

Gingerbread*

**“They are
sanctioning
the children”**

**The impact of a punitive
Universal Credit regime on
single parent families in the UK**



Supported by Lloyds Bank Foundation for England & Wales. In partnership with Himmah and Home-Start Lambeth.



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Foreword



We expect social security in this country to act as a safety net for those who need it most and for the system to treat people with fairness and respect. We need a system that supports, not punishes.

Single parents we spoke to as part of this report told us that the process of claiming Universal Credit (UC) and its conditionality and sanction regime created a negative environment. In turn, this saw them at times jumping through hoops, rather than developing a constructive relationship with work coaches at Jobcentre Plus to help them apply for new or more suitable job roles.

Where single parents did find themselves sanctioned, in other words having their payments reduced or stopped for not following a particular rule, such as not being able to attend a meeting, there were often very reasonable explanations such as a lack of childcare. We heard about sanctions being overturned when challenged, highlighting that on a second look it was clear that people are trying to follow the rules. However, in the meantime, they have been plunged into further hardship and are now having the added stress of working to challenge the sanction.

With the new government committed to reviewing UC as well as developing a strategy for combatting child poverty, our message is clear. The system needs to be overhauled so that it supports rather than punishes claimants. It is our view that sanctions should be abolished entirely. Failing that, significant reform is urgently needed so they are only used in very exceptional circumstances.

With the correct support, single parent families can and do thrive, and we are calling for the social security system to support everyone, especially single parent families who may be hit hardest by negative social security policies.

A handwritten signature in green ink that reads "Victoria Benson" followed by a horizontal line.

Victoria Benson, CEO, Gingerbread

Introduction

There are 2 million single parents in the UK,¹ making up almost a quarter of all families. At Gingerbread, we know that these families are significantly more likely to experience financial hardship and that they are almost twice as likely to be living in poverty than couple parents.²

Unsurprisingly, a high proportion of single parents are on Universal Credit (UC). Current statistics show that as many as 1.9 million single households with children were on UC in February 2024.³ The majority of single parents are in work, highlighting just how important UC is to support single parents to make ends meet.

There is evidence to show that, like other groups with caring responsibilities, there are some increased risks for single parents in getting sanctioned (having their UC reduced, or stopped, temporarily, or permanently for failing to adhere to certain conditions.)

While sanctions are detrimental to anyone they're applied to, there is particular concern when it comes to single parents, given that this is a group we know already experiences significant financial hardship – meaning the financial impact of sanctions can be particularly devastating.

Single parents are less likely to have savings to fall back on – 75% of single parents have either no savings or savings less than £1,500 compared with 43% of coupled parents,⁴ – and are more likely to be in debt. Often, this debt is not only worsened by living in a one-income household, but it is linked very specifically to single parenthood. Our research shows 44% of single parents said relationship breakdown or divorce was a reason for being in problem debt and single parents often inherit arrears and debt.⁵

We wanted to find out more about the experiences of single parents claiming UC to better understand any increased risk of sanctions and the impact this had as well as their broader experiences of claiming social security benefits and finding work using Jobcentre Plus. We worked with our partners Himmah and Home-Start Lambeth to complete desk research and surveys. We also interviewed more than 20 single parents.⁶

1 ONS (Office for National Statistics) (2024), Families and Households: 1996 to 2023, Table 3.

2 DWP (Department for Work and Pensions). (2017), Households below average income: 1994/95 to 2015/16. Gingerbread analysis.

3 gov.uk/government/statistics/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-11-april-2024/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-11-april-2024.

4 ONS (Office for National Statistics) (2022), Family Resources Survey.

5 Gingerbread (2021), The Single Parent Debt Trap.

6 Full details about the methodology are in the appendix.

We found:

- 1. Universal Credit (UC) as it stands is insufficient**
- 2. The social security system is confusing and hostile**
- 3. There are specific risks of being sanctioned for single parents**
- 4. The social security system has a significant financial and mental health impact on single parents**
- 5. The system impacts work coach relationships**

With the new government set to review UC and reform the operation of Jobcentre Plus, as well as developing a strategy to tackle child poverty, this report is timely in outlining the current challenges and in recommending the changes needed.

Report findings*



1. The insufficiency of Universal Credit (UC)

Gingerbread has long had concerns that the amount of money given under UC is insufficient and does not secure the financial position of single parent families, most of whom are in work, and many of whom struggle to make ends meet.

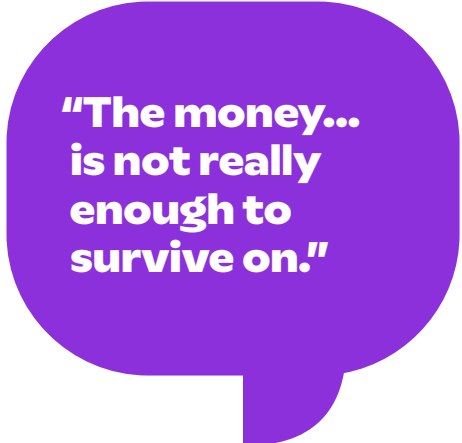
While the focus of this research was the impact of sanctions, the insufficiency of UC was a theme that kept emerging, regardless of whether someone had experienced a sanction.

Single parents told us they didn't find the rates of social security to be enough in supporting them to meet the costs of living. This then amplified fears around the financial implications of sanctions, as many people on UC didn't have any financial cushioning should they receive less than expected for whatever reason.

As one parent told us, "the money is not enough to sustain the family", and another that it is "not really enough to survive on."

This is supported by research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Trussell Trust which found that around 5 in 6 low-income households on UC are currently going without essentials.⁷ Further, support has eroded over decades, with the basic rate ('standard allowance') of UC now at around its lowest ever level as a proportion of average earnings, leaving people struggling.

An insufficient safety net impacts both single parents and their children. Home-Start Lambeth surveyed 23 service users⁸ about their experiences of UC and found that 19 of them had a difficult experience with UC, which left them struggling to afford the essentials. Of those surveyed, 8 (44%) said they had to cut down on food, 8 (44%) said they were borrowing money to pay



**"The money...
is not really
enough to
survive on."**

⁷ Joseph Rowntree Foundation and The Trussell Trust (2024) An Essentials Guarantee.

⁸ Some people surveyed did not respond to every question.

for rent and bills, 5 (36%) said their children did not have adequate clothing and were not getting sufficient food and 9 (64%) said their children were missing out on opportunities to meet and play with other children.

When we asked single parents what was needed, they agreed that higher rates of UC were essential. For example, single parent Chris told us that social security must be urgently and permanently uprated. Gemma said whilst additional cost of living payments provided by the government had been welcome, these were really only a 'plaster' and genuine uprating needed to be introduced.

The sufficiency of current benefit levels are further eroded by policies such as the two-child limit on benefits and the benefit cap, both of which leave some single parent families with even less in their pockets. More than two-thirds (62%) of capped households are headed by single parents,⁹ and over half of families affected by the two-child limit are single parent families.¹⁰ Abolishing the two-child limit would lift 250,000 children out of poverty, and a further 850,000 children would be in less deep poverty.¹¹

Inadequacy
of Universal
Credit means
children can
miss out on:

Food
**Adequate
clothing**
**Opportunities to
play with other
children**

Recommendations

- **The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) must ensure that the basic rate of UC truly reflects the cost of living by:**
 - Uprating the basic rate annually in line with inflation.
 - Introducing an Essentials Guarantee in line with recommendations by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Trussell Trust, but ensuring calculations look at the specific needs of single parent households. This guarantee would mean enshrining in law that the basic rate of UC at least covers the essentials.
- **The DWP must abolish the two-child limit and benefit cap.**



⁹ [Benefit Cap statistics | GOV.UK \(gov.uk\)](#).

¹⁰ [Things will only get worse: Why the two-child limit must go | CPAG](#).

¹¹ ["My children are people, not numbers." How the two-child benefit limit impacts families | Barnardo's \(barnardos.org.uk\)](#).

2. The social security system is confusing and hostile

The social security system was described by many single parent families as confusing and complex. We were told that this complexity means single parents are worried about doing things 'incorrectly' by accident and receiving a sanction as a result.

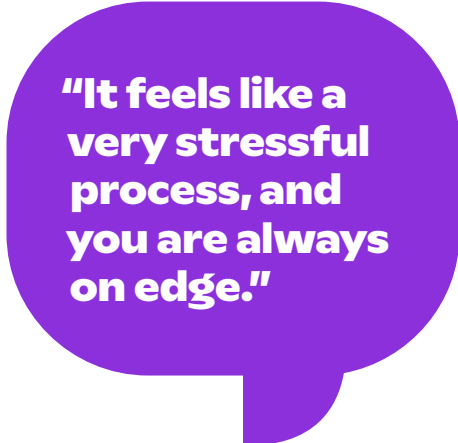
One single parent told us, "UC has been a confusing process at times for me", with another telling us that there are "so many hoops to jump through, complete lack of understanding for single parents, long delays. Working and Child Tax Credits were so much easier and straightforward."

A common theme in our discussions was a sense that the social security system is built upon a lack of understanding and flexibility which makes people jump through hoops, often at personally difficult times.

"When I moved into temporary accommodation, they (DWP) made me fill out all the forms again about my children and requested to see Matb1 forms, hospital tags and discharge letters years after my children have been born, even though I provided them all at the time of my pregnancy and births of my children. It's as if they assumed I was lying, causing stress for no reason. Then I had to go back to my flat in fear to look for all these things they requested, in more fear that if I don't provide it, they will sanction my payment."

"It feels like a very stressful process, and you are always on edge about if you are doing the right thing or if you aren't following their rules. I don't find the staff very empathetic or easy to talk to at all when there are queries."

The fact that such stresses were often placed on parents with very young children is echoed by another single parent who told us:



"It feels like a very stressful process, and you are always on edge."

"Sometimes they make things difficult for you like making me come in for an appointment after I'd given birth just to say that I don't actively need to look for work. Something they could have done over the phone. Even now, I have to go in with my two little ones every few months to do the same thing. My circumstances haven't changed."

Rosita is studying while also working on a zero hours contract to help her balance work and study. She told us

"The Jobcentre don't care or understand because I'm in college not uni and it's not full-time study."

She feels like she sometimes has to risk exam grades in order to manage her life as she needs to spend 20 hours a week studying alongside attending classes, but the rules don't recognise independent study hours. Instead, they have told her to find more work. Pay for her job is low – she can barely pay rent and food on her wages.

Some feel like it goes beyond confusion, complexity and lack of flexibility, and the social security system is designed to be deliberately hostile.

Laura, a single parent to two children told us:

"The way they (DWP) communicate is the main thing I'd change, messages are getting more aggressive. It makes you anxious that you're going to be in the wrong. Even when you call them, they're not nice. It's like they're a parking warden with a quota."

Another single parent revealed the 'aggressive tone' of the DWP is worsening. She said:

"I work 22 hours a week and am also freelance and self-employed – I earn enough money to meet conditionality, but not quite enough hours. There is lots I have to prove. It wasn't like that before – it's becoming a lot more aggressive in tone. They're not clear on conditionality, it needs to be more precise."

Susie from Home-Start Lambeth tell us

"There is no humanity in the system. You're not treated like a grown up. The anxiety for people on UC when you don't know what's coming next is really unhelpful."

"It makes you anxious that you're going to be in the wrong."

"It's like they're a parking warden with a quota."

"There is no humanity in the system."

The lack of clear published rules and guidance on how conditionality and sanctions work and how work coaches are expected to apply these rules helps create anxiety and confusion on what to expect. It also prevents advice services from being able to help those who come to them.

Recommendations

- **The DWP must publish clear guidance and information so that work coaches, single parents and those providing advice and support services all understand the detail of the UC regime and are very clear about the expectations the system places on claimants.**
- **The government should set a more positive tone in its leadership of the system to help create a less hostile environment and ensure this translates to training of and expectations of staff.**



What are sanctions and how do they work?

To explain the sanctions system, we will be using the language used by the DWP. This is language that we believe needs to be challenged as it surrounds 'failure' and 'good reasons.' Concerningly, there is no published guidance that clearly explains what constitutes a good reason for being unable to meet a certain rule.

For those who 'fail' to adhere to the rules and their claimant commitments, a sanction may be applied. The amount that people get sanctioned varies significantly based on their conditionality regime, age and whether they claim as a single person or as a couple.

Typically, a single person over the age of 25 who is in the 'searching for work' group would be sanctioned 100% of their allowance for as long as the sanction lasts – this amounts to £12.90 a day.

Whilst sanctions differ from person to person, they can typically be categorised into three types – high level sanctions, medium level sanctions and low-level sanctions:

High level sanctions may be applied if you fail to apply for or accept a job that is offered to you or if you leave your job without a good reason. This usually lasts for 91 days but can last up to 182 days if you've been sanctioned before.

Medium level sanctions may be applied if you 'do not do enough to look for work or are not available for work'. These typically last for 28 days but can last for 91 days if you've received a medium level sanction in the past year.

Low level sanctions are the ones that, according to our research, are most likely to be applied to single parents. These typically last for seven days, plus the time it takes you to 'correct the failure.'

Examples of where these are applied include:

- Not attending a work focused interview.
- Not signing on when you are supposed to.
- Not providing evidence that the DWP has asked for.
- Not going on a course that has been recommended as part of work preparation.



3. The specific risks of being sanctioned for single parents

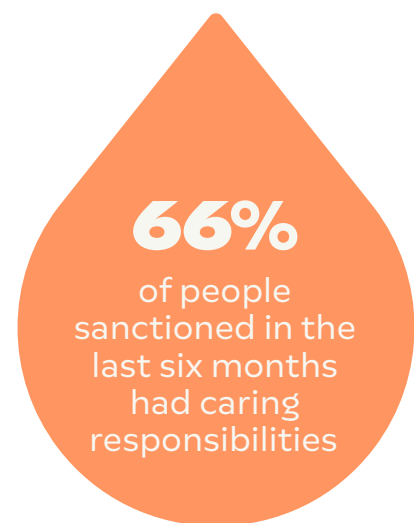
While data about who is sanctioned is hard to find, those with caring responsibilities are overrepresented in sanction recipients.

Citizens Advice found that 66% of the people who were sanctioned in the last 6 months had caring responsibilities, compared to just 32% of everyone who received UC.¹² From June 2022 – May 2023, 22% of people that Citizens Advice were supporting with sanctions were single people with dependent children.¹³

The people Citizens Advice have supported with sanctions were often sanctioned for missing meetings due to ill health, caring responsibilities or phone or internet issues. Work coaches appear to take a 'guilty until proven innocent' approach, where they apply sanctions without asking claimants why they didn't do the required activity.¹⁴ This is certainly something that our research shows, with single parents telling us they had been sanctioned despite doing everything they could to avoid it and then having to work hard to challenge sanctions.

DWP statistics suggest that, between August 2021 to October 2022, 98.4% of sanctions were issued to claimants for failing to attend their Jobcentre meetings rather than not meeting work search requirements.¹⁵ For single parents, we know that access to childcare can pose a major barrier to attending appointments.

There is limited evidence on the numbers of sanctions that are overturned. The statistics that are available show that, historically, single parents were more likely to be successful in having sanctions overturned.



¹² Citizens Advice (2023), The Sanctions Spiral.

¹³ Ibid (10).

¹⁴ Ibid (10).

¹⁵ DWP (Department for Work and Pensions). (2023), Benefit sanctions statistics to October 2022 (experimental).

This means that single parents not only face greater risk of being sanctioned but may be at greater risk of being unfairly sanctioned.¹⁶

Several single parents revealed to us that simple administrative errors on their side meant they received a sanction. One single parent told us:

"I received a sanction when I first claimed UC as I was new to claiming benefits and didn't realise I needed to check my journal and agree to conditions. I had to phone to explain this to UC, and I won an appeal of the sanction, but I did feel it was very scary to have the threat of income being stopped."

"I won an appeal of the sanction, but ... it was very scary to have the threat of income being stopped."

Family emergencies were another reason cited for receiving a sanction, with work coaches not being forgiving of these difficult circumstances that can arise for anyone but are often trickier to manage as a single parent.

Max, a bereaved single parent of two children received a sanction for missing an appointment due to a family emergency and childcare issues:

"I tried to appeal and review the sanction as I was feeling helpless. The process consisted of providing a lot of documents and it was very frustrating, and I was already frustrated at the time. It took so long to receive a response - almost 2 months and I tried to gather more of my documents and had to attend hearings, but I didn't have the luxury of have childcare."

"Being a single parent made the appeal process harder."

He also told us that

"Being a single parent made the appeal process harder as if I had my partner, I would have had support financially and emotionally to help with the appeal process."

This had a significant impact on his mental wellbeing.

Mental health issues were also reported separately as a reason for missing an appointment, resulting in a sanction, demonstrating a lack of 'grace' in the

¹⁶ DWP Stat-Xplore. Data covers all referrals to date (April 2005 to September 2016) JSA sanctions.

system. For one caller to the Gingerbread advice line, the high cost of living was exacerbated by having been sanctioned for missing a Jobcentre Plus appointment which he couldn't attend due to his agoraphobia, anxiety and depression. He was now seeking some local financial help so that he can provide for his children.


Talking to single parents who had family abroad, there is also a particular risk of sanctions due to unclear guidance about travel abroad. The intersection of single parenthood and immigration was particularly apparent in the research.

Crystal, a single parent to a five-year old boy told us:

"I was stressed with a one-year-old, having been in an abusive relationship, suffering postpartum depression. I asked them (my work coach) what the limit was on travel. I was told I could have 30 days. My mum booked my ticket to Trinidad for 28 days. This was February 2020. Whilst I was there, the pandemic happened. Then, Trinidad closed their borders – I informed UC of this. UC said it was fine, just let us know when back.

"In December, they made the cold weather payment to me – I called to check it's okay and should I still be receiving it as not in the country? They said it's fine. When the borders finally reopened, I booked a ticket and let UC know I was coming back. They said 'oh we didn't know you were still out of the country' – they said we need to look into this, you should not have been paid. And they just shut my account completely. Couldn't even access my page. I had no food in my house. I needed to buy my child winter clothes and needed to buy food. I came back into the country with nothing. My parents had to send me back with money.

"Thankfully, I screenshotted everything before they closed my account so had evidence for the appeal. They said my intention was to stay in Trinidad, but I had booked a return ticket. They started quoting laws that I didn't understand. The judge even agreed with me but said their hands were tied because of the law they stated."



**"I came back...
with nothing.
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with money."**

It is clear that the regime operates too harshly, that claimants are not listened to and are often sanctioned when there is a clear explanation for their actions. As set out further below, reducing the payments for single parents is pushing them unfairly into further financial hardship. We also know that sanctions have been shown to be ineffective – a sanction leads the average UC claimant to find work, and when they do enter a job, they are likely to be earning less than their unsanctioned peers.¹⁷

It is our view that sanctions should be abolished, time and energy invested in supporting single parents and other claimants into roles where they can meet their potential. At the very least, a transformation of the social security system is needed so that sanctions are only applied in the most exceptional of circumstances, with forewarning and discussion with the claimant. All challenges with meeting claimant requirements should be discussed and reviewed with work coaches so that sanctions can be avoided.

Recommendations

- **The DWP to include the following as part of their review of UC:**
 - The benefits of abolishing sanctions entirely.
 - Ensuring that if sanctions are to continue, they are only used in the most exceptional circumstances with forewarning and discussion with the claimant.
 - Ensuring any reforms look at the specific challenges of single parents and how these challenges might be compounded due to other factors such as disability, ethnicity and migration status.



¹⁷ David Webster (2023) [Commentary on DWP sanctions report](#) | DW 12 Apr 2023.docx (live.com).

Application of conditionality and conditionality changes

The UC conditionality regime subjects 'lead' carers to varying levels of work preparation and job search requirements, with sanctions applied for perceived failure to comply. Over the years, the expectations on parents of younger and younger children to work or increase their hours have become more stringent.

Before 2008, single parents were not required to work until their youngest child turned 16, though the majority did. Single parents were at first only expected to work when their youngest turned 12, this has now fallen to when their youngest child turns 3.

In October 2023, the expectations on those with a child 3 years and older increased and anyone with a child aged 3-12-years-old is now expected to be available for work for up to 30 hours a week. This is up from 16 hours for parents of 3-4-year-olds and up from 25 hours for parents of 5-12-year-olds.

These requirements ignore individual circumstances and do not take into account the following:

- Sufficient and affordable childcare provision is not in place to support increased requirements. It is also unclear whether travel to and from childcare settings count in the 30-hour requirement.
- There are not enough part-time, flexible roles available.
- Single parents may be working in a suitable role that is under the 30-hour threshold.

These requirements risk placing lead carers in the impossible position of needing to work more hours without suitable childcare or jobs which may result in an increase in sanctions among parents of young children.

Recommendations

- **DWP to reverse the conditionality rules put in place by the last government in 2023 on lead carers.**



4. Financial and mental health impact

Citizens Advice research shows that 94% of people who've been sanctioned in the last 6 months have had to cut back on spending, borrow money, seek crisis support and/or go without essentials.¹⁸ The knock-on effects of this are significant, especially given the fact that many single parents are already in debt.

For Crystal, who experienced a high-level sanction which meant she was shut out of her UC account, the financial ramifications were significant. She is now £30,000 in debt and hasn't taken her complaints with the DWP any higher because she is also involved in a court process with her ex and has other issues to contend with.

Further, Max found that when he was sanctioned "the temporary financial relief that came from being on UC was gone", and this sanction left him in 'financial crisis'. He told us "it forced me to rely on foodbanks and borrow money from friends and family." He also took out a high interest loan that month to cover the basics. This means he is still feeling the financial ripple effects of that sanction.

It's not just the parent that experiences these financial impacts – the effects are felt by the entire family. As Kelly, a single parent of two pre-school aged children told us "they (the DWP) are sanctioning the children."

Kelly was sanctioned for missing an appointment and had to sell household items, borrow money from family and friends and rely on food vouchers to fill the gap that sanctions had created in her finances. She successfully appealed the sanction but getting the money back took a long time.

This experience also has a knock-on impact on mental health. We know that many single parents experience poor mental health, often linked to finances.

"It forced me to rely on foodbanks and borrow money."

"They (the DWP) are sanctioning the children."

¹⁸ Ibid (10).

The interaction between mental health and sanctions is twofold. Poor mental health may contribute towards being sanctioned, and (fear of) being sanctioned may worsen mental health for single parents.

This might also impact the decisions single parents make in terms of employment. For example, taking the first job available rather than one that really works for them. This is supported by the government's own data, which shows that sanctions slow down the progress of claimants into employment.¹⁹ The data shows that the sanctions regime often result in claimants feeling compelled to accept lower-paying jobs, leaving them with £34 a month less on average when they start work compared to non-sanctioned claimants.

Sanctions really don't work for anyone, least of all single parents who want and deserve good jobs that meet their skill sets and interests and pay them sufficiently.

Our research revealed that many single parents fear being sanctioned and work actively to avoid being sanctioned, causing significant stress on top of the pressures of already having to work very hard to make ends meet.

Ava told us she:

"Keeps checking (her) record on UC system as (she is) terrified to get sanctioned. Having to pay £10 a day to get kids to school as the temporary accommodation (moved due to Domestic Abuse) is 2 buses away from where the family are staying."

A sanction would leave her without the money to make this journey, so the stakes feel high.



Recommendations

- **DWP to make sure there is clear information available on how to challenge sanctions and clear signposting to any emergency financial support, as well as mental health support.**



¹⁹ DWP (Department for Work and Pensions). (2023) The Impact of Benefit Sanctions on Employment Outcomes: draft report.

5. Work coach relationships

One thing that can determine whether someone is sanctioned is the relationship they have with their work coach and if they feel their work coach understands their specific circumstances.

Many single parents report having a difficult relationship with their work coach, with many feeling that their work coaches don't really understand them and their needs. At the start of 2022, just one-third (34%) of single parents agreed that contact with Jobcentre Plus was personalised and relevant to their specific situations.²⁰

Knowing that a work coach can sanction you creates a power dynamic within the relationship which is tricky to navigate. It also means that many people feel they cannot be as honest as they'd like to with their work coach or feel that the purpose of their work coach is to uphold conditionality, rather than support and advise with employment and UC.

As Valerie, a solo mum by choice to a 4 and 1 year old, tells us:

"Work coaches – I don't know why they call them coaches because they aren't coaching anybody. A coach makes it sound like a mentor – someone who gives you ideas and support. Work coaches are unprofessional and out of order. They're not giving us customer service. We are being treated like beggars and criminals."

This poor treatment is particularly acute for the third of single parents who are disabled.²¹ Many report that work coaches have no real understanding of how their health interacts with single parenthood and impacts their needs.



"We are being treated like beggars and criminals."

²⁰ Gingerbread (2023), The Single Parent Employment Challenge – job loss and job seeking after the pandemic.

²¹ Gingerbread (2023), Single Parents in 2023.

Crystal reveals that one work coach told her she could do certain jobs despite her health issues because "I have colleagues who have x health issue like you and make it into work... you're fit and you're young and you can still work."

Several single parents we spoke with reported negative experiences with their work coaches, which resulted in them changing work coach. One told us:

"When my daughter was ill with respiratory problems in hospital, I had to go to my work coach with proof and papers from the hospital as he said I still had to attend my appointment... I complained and they removed him as my work coach."

Christina, the family Coordinator at Home-Start Lambeth, is a single mum of two and has had negative experiences with her work coach. When she was pregnant, she became unwell and had to stop working and studying. She was then told that she had No Recourse to Public Funds by a work coach, despite having lived in the UK her whole life. Eventually, she took the DWP to court through tribunal and was told that her work coach had 'messed up'. The impact of these mistakes is huge, financially and mentally.

We hear regularly that work coaches make errors which make it harder for single parents to understand what is required of them, and claim the UC they are entitled to. One single parent told us:

"Staff responding to journal entries constantly make errors which negatively impacts on my payments. (There is) lots of staff confusion around the combination of UC, self-employment and having a young child."

Ultimately, if work coaches don't understand all the requirements well, how are most single parents meant to? There has been a fall in reported positive experiences of Jobcentre Plus since mid-2021. This trend is higher for single parents, who also reported that requirements are becoming more unreasonable and that they need more bespoke support in matching skills and availability.²²

"They [work coach] just said 'You're fit and you're young and you can still work!'"

"Staff... constantly make errors which negatively impacts on my payments."

²² Ibid (10).

However, it's also important to recognise that single parents told us about positive experiences with individual work coaches, who were particularly helpful and understanding of the complex situations they faced. For example, Faith told us of a positive work coach experience when her coach advised her to undergo a health assessment, which allowed her to make sure that UC was meeting her specific needs.

We do believe that there is real potential for the work coach role to work and ensure single parents get the support they need, but it needs reform.

Many of the challenges single parents face when returning to work or looking to increase their hours need to be specifically understood. These challenges may include a lack of affordable childcare and a shortfall in flexible or part time roles. Our recent research report *The Single Parent Employment Challenge*²³ found that support for single parents to move into work is most effective when it is consistent, focused and bespoke. Evaluation of the New Deal for Lone Parents indicates that a specialist single parent advisor role was central to the positive cost-benefit of the programme, and a similar role should be introduced in Jobcentres.²⁴ We therefore propose that Jobcentre Plus develops its work coach role, creating specialist single parent work coaches who can offer this bespoke support.

Recommendations

- **The DWP to introduce specialist single parent work coaches as part of the major overhaul of Jobcentre Plus. This should be included in the forthcoming White Paper to Get Britain Working.**



²³ Ibid (10).

²⁴ Gingerbread (2024), The case for specialist single parent work coaches.

Report summary*



Full list of recommendations

- **The DWP must ensure that the basic rate of UC truly reflects the cost of living by:**
 - Up-rating the basic rate annually in line with inflation.
 - Introducing an Essentials Guarantee in line with recommendations by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Trussell Trust, but ensuring calculations look at the specific needs of single parent households. This would mean enshrining in law that the basic rate of UC at least covers the essentials.
- **The DWP must publish clear guidance and information so that work coaches, single parents and those providing advice and support services all understand the detail of the UC regime and are very clear about the expectations the system places on claimants.**
- **The government should set a more positive tone in its leadership of the system to help create a less hostile environment and ensure this translates to training of and expectations of staff.**
- **The DWP to include the following as part of their review of UC:**
 - Abolish the two child limit and benefit cap.
 - The benefits of abolishing sanctions entirely.
 - Ensuring that, if sanctions are to continue, they are only used in the most exceptional circumstances with forewarning and discussion with the claimant.
 - Ensuring any reforms look at the specific challenges of single parents and how these challenges might be compounded due to other factors such as disability, ethnicity and migration status.
 - A reversal of the conditionality rules put in place by the last government in 2023 on lead carers.
 - Ensure there is clear information available on how to challenge sanctions and clear signposting to any emergency financial support, as well as mental health support.
- **The DWP to introduce specialist single parent work coaches as part of the major overhaul of Jobcentre Plus. This should be included in the forthcoming White Paper to Get Britain Working.**

Research background

The research was comprised of a questionnaire, asking people about their experiences of UC and sanctions, a focus group with Home-Start Lambeth and a series of telephone interviews conducted by Himmah and Gingerbread.

The interviews and focus group were semi structured, allowing single parents to share their experiences freely. Single parents who participated in the focus group and interviews were asked how they wished to be identified in the research – some chose to use their names, others selected pseudonyms, and others asked to be referred to as 'a single parent' or a single mother/father.

The overarching research question was focused on exploring the impact of sanctions when applied, with secondary research questions exploring whether fear of sanctions impacts single parents, their actions, and their relationships with Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches.

There are 2 million single parent led families in the UK; but they are not one homogenous group. We ensured that our research reflects their multifaceted, intersectional identities. We ensured that a mix of single mothers and fathers participated as well as single parents from a range of backgrounds. We did encounter a range of challenges in finding people to talk to, as well as a lower than anticipated response rate to our survey – perhaps reflective of the complexity of the sanctions system and the UC regime.

This is definitely a topic around which there remains some stigma, which made it harder to find people to speak to. Home-Start Lambeth hosted a focus group on our behalf, which we facilitated. They invited single parents with young children who they had been supporting through UC related challenges. There was a children's drawing area, food and drink available and a sense of sociability and solidarity amongst the group, with one participant reporting how good it was to 'have a voice.' For Himmah's interviews, they called a number of people who had been referred to their services, and set up a time to have an interview over the telephone at a later point – this helped overcome the digital divide and logistics of getting to a location for a focus group/interview.

We also included insight from the Gingerbread helpline, which advises people on a range of issues, including related to UC, conditionality and sanctions.



Gingerbread*

[gingerbread.org.uk](https://www.gingerbread.org.uk)

Gingerbread, the charity for single parent families, is registered in England and Wales as a company limited by guarantee, no. 402748, and a registered charity, no. 230750.