowest within each group by parental position and number of children, as shown in Figure 12. Overall, the employment rates decline as the number of children rises. This applies particularly for single mothers in full-time work, as they are solely responsible for care needs. The greater use of mini-jobs by mothers in couples makes a difference to the overall employment rates – for families with three children or more the total proportion of mothers in couples and single mothers who are either in full-time or part time work is similar.

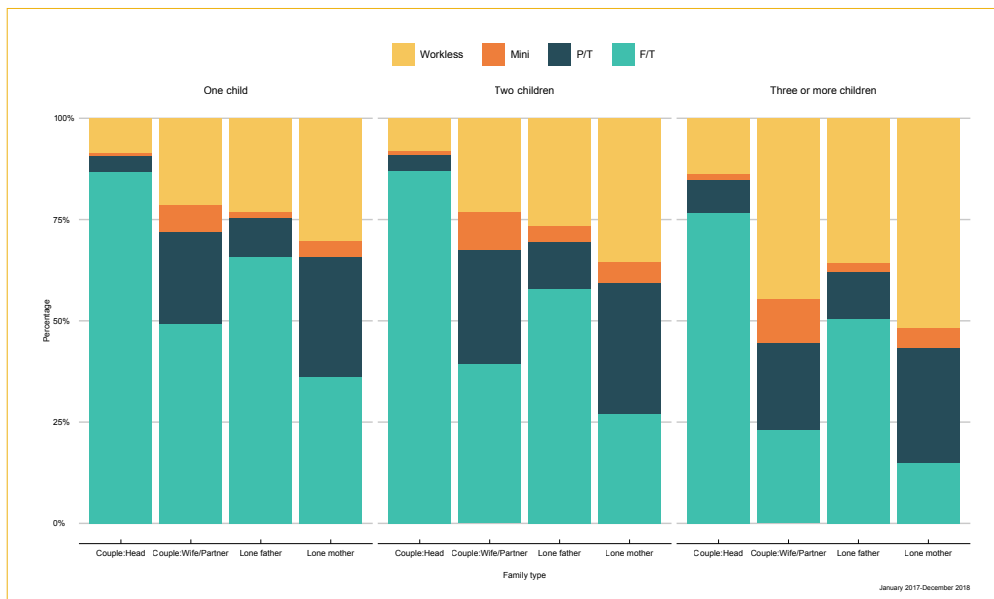


Figure 12: Employment of parents by family position and hours by number of children

Source: Labour Force Survey data

Earnings

The earnings patterns by the number of children show little variation in hourly pay or indeed in the weekly pay comparisons we have undertaken. Most of the impact on incomes looks to be accounted for by the patterns of employment – full-time, part-time, mini or workless, rather than by hourly pay within these groups. These figures are average (mean) earnings within the groups, as some of the estimates (both for single fathers and for fathers in couples in mini-jobs) are sufficiently small in number that medians (for a survey with population weights) could not be calculated. As earnings distributions usually extend upwards, but are heavily concentrated at the low end, means are usually higher than medians, though the relative pattern of the different groups may be less affected.

Progression

The progression patterns analysed here are for weekly pay as in the other detailed analyses, so encompassing progression by increasing hours as well as hourly rates. As with the analysis by age of youngest child and for simplicity, we present just the data for single mothers.

While single mothers are overwhelmingly likely to be stuck in low pay, and not to be consistently over the minimum income standard, Figure 13 shows that this pattern is increasingly evident as the size of family increases. Those with larger families are also more likely than the other groups to leave work between the first and second LFS interviews.

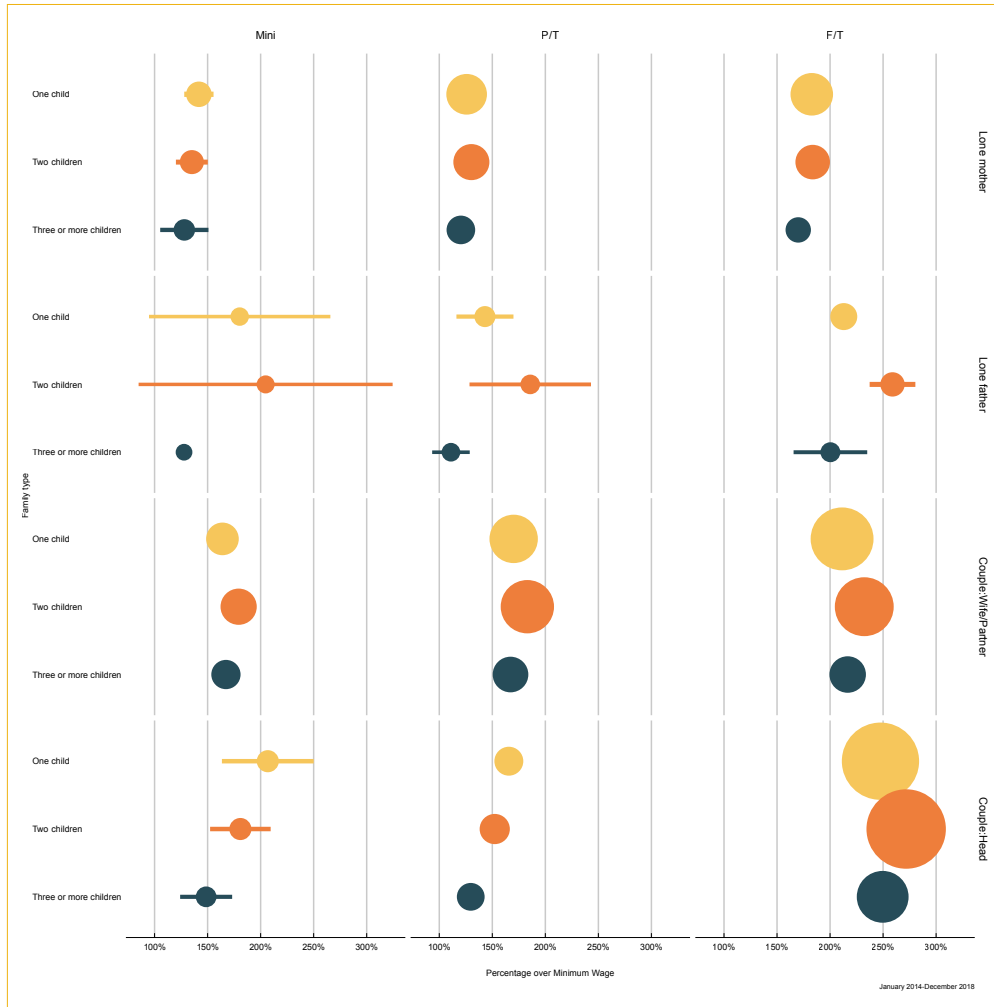


Figure 13: Mean premium over National Minimum Wage (inc NLW) of parents by family position and hours and family size

Source: Labour Force Survey data with confidence intervals

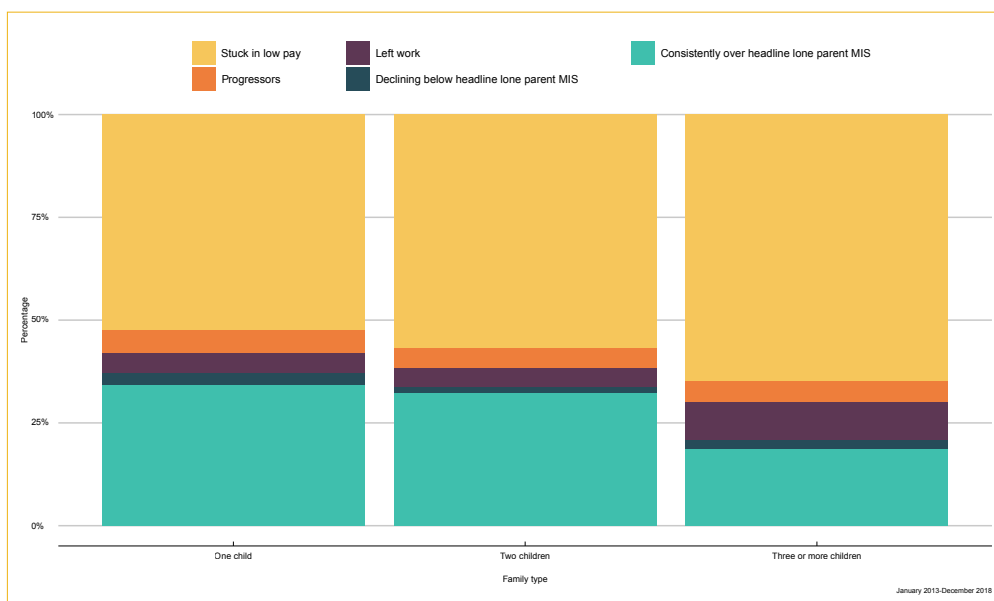


Figure 14: Weekly pay progression patterns of lone mothers by age of youngest child

Source: Longitudinal Labour Force Survey data

Patterns by nation

We have analysed geographic areas in three groups, so that the estimates are reasonably robust. The three groups are: Devolved nations, grouping Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, London, and the rest of England. The historical pattern has been that the London employment pattern for mothers has been different from other areas, with lower employment rates. This is related to London having a low proportion of part-time working, and long commute times, both of which pose constraints on those with caring responsibilities.

Employment rates

As shown in Figure 15, the employment rate pattern for single parents is more even across these three geographies than it is for mothers in couples or for single fathers. In London, mothers in couples, single mothers and single fathers, have similar overall employment rates, with single mothers having a much higher proportion of part-time jobs than the other groups. In other areas, mothers in couples and single fathers have substantially higher employment rates than single mothers. The differences seem to be largely due to mothers in couples working part-time to a greater extent than in London.

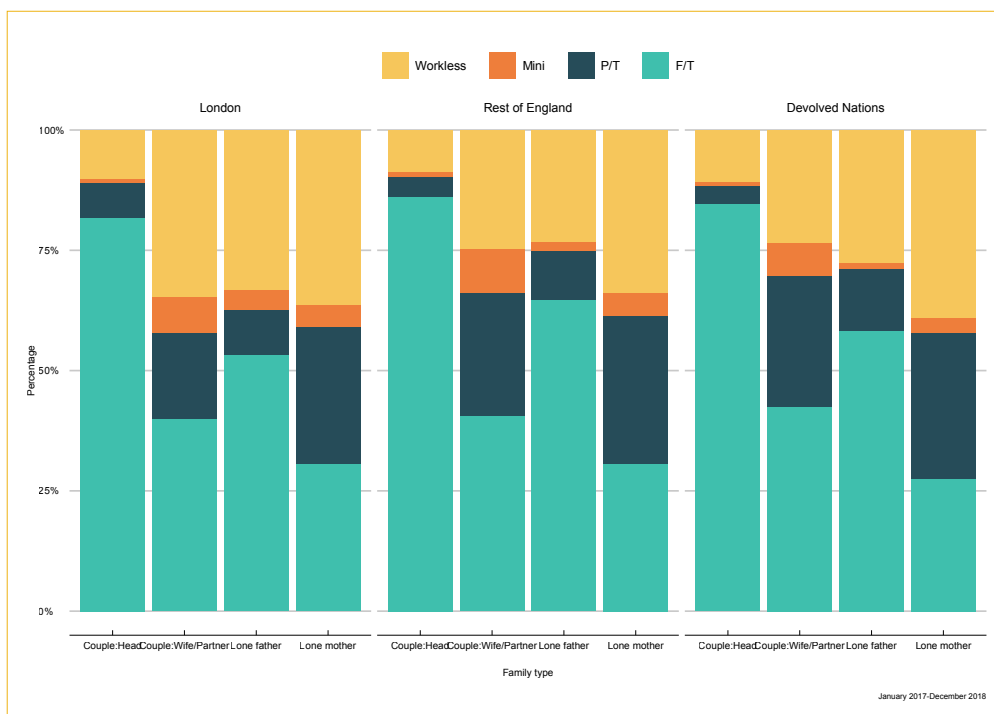


Figure 15:
Employment of parents by family position and hours by nation group

Source: Labour Force Survey data

Earnings

The earnings patterns presented in Figure 16 show that single mothers have much lower London premia than do parents in couples. This applies to full-time workers as well as the groups with other patterns of work. For single mothers working part-time, the London premium is minimal compared to the other areas. Full-time working single mothers in the devolved nations earn (at the median) below the level in the rest of England. This pattern is not found for the other groups defined by patterns of work.

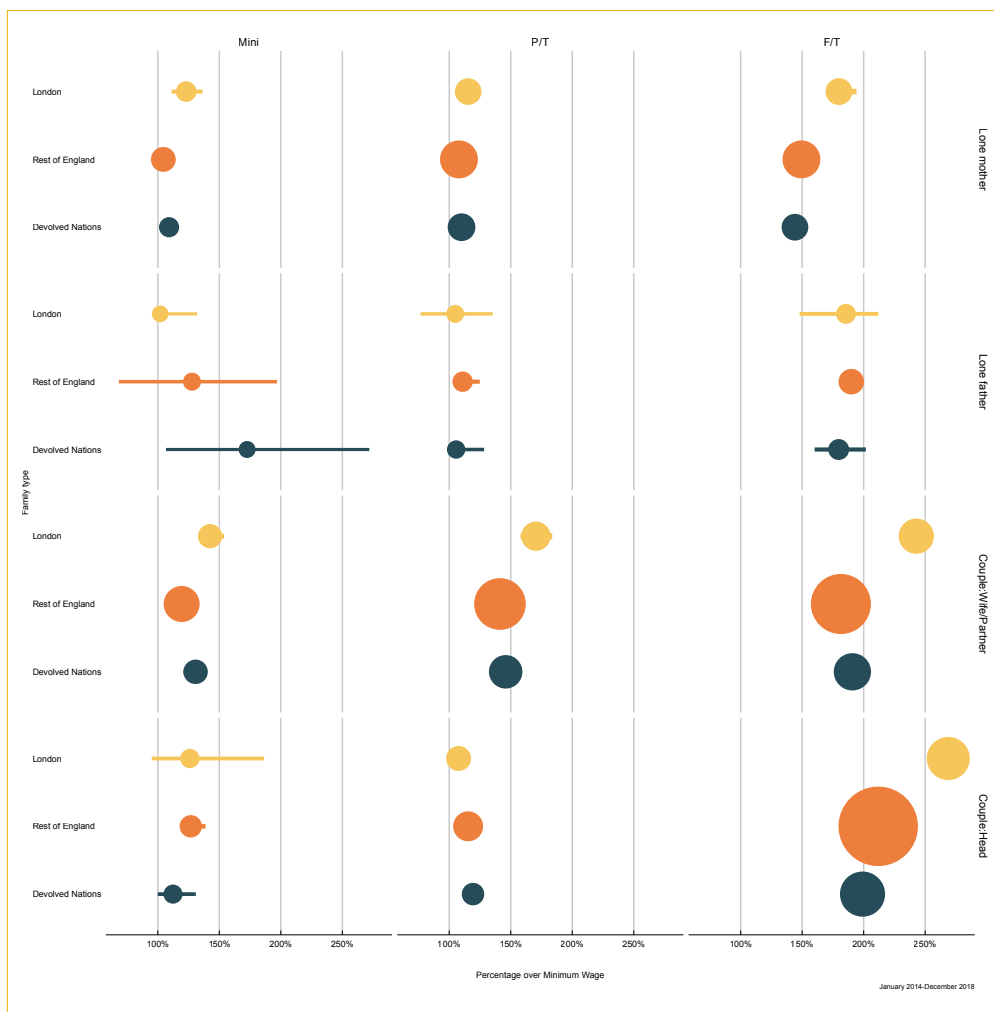


Figure 16:
Median premium over National Minimum Wage (inc NLW) of parents by family position and hours and area

Source: Labour Force Survey data with confidence intervals

Patterns by occupation level

In this analysis, we have grouped the occupations into four categories, based on skill requirements²¹.

Earnings

The largest occupation groups for mothers in this classification grouping are those for high-skilled and lower middle skilled workers, though there are also numbers in the elementary jobs grouping. High skilled occupations have a pay premium within each pattern of work and family position group, while elementary jobs are low-paid, as would be expected. For part-time workers, in all family groups, there seems little premium of lower middle skilled workers over elementary jobs. This is probably because care work and retail jobs (which are in the lower middle group) are also classed by the Low Pay Commission as having a high ‘bite’ of minimum wage legislation as well as hospitality (large employers of elementary workers). This analysis uses the average, rather than the median, in each group, so small numbers of higher earners raise the average compared to the median.

²¹ High skilled occupations are managerial, professional and associate professional, Upper middle skill requirements are skilled trades, Lower middle skill requirements are administrative and secretarial, caring and leisure, sales and related, and operatives and mobile machine operators, while low skill requirements are elementary jobs.

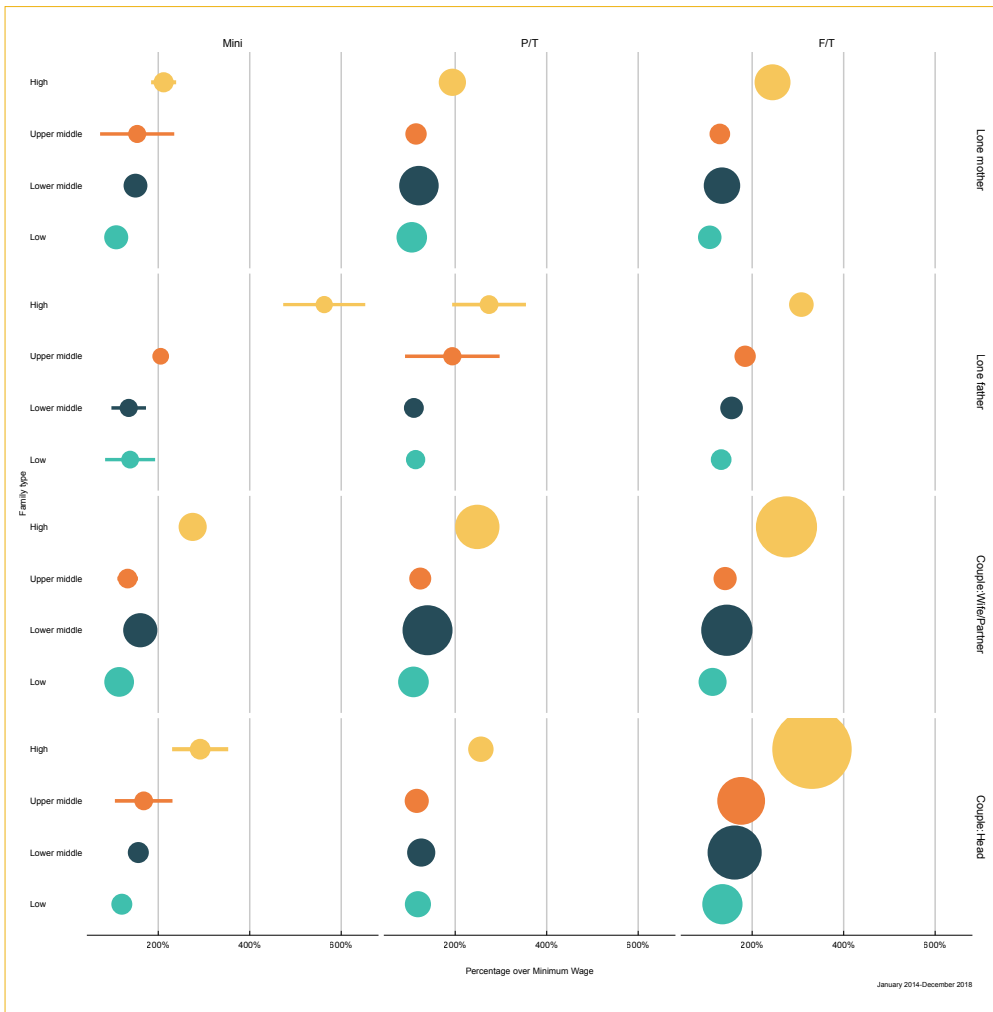


Figure 17:
Median premium over National Minimum Wage (inc NLW) of parents by family position, hours and occupation level

Source: Labour Force Survey data with confidence intervals

Section 3:

Findings from qualitative interviews

Introduction

This section draws out the key themes which emerged from the qualitative research strand, designed to assess how attitudes, understanding, aspirations and experiences of in-work progression vary and interact for single parents at the current point in time including the experience of single parents who had moved to UC.

Methodology

We designed our sample to reflect diversity in the key set of characteristics shown by the literature to be associated with single parents' experiences of in-work progression, as set out in Table 1.

We advertised for potential interviewees through Gingerbread's newsletter and our network of groups across England and Wales. Just over 100 single parents put themselves forward to be interviewed. We selected single parents to be interviewed based on screening data we collected on their work patterns (full-time or part-time), type of work (employee or self-employed), number of children, school stage of youngest child, receipt of UC and location. For each characteristic, we set minimum criteria in terms of the number of single parents to interview with each characteristic.

Fourteen single parents were interviewed in the last two weeks of May 2019. The characteristics of our achieved sample of single parents are summarised in Table 2.

The interviews were carried out over the phone and took on average half an hour. The single parents interviewed received a £20 shop voucher as a 'thank you' for their time. In advance of their interview, each parent was provided with written information about the project including how the project was funded, how their details would be anonymised and how their data would be protected.

Table 2: Characteristics of achieved sample

Characteristic	Breakdown of achieved interviews		
Work pattern	Full-time: 5 interviews	Part-time: 8 interviews	Maternity leave: 1 interview
Type of work	Employees: 11 interviews	Self-employed: 3 interviews	
Number of children	One child: 9 interviews	Two children: 4 interviews	More than two children: 1 interview
School stage of youngest child	Pre-school: 5 interviews	Primary school: 7 interviews	Secondary school: 2 interviews
Location	London: 4 interviews	Outside London: 10 interviews	
Universal Credit receipt	Receiving UC: 5 interviews	Not receiving UC: 9 interviews	

The interviews were carried out over the phone and took on average half an hour. The single parents interviewed received a £20 shop voucher as a 'thank you' for their time. In advance of their interview, each parent was provided with written information about the project including how the project was funded, how their details would be anonymised and how their data would be protected. Participating single parents were asked to sign a consent form. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and participants were sent copies of 'their' transcribed interview and given the opportunity to make minor amendments. Once all of the interviews had been transcribed, thematic analysis was undertaken of key themes across the 14 interviews, with the two researchers involved reviewing and identifying themes independently before corroborating their findings.

Levels of education

We did not set a quota for level of education in our sampling framework, as it was felt that a sub-set of other characteristics were more pertinent to the area of in-work progression from the literature review. While we are aware that our achieved sample is relatively well-qualified²², it nevertheless reflects the diverse qualification levels of single parents in employment. This is also less problematic as many of the single parents interviewed were working in jobs below their qualification and skills levels.

²² Of the 14 single parents interviewed, two had a Level 2 qualification, three had a Level 3 qualification and nine had a qualification at Level 4 or above. As detailed in Section 2, 29 per cent of single parents in 2017-18 had a qualification at Level 4 or above, 42 per cent at Levels 2 or 3 and 28 per cent at a lower level, while those single parents with higher qualifications were substantially more likely to be in work.

Jobs

All the single parents interviewed were in employment. They worked across the public, social enterprise, charitable and private sectors. Three single parents worked in community based nursing; one was a medical consultant; one was an NHS administrator; one was an office manager; two were IT managers; one a general manager; two were freelance; one was a support worker; one worked in retail and one worked in a laundry.

Findings

From our interviews with single parents, a number of themes emerged which have been grouped in terms of single parents' understanding of progression, their aspirations to progress and their experiences of progression including perceptions of barriers and enablers. We also investigated how single parents would like to receive information about progression in the future and the impact for single parents who had moved to UC on attitudes to and experiences in this area.

Understandings of 'progression'

The single parents interviewed regarded progression at work as being about more than increasing their earnings, although it should be noted that the majority of these single parents would satisfy the government's pilot in-work progression conditionality earnings threshold, meaning that the current or future requirements of UC would be less of a pressing concern. The single parents interviewed commonly defined progression in relation to securing work that meant that they also had sufficient time and energy for their children. Single parents talked about the importance of securing autonomy in their job roles in order to be there for their children when they were most needed.

"At the moment, I have to work bank holidays and all over Christmas, which is not ideal for children, so I'd love to get rid of that really and just work in the week."

– Single parent with primary and secondary school aged children wanting to move from retail back into office work

"It's about work-life balance for me as well, the flexibility, because I can work from home sometimes."

– Single parent who works in a mid-level managerial role

However, many of the single parents, as sole earners, also viewed their pay and ability to progress as important. This sometimes involved wanting to earn more money but also might encapsulate having a job that made the most of their skills and experience, or increasing their status or job security.

"Progression to me, it's not just about money...Progression to me is the title as well...I think for me it's about career rather than amount of money that I earn."

– Single parent with a mid-level managerial job who wants to progress into a more senior role

"I am just focusing on trying to get a permanent job...to try to get some stability."

– Single parent with a pre-school aged child and on a temporary contract

Aspirations regarding progression

While an aspiration to progress at work was common among the single parents, this was often located within a broader set of inter-linking ambitions regarding their work and family lives and financial circumstances. Consequently, the aspiration to progress was often not immediate, but was commonly linked with key milestones in their families' lives.

(a) Seeking progression in the context of family lives and financial circumstances

Reflecting the broad understandings of what constitutes 'progression', discussed above, among the single parents, there was a consistent theme that they wanted to put their children's well-being at the forefront of their decisions about work, including progression. They wanted time with their children and they talked about making decisions about work that would also be in the best interests of their children.

"I definitely do freelance because it gives me the flexibility and I guess I felt like, with her only having one parent, that is was actually crucial that I was the person who bought her up and that she had that person in her life."

– Widowed single parent with a child in the early stage of secondary school

One single parent with a baby talked about making steps to move from her office job to become a teaching assistant in advance of her child attending primary school. She had already set plans in place to volunteer and work towards this goal. She had decided to work towards this role so that she could be there for her son, including in the school holidays.

Another single parent with a primary aged child had reluctantly decided that she would need to give up her job before the long school summer holiday. She had requested to work less over the summer but the organisation was not keen.

"I don't want to put my child in childcare for five days a week; I didn't think it was fair".

– Single parent with primary school aged child

The majority of the single parents interviewed had little practical support from their ex-partners; their working lives therefore involved the day-to-day responsibility for their children including dropping off and picking up from childcare, covering school holidays and being there in an emergency, including when their child was unwell. The single parents also talked about providing stability and emotional support for their children and that this required them to be present and available in their child's life.

"I think the challenge is describing to people who are not a single parent what an almighty challenge it is because they do not know the precarious tightrope that you are walking on all the time...your natural instinct as a mother is to protect your children and you are always in that place where you are balancing."

– Single parent of a primary aged child and is a Health Consultant.

“It has to do with the children because obviously they are a priority and whatever you do you have to do it around them.”

– *Single parent with a youngest child who has just started primary school*

Even when explicitly considering progression from a monetary perspective, in discussing plans to increase their earnings, single parents linked these increases with specific goals or outcomes for their families or considered how they would fit in or be balanced with their caring responsibilities.

“But right now, I think I will be focusing on making sure I...do my job and get paid some income, and go back and take my child safely from the nursery.”

– *Single parent currently on maternity leave*

“I am not trying to start a business where I do some work myself and then once I have piloted doing the work myself then I start employing other people...its entirely motivated by the needs of my family... I need to be earning more than the minimum wage because...I want to be able to support my family.”

– *Single parent with three children; the youngest is at primary school. She is motivated to get more income because she is short of money.*

When having to balance their aspirations to progress with financial considerations and their caring responsibilities, there is evidence of some parents (sometimes reluctantly) giving lower priority to their work-focused aspirations.

“I had to turn a job down, which was absolutely gut wrenching because in terms of my personal progression and satisfaction at work, that was what I would love to get back into and I had the perfect job offer...but I could not really justify it because it would have changed my daughter’s life and I wouldn’t have been that much better off financially.”

– *Single parent with pre-school aged child*

“I don’t feel I can work full-time until she is older. I’m stuck. I don’t feel I can progress at all really.”

– *Single parent with child at primary school*

“If you had asked me five years ago, I was much more ambitious and my career was much more important to me. Because of my circumstances, I now feel grateful to have a job rather than a career and a job that fits in with my family.”

– *Single parent with two children at secondary school*

(b) Timing of progression

Linked to their children’s evolving needs and their own caring responsibilities, single parents’ aspirations to progress in the future were often linked to specific milestones in terms of their children’s age and needs. Single parents talked about progression when their children were at an age when they might be needed less, which was often talked about in terms of the stage of their children’s schooling. For some, this was when their child was going to primary school and, for others, secondary school, although a number of single parents whose children were in secondary school expressed a need

to also offer support to their children during this stage of their education. For instance, a single parent who does freelance art work talked about taking on more work in the future as her child progressed through secondary school. This would enable her to travel more and attend art festivals further from home.

School stage was sometimes a trigger for single parents to think about progression. The age of a child was sometimes also characterized as a barrier to looking at progression in work. Overall, single parents expressed a reluctance to work more hours when this would involve the greatest childcare costs, particularly marked among those with pre-school aged children.

“I can’t do it [increase her hours] until he gets to school, basically because they are too expensive. Nurseries are too expensive.”

– Single parent with a one year old

“I’ve put all those thoughts of progression on the back burner in my head. I suppose I will revisit them when the children are older in five or seven years.”

– Single parent with two children at secondary school

The issue of childcare, and the barrier that single parents perceive it presents to progression at work, are discussed in greater detail in a later section.

Experiences of progression

While progression was typically seen as something to aspire to in the future, for many single parents this was not viewed as a linear process. Many of the single parents interviewed had taken a step down in terms of their working hours, pay or status, in order to facilitate their caring responsibilities. For these parents, progression would involve returning to working hours, employment conditions or a status that they had enjoyed previously. Describing their current work situations, individual single parents stated:

“So it is nothing like I have done before, but it is really easy in terms of there is no stress...but it is a massive step back”

– Single parent previously worked at a management level and now works in a part-time administrative role

“So I went further down the career scale again with the job I have got and I’m on a fixed term contract.”

– Single parent who previously worked at a senior level in the civil service

Another single parent had a full-time job in a financial services company before she had children. The company reluctantly allowed her to work part-time on return from maternity leave, then made her redundant. Since that time she has worked in retail, at a lower level of pay and status.

Single parents who were currently working at, or had previously progressed to, more

senior levels talked about the difficulty of combining a more senior job with being a single parent.

“I’d get home and I’d be cooking the kids’ dinner and I’d be checking my emails...I think of (the) men (at work) and (their) six figure salaries as in their career progression had often been quite quick, but they had someone at home, they did not have to rush home, they did not have to make all those arrangements. I think it’s quite impossible if you are the person trying to do both.”

– *Single parent who previously had a full-time senior role in a private company*

Another single parent is a health consultant. Working outside clinical care means that she currently has the opportunity to combine her role with “dropping my daughter off every day to school Monday to Friday”. However, looking towards further progression (in terms of a higher grade), she expressed similar concerns about her ability to combine the job requirements with being a single parent:

“I feel I can’t take on that role because it involves evening meetings...I don’t know whether I can stretch that far”.

– *Single parent with primary school aged child*

Barriers and enablers to progression

The barriers that single parents perceived as preventing or limiting their ability to progress largely mirror those identified in the academic literature (discussed in Section 1); chiefly, these included a lack of flexibility, the need to and impact of working part-time, taking time out of the job market and the impact of childcare. In addition, single parents highlighted specific enablers of progression in relation to their employers’ attitudes and behaviour.

Barriers to progression

(a) Lack of flexibility

Single parents talked about some of the limitations that sole parenting had on their ability to be flexible in relation to their work. Childcare hours, not being able to share drop offs and pick ups with a partner and being the only person available to deal with their child when they were ill were all cited as considerations that limited single parents’ abilities to be flexible at work. Single parents thought that they needed to remain close to their children (or have the facility to reach them quickly), with a number particularly mentioning that they did not want to travel significant distances to work and / or to training or meetings.

Single parents felt that the restriction on their ability to be flexible at work had an impact on their ability to progress to more senior and better paid roles. For some single parents, the flexibility to work from home some of the time, or the ability to be able to make up hours in the evening were important – and single parents did not feel willing

or able to sacrifice these benefits in order to progress. In a subsequent section, we examine the impact of employer attitudes and behaviours in making progression more viable and attractive for single parents. Those who struggled the most around flexibility at work were parents had no close family living nearby, indicating that it is not just the absence of a partner that can have this impact – rather, it is confounded by the absence of a wider support network.

“I couldn’t go for the jobs at the level I had been before because I could no longer travel, I didn’t have the flexibility to work long hours...I now have a job (in which) I’m not using my skill set in any way and my skills are diminishing because of it.”

– *Single parent with a pre-school aged child*

“I cannot take turns. My son was ill two months ago suddenly and I had to stay three days at home with him because he went to the hospital....I need to be at work (nearby) because I need to prioritise my son.”

– *Single parent with a pre-school aged child*

A single parent with primary school aged children talked about not being able to do training which might have helped with career progression at work. This was because the training was going to take place some distance from home and she would not be able to get back in time to pick up her children from childcare.

b) Working part time

As noted above, single parents felt their need for flexible work, which could include part-time hours, was a major issue impacting on their ability to progress especially where they were moving to a new employer. Those single parents who had returned to their organisation from maternity leave or who worked in larger public sector organisations tended to be able to access better quality part-time work.

However, for those seeking to identify progression opportunities via advertised vacancies there was less choice and securing part-time work often meant a step down in terms of seniority. There is still a prevailing assumption that more senior jobs had to be done on full-time hours, reflecting a theme from the academic literature identified in Section 1. Single parents reflected that the majority of quality roles are advertised as full-time. Single parents, even those who had then secured a part-time role below their skill level, could then be reticent to move roles without a guarantee of flexibility.

“I’ve gone back part-time because I just can’t afford to go back full-time.”

– *Single parent with pre-school aged child*

“Make part-time work become just accepted as normal, as opposed to being seen as a second-rate worker.”

– *Single parent with pre-school aged child*

“It’s very difficult to get back into (part-time work) unless you already had the job prior to going off on maternity leave.”

– *Single parent with a primary school aged child*

“I’ve ended up doing part-time work for which I am probably over qualified, in terms of experience as well as education. I have found that along with that has come quite a drop in confidence which affects future progression.”

– *Single parent with secondary school aged children*

c) Time out of the job market

As noted previously, those who had taken time off after maternity leave could find it hard to obtain a role equivalent to their last post, especially when they required this to be part-time. In addition, single parents who had made job choices to downgrade when their children were young could then find it hard to claw back to a job at a more senior level when they reached a point in their lives at which they wanted to progress. Some single parents talked about this being about their skills, particularly IT skills, needing to be brought up to date. For others, taking a job at a lower level had knocked their confidence.

“The longer I am at this lower level, the harder it is going to be, both in terms of my confidence but also technology changes.”

– *Single parent with a pre-school aged child*

“I think they look at my CV now and think ‘she has worked in retail for eight years, she’s got no recent experience within an office or admin role’...I’ve looked at some jobs today but they all ask for you to be proficient in Excel and Word.”

– *Single parent with one child in primary school and one in secondary who previously worked in an office*

Conversely, a number of single parents had made the decision to stay in work with full-time hours, even though they found this difficult and it did not always pay financially, because they were worried about their skills becoming out of date if they left their job or worked at a lower level. One single parent, who had a pre-school aged child, had gone back to work full-time and had not taken a break, as she did not want her IT skills, which were intrinsic to her work, to become out of date.

d) The impact of childcare

In order to work, all of the single parents interviewed had needed to use childcare – formal childcare, informal childcare or a combination of the two. The cost of childcare and the associated impact on their flexibility (discussed in broad terms above) was the most major and persistent theme that single parents saw as a barrier to progression in work.

The cost of childcare, including the need to pay upfront fees, was seen as a major barrier to single parents progressing in work and prevented many from working more hours. Almost all the single parents talked about wanting government intervention to reduce the costs of childcare in order to facilitate progression in work. Many utilised and were grateful for the 30 free hours allocation for three and four year olds and other policies to support childcare. However, it was an overarching view that childcare was just too expensive. The need to fund childcare throughout the year made working, and the pursuit of progression opportunities, very challenging.

“I couldn’t have gone to work because I couldn’t afford to pay that upfront...who has £1,300 as a single parent just laying there?”

– *Single parent with a pre-school aged child on legacy benefits who had to borrow money from her parents to pay for the upfront childcare costs*

“I really wanted to go back full-time but I cannot because I’m not going to be able to afford the childcare...I’ve already started looking at basically working as a teaching assistant or something like that in a school so I can get my holidays to be with him, because I couldn’t afford the childcare for it.”

– *Single parent with a pre-school aged child.*

One single parent with a primary school aged child is grateful for the 85% of childcare costs that are paid under UC but described the system as frustrating “because you have to pay for the childcare upfront and then claim it back once they have had the childcare.”

Another single parent with a pre-school aged child and who works full-time pointed out that despite getting the free 30 hours of childcare she still has to pay £350 a month because the entitlement is not throughout the year. In addition, because of the high cost of childcare she has to use a combination of nursery provision and support from family members to cover her working week.

As well as the costs of childcare, many of the single parents interviewed found it challenging from a logistical point of view, to find flexible childcare for when they were working away from their usual locality or to cover school holidays.

“The school she is in, there is a breakfast club but it is oversubscribed. There is not an after school club.”

– *Single parent with primary school aged child*

“The after school club at my daughters school, they are open half of every holiday, so for three weeks out of the six week holiday that shuts.”

– *Single parent with primary school aged child*

“If I was to go into an office you’ve got to factor in the driving and also I’ve got the problem that my daughters after school (club) closes at 17:45, so I would have to have a job that’s literally very local or finishes at 17:00...so there are lots of jobs I see and they work until 17:30 at night which (means) I cannot get back to the after school club for 17:45.”

– *Single parent with primary school aged child.*

Some of the single parents used informal childcare, instead of or in addition to formal childcare. In general, childcare appeared to be less of an issue for these parents; impacting less on their ability to progress at work. A number of single parents talked about only being able to maintain their jobs because of the informal childcare offered by their wider family.

One single parent, with a primary school aged child, had designed her 4-day working week so that she had no paid childcare. She relies on a combination of wider family

support and some working from home. Another single parent indicated that she could not have stayed in work, if it were not for the support of her wider family who looked after her children in the holidays. It was widely recognised that having such help available could have a considerable impact on single parents' abilities to progress at work.

“You’ve got nobody to fall back on when the children are sick or [to] share the holidays or for pick-ups from childcare.”

– Single parent with primary and secondary school children

Enablers: the role of employers

From our interviews, it clearly emerged that employers' attitudes and behaviour could be either a barrier to or an enabler of progression. Examples of the former included employers not offering flexible working or requiring training at remote locations or inconvenient hours.

However, balancing these negative impacts, single parents reported instances where the actions and attitudes of their employers had enabled them to remain and progress in work. These examples demonstrate the positive difference that employers can make to progression. While formal discussions and planning about progression were more structured in larger organisations, particularly the public sector, single parents also indicated that smaller organisations could encourage and support progression. The appraisal system, particularly in public sector organisations, was viewed as an opportunity to discuss progression plans. Across the board, single parents valued the role of supportive managers.

One single parent talked about the appraisal system in her public sector job being used as an opportunity to talk about progression. In this context, her manager, who she described as “very supportive”, had indicated that, “I think you should think about progression.” She had previously made a formal request for flexible working to ensure that her job can work around her children's school hours, to gain access to carers leave when her children are ill and to facilitate opportunities to work from home.

Another single parent described discussions with her employer around progression as follows:

“So I drew up a sort of progression plan...and proposed it to my boss, the lady that runs the business that I work for ...that I would like to get a bit more involved in marketing and HR..I would like to learn from them...and my boss said ‘We always like to support people and if there is an opening we would definitely like to offer it to someone that works for us’.”

– Single parent with pre-school aged child who works for a small private sector company

Employers could also play a valuable role in helping single parents to remain in work and build up their work experience, which the literature reviewed in Section 1 has demonstrated can have a significant impact on rates of progression.

“My company are incredibly thoughtful and understanding, because obviously things

like when [my child] is ill, I cannot go in...some employers could be funny about it, mine... they are really understanding...they [also] made a job [share role] for me to come back to [after maternity leave]”

– *Single parent with a pre-school aged child, whose private sector employer re-designed her job as a job share*

“I am working for a company that I know, for those first couple of weeks whilst she settles (into school), might allow me to do a bit of working from home or some shorter days and make the hours in lieu...having the flexibility where I work is amazing...that is just as valuable as money I think.”

– *Single parent with a pre-school aged child*

“I have a certain level of autonomy in my role and I exercise that autonomy in a way that is empowering for me.”

– *Single parent with a primary aged child who works for the public sector*

Accessing information on progression

As part of the interviews with single parents, we explored how they would like to access advice and support about progression at work. In general, single parents reported having a good understanding of how they might progress at work – but were also conscious of the barriers that they faced, as identified previously. Single parents reported knowing how to access relevant material online but also talked about the value of their own informal and work-based networks for support.

“I’ve a few friends that work with children...a couple of NCT mums...they are teachers... one of my friends works at a local school...so it’s a bit of who you know.”

– *Single parent with a pre-school aged child who currently works in an office but has accessed support to volunteer and potentially become a teaching assistant*

Single parents also talked about the value of mentors. Some single parents talked about this being something that they would like in order to think about and potentially access support for progression. Others had secured a mentor and seen the benefits for progression.

“I feel like I would not know who to ask or where to turn, and sometimes I find the world of work does seem to have these mysteries...When you are a single parent you are less in the world of networking and your mind is on other things...so you miss on opportunities to network...I think a mentor would be really useful for a lot of people including me.”

– *Single parent with secondary school aged children*

“I have actually found a mentor for me...you get free mentoring for a year...I have got someone who works in leadership...and she is working with me...I’ve done pretty much all the bits of the business but it’s the confidence that I need at the moment because I’ve had some quite big blows.”

– *Single parent with primary and secondary school children looking to set up a business with the support of a mentor from the private sector*

The impact of universal credit

Five of the single parents we interviewed were receiving UC. In each of the five cases, both positive and negative points were raised about its potential impact on progression.

A current trigger for 'natural migration' to UC is when a claimant's youngest child turns five years of age²³. This was the case for two of the single parents who were in receipt of UC – both of whom were relatively positive about the process of transferring and the discussion around their work. One parent, who currently works part-time, indicated that her work coach referred her for extra support, including CV writing, and this then led her to access a free IT course. Another stated:

"I actually went into the interview in tears thinking I was going to be forced to leave my baby and work full-time. I am very lucky in that I am not being pressurised into work...I just have to update them of any changes (to my circumstances and note it in my journal) they know I am a fairly educated person and if I needed to find out something I'd go out and find it myself."

– Single parent with a primary school aged child. She is working a temporary contract

However, while single parents valued the 85% childcare subsidy available under UC, they questioned both its application and also administration, seeing it as a barrier to progression at work.

"There is also a cap on how much they can pay, and the nurseries are quite expensive in this area (London)."

– Single parent with a pre-school aged child about to return to a job from maternity leave.

"Well initially I was really struggling with universal credit; at first there was a month where I did not have anything for the kids and it was really bad...also with breakfast club and getting the money back from universal credit."

– Single parent with two primary school aged children. Her UC payments were delayed at the point that she was starting work and the payments for her childcare including the evidence that she must provide are not resolved after six months in work

"They closed my universal credit account and then reopened it because of [the timing of the fees payable to the nursery]."

– Single parent who has a pre-school child at nursery and works full-time. She relies on a relative looking after her child for part of the week. Her full-time nursery fees would be £1000 and Universal Credit childcare at 85% are capped at £646.35 for one child

The aim of UC is that it makes work pay. However, single parents talked about the current taper rate actually discouraging progression in pay.

"With universal credit anything that I earn over what I am earning now, because they take 63 pence out of every pound, for me to do more days I would have to pay petrol costs that I am not again having to pay at the moment...there is no point in me doing extra hours...I would happily work full-time or more hours if I was actually going to then be able to keep that money."

– Single parent with a pre-school aged child

23 In time through broader 'natural migration' and 'managed migration' single parents are moving over to job-seeking requirements when their youngest child reaches three.

Conclusion

Our interviews with single parents corroborate and elucidate many of the themes around in-work progression highlighted in the academic literature presented in Section 1 and through the analysis of quantitative data detailed in Section 2. What is made particularly clear from the qualitative data is the fact that single parents' attitudes, motivations and behaviour regarding progression at work do not occur and develop in isolation; they are part of a wider range of considerations around family lives and financial circumstances, with the well-being of children tending to assume the greatest importance when these different considerations are weighted against each other. Single parents' balancing of multiple responsibilities and goals is an essential context in which their ambitions and efforts to secure progression at work need to be considered.

Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion

From the data and literature analysed as part of this project, a number of cross-cutting themes relating to single parents' progression in the workplace have emerged – all of which exemplify why in-work progression is such a challenging goal for this group in particular.

- Single parents are **more likely to be stuck in low pay and have poorer progression outcomes** than the working-age population as a whole. While their rates of progression are more similar to those of parents in couples, it remains the case that single mothers and single fathers experience significantly worse outcomes than mothers and fathers in couples respectively.
- **Single parents tend to have characteristics or experiences associated with lower rates of in-work progression** which, together, will have a cumulative impact on their ability to progress. These characteristics and experiences include; being more likely to work part-time; having a lack of flexibility, due to the absence of a partner with whom to share their caring responsibilities; having, on average, fewer educational qualifications; having taken time off work or worked at a level not commensurate with their level of qualifications; and being more likely to work in occupational sectors associated with lower rates of progression.
- In addition, **single parents balance their aspirations and behaviour around in-work progression with a range of other considerations relating to their families and finances, in which the well-being of their children consistently assumes the greatest importance.** As a result, many have put their plans for progression on hold – for example, until their caring commitments have reduced.
- Despite the additional challenges facing single parents, **there is comparatively little evidence regarding 'what works' in achieving in-work progression for single parents specifically.** This is partly because few interventions have solely or predominantly focused on this section of the workforce. Those interventions that have been undertaken present little evidence of significant proportions of single parents achieving positive and long-term progression outcomes.
- **A number of broader structural barriers, linked to the specific characteristics detailed above, are limiting the abilities of single parents to progress at work.** These include legislation around flexible working, inhibiting moves to part-time roles in new organisations; the cost, availability and logistics associated with using childcare, limiting single parents' abilities to be flexible at work and constraining the progression opportunities available to them; and the availability of education and training, limiting single parents' abilities to increase their skills in order to open up a greater range of opportunities.

Recommendations

Without significant action from government and employers, many single parents will be unable to progress into better paid and higher quality jobs.


The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should be cautious in the development of in-work progression requirements for single parents, developing a better evidence base for what works for this group and moving away from a punitive approach including sanctions that are unfair and counterproductive in promoting progression.

Gingerbread would like to see more employers utilise the untapped pool of talent and skills that single parents possess both from their existing staff but also in their external recruitment to roles. Such a move would help many more single parents to progress with their existing employer and help single parents to have the confidence to move to a new job role at a different organisation, which can be a vital way for people to progress in their career.

To remove or reduce the barriers to in-work progression facing single parents, Gingerbread suggests a range of solutions are needed requiring action and collaboration from a number of government departments and employers:

Increase the availability of part-time and flexible work

- It is positive that BEIS has consulted on a duty on employers to consider if a job can be done flexibly and to make that clear when advertising a role. We would like this to go further to introduce a duty on employers to publish flexible working options in job adverts and give workers the right to take up the advertised flexibility from day one. In the meantime employers should voluntarily consider whether a job can be done flexibly and this should be made clear in job advertising through the use of the Working Families 'Happy to Talk Flexible Working' strapline.
- Employers should open up more roles in management and senior levels with part-time and flexible hours for both internal and external recruits. In addition we would urge employers to learn from the good practice examples on in-work progression which support and develop existing staff. For instance the Pets at Home project led by Timewise which opened up more management roles for part-time workers and the Institute for Employment Studies project which shows the positive role of employers in providing up-skilling and pathways to progression for lower skilled workers.



**Increase
availability of
part-time and
flexible work**

Cheaper and more accessible childcare

- The DWP must loan the upfront costs of childcare for single parents (not through the Flexible Support Fund), including deposits and the first month advance payment, so that single parents do not need to cover this substantial upfront cost. This could be modelled on the Childcare Deposit scheme that Gingerbread developed with the Greater London Authority.
- The DfE should reconsider the current operation of the 30 hour childcare offer to make it more compatible with the realities of working life including offering this provision throughout the year.
- The DfE needs to urgently review the childcare cap which limits the total amount that parents can receive and was set back in April 2003. This level has not kept up with rising childcare costs and prevents the promised 85% support for childcare under UC.

**Make childcare
cheaper
and more
accessible**

Offering timely careers support

- The DWP should target career support and advice to single parents at key stages of their children's lives, in particular when their youngest child begins primary or secondary school.
- Employers should use their appraisal system to encourage single parents within their workforce to consider progression and offer coaching to build the confidence of single parents to progress.
- The Government Equalities Office (GEO), BEIS and employers should set up networks for single parents to access information and support in different work sectors and at different levels of roles. In addition a mentoring programme, which includes single parents as a priority group, should be piloted and evaluated by the GEO along similar lines to their returners programme.

**Offering timely
careers support**

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