



Lone parents and Jobseeker's Allowance

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Until recently, lone parents with a child under 16 who were not in full-time work could claim Income Support. However, from November 2008 most lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over have no longer been eligible for Income Support. Those deemed able to work may instead claim Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), provided they are 'available for and actively seeking work'. The age threshold for the youngest child is being progressively lowered, so that by October 2010 most lone parents with a youngest child aged seven or over will be subject to the JSA regime.

When the new 'Lone Parent Obligations' were proposed, the Government said that no lone parent would be forced into a job that did not suit their circumstances, and that Jobcentre Plus advisers would have additional discretion so that lone parents would not be penalised if they did not take up a job because appropriate, affordable childcare was not available. Other 'flexibilities' have been introduced in the JSA regime to take account of lone parents' particular circumstances. Welfare rights groups have however expressed concern about the extension of conditionality to lone parent benefits, and about whether the JSA rules can be adapted to take account of the complexities of lone parents' lives. The availability of affordable and suitable childcare remains a major concern.

This note gives information on transfer of lone parents to JSA, and outlines the background to the changes. It also gives preliminary findings from studies of the impact of the changes so far.

In addition to these changes, the Labour Government planned that from October 2010 lone parents (and partners of certain benefit claimants) with a youngest child aged between three and six in four Jobcentre Plus districts would be required to undertake 'work-related activity' to remain entitled to their full rate of benefit. This followed provisions in the Welfare Reform Act 2009. Further information can be found in a separate Library standard note, *Lone parents with younger children: the Progression to Work Pathfinders*.

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1 Overview of the changes

Jobcentre Plus produced an information pack for welfare rights advisers giving the following overview of the changes to lone parents' benefits:¹

1.1 The Government is committed to halving child poverty by 2010–11 and on the way to eradicating it by 2020. Currently there are 2.9 million children living in poverty. In addition to making families better off, paid work has other important benefits including improving the health and well-being and future prospects of both parents and children.

1.2 Since 1997 considerable progress has been made in increasing the lone parent employment rate to 56.3 per cent but we still face major challenges to eradicate child poverty. Over half – 58 per cent – of children in non-working lone parent families live in poverty, compared to 19 per cent of children of lone parents working part-time and 7 per cent of those working full-time.

1.3 The Government's policies for lone parents, therefore, are a balance between providing financial and other assistance to support his or her family, and wider responsibilities to lift families and children out of poverty. On this basis, the Government is committed to the principle that once children are older, lone parents who are claiming benefits and are able to do so, should be expected to look for paid employment.

The changes

1.4 From 24 November 2008, most lone parents with older children making a new or repeat claim for benefit were no longer entitled to Income Support only on the grounds of being a lone parent.

1.5 From 2010, most lone parents with a youngest child aged 7 or over will no longer be entitled to Income Support only on the grounds of being a lone parent. Instead, those able to take up paid employment may claim Jobseeker's Allowance and those with a disability or health condition may claim Employment and Support Allowance.

1.6 These changes are being introduced in 3 phases and will affect:

Most lone parents making new or repeat claims with:

- youngest child aged 12 or over from 24 November 2008;
- youngest child aged 10 or over from 26 October 2009; and
- youngest child aged 7 or over from 25 October 2010.

Most existing lone parents' Income Support will cease by

- December 2009 for lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over;
- September 2010 for lone parents with a youngest child aged 10 or over; and
- April 2011 for lone parents with a youngest child aged 7 or over

The changes will not affect all lone parents with children in the relevant age groups, however. Some lone parents will continue to be able to claim Income Support; this includes, for example, lone parents with a foster child, those also in receipt of Carer's Allowance, those

¹ [Changes to Income Support for lone parents and Jobseeker's Allowance for all parents – Information pack](#)

with a child getting the middle or higher rate Disability Living Allowance care component, and those receiving Incapacity Benefit or National Insurance credits for incapacity for work.

The DWP information pack for advisers gives further details of the changes and how they are being implemented. The pressure group Gingerbread has also produced a factsheet for lone parents and advisers, *Moving on to JSA and into work*, which gives answers to frequently asked questions about the changes and how they will affect people.

1 Background

While there has at times been some ambiguity in the way the benefits system has treated lone parents (or certain categories of lone parent) over the postwar period², for the most part policy in recent decades has been guided by the principle that lone parents should have the right to choose not to engage in paid work. The Finer Committee report of 1974 stressed the importance of the principle that-

...a woman should not be obliged by financial pressures to go out to work when she feels it is in the best interests of her children for her to be at home.³

This general principle was reiterated in a written answer in June 1998:

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to introduce an element of compulsion into the new deal for lone parents. [42932]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The New Deal for Lone Parents is a voluntary programme. There is no question of us trying to compel lone parents to go out to work rather than looking after their children.⁴

Nevertheless, the Labour Government introduced a series of measures aimed at increasing the lone parent employment rate. As well as the voluntary New Deal for Lone Parents, these included:

- The introduction of mandatory Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) for lone parents on Income Support from April 2001
- Pre-employment support through Jobcentre Plus including 'Options and Choices Events', Guaranteed Job Interviews and Work Trials
- Measures aimed at easing the transition to paid work, including in-work credits and continuing help from Jobcentre Plus advisers for lone parents who move into work
- More generous ongoing in-work support through tax credits, including increased help with childcare costs via the Working Tax Credit

Other policies aimed at increasing employment rates generally included:

- The introduction of the National Minimum Wage

² Jane Millar, *Poverty and the lone parent family: the challenge to social policy*, 1989, p27

³ *Report of the Committee on One Parent Families*, Cmnd 5629. For further information on the Finer Committee's deliberations see Joan Brown, *In Search of a Policy: The rationale for social security provision for one parent families*, 1988

⁴ HC Deb 8 June 1998 c467w

- Efforts to increase the number of childcare places, including new duties on local authorities in England and Wales under the *Childcare Act 2006* to secure sufficient childcare to meet the needs of working parents
- Measures to improve the work/life balance, including changes to parental leave and the right to request flexible working

Until relatively recently however, lone parents receiving benefits have not been subject to any obligation to be available for or to seek work.

1.1 Lone parents and conditionality

The January 2006 Welfare Reform Green Paper, *A new deal for welfare: Empowering people to work*, proposed 'a more radical approach' to engaging with lone parents on benefits:

Lone parents are naturally concerned that if they go to work their children should be well looked after. This is true not just for those whose children are too young to go to school, but also for lone parents with school-age children, who need to be assured that they will be well cared for after school and during the holidays. It is right that the Government should help make provision available to enable lone parents to work, but in return we believe that lone parents have a responsibility to make serious efforts to return to work, especially once their youngest child reaches 11. This will improve their own lives, and the lives of their children too.⁵

To this end it proposed, among other things, piloting a new 'Work-Related Activity Premium' for lone parents whose youngest child was aged 11 or over and who were taking active steps to prepare for work. In its response to the Green Paper consultation, the Government stated however that undertaking 'work-related activity' would be voluntary and that lone parents would continue to be able to do nothing and still receive their usual Income Support.⁶

In her November 2006 report for the DWP, *Delivering on Child Poverty: what would it take?*, Lisa Harker argued that, given the right support package and access to affordable and flexible childcare, there might be grounds for extending 'conditionality' for lone parents. The UK, she noted, was out of step with many other countries in requiring little of lone parents in return for the benefits they received. However, she also warned that 'stronger' forms of conditionality - such as the regime for JSA claimants - could undermine the success of the New Deal for Lone Parents which was based of positive, supportive engagement with parents.⁷

In a speech on 30 January 2007, the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, John Hutton, signaled a possible to change to the Government's approach to rights and responsibilities for lone parents:

...if we are to eradicate child poverty, then I believe we will also need to go further in challenging existing assumptions about who - and at what point - someone should be in work; and where the focus should be for the welfare state in helping people to find work and progress through the labour market.

The UK has one of the highest proportions of families headed by a lone parent in Europe. And yet despite the progress we have made in increasing the lone parent

⁵ Cm 6730, p56

⁶ DWP, *A new deal for welfare: Empowering people to work: Consultation report*, June 2006, p28

⁷ Cm 6951, pp23-24

employment rate since 1997 – now up over 11 percentage points to 56.5 per cent - we still have the lowest lone parent employment rate of any major European country.

Coupled with this, we ask very little of lone parents on benefit – with a requirement to look for work that only begins when the youngest child reaches 16.

By contrast countries whose welfare systems are held up as beacons of progressive social values, such as Sweden and Denmark, make little distinction between lone parents and other benefit recipients in terms of the obligation to look for work. As a result, they have lone parent employment rates as high as 80 per cent.⁸

In March 2007 David Freud's independent report for the DWP on the future of the Government's welfare to work strategy was published.⁹ The report argued that, with 'wraparound' childcare in place, the rationale for placing fewer obligations on lone parent claimants should be re-examined. The treatment of lone parents also appeared increasingly anomalous in the light of other countries' rules, and new responsibilities being placed on sick and disabled claimants in the UK as a result of the introduction of the Employment and Support Allowance. This, combined with evidence on the positive benefits of work and the importance of the Government's 70 per cent employment rate target, made for a 'strong case for a fundamental shift in how the Government supports lone parents':

I would therefore recommend that from 2008, to broadly coincide with the creation of the ESA, the Government reduces the point beyond which a lone parent can claim income support from when their youngest child is 16 to 12. In addition, the Government should consider as wrap around childcare becomes available from 2010, whether further reductions would be desirable. The Government would need to ensure that the new system took account of the particular challenges faced by lone parents in accommodating full time work and caring for disabled children.¹⁰

The July 2007 Green Paper, *In work, better off: next steps to full employment*, proposed that from October 2008 lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over should be required to claim Jobseeker's Allowance, and that the age threshold should be lowered to seven from October 2010:

Given the substantial increase in childcare availability since 1997, we propose that from October 2008, lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over will no longer be entitled to Income Support solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. They may, however, be eligible to transfer to Jobseeker's Allowance or another benefit. Subsequently, from October 2010, this age would be reduced to seven years old.

Those lone parents who transfer to Jobseeker's Allowance will be expected to look for suitable work in return for personalised help and support. The popular and successful New Deal for Lone Parents programme includes personal adviser support, help with childcare and training, and financial incentives. Building on this we will ensure that lone parents get the appropriate help, support and advice both before and after they cease to be eligible for Income Support. This will include improved childcare provision and help with identifying jobs with suitable flexible working arrangements.

In addition we want lone parents to be better off when they move into work. The tax credit system is there to make work pay, but we need to consider how to make sure that lone parents who are applying for a job know exactly what their take home pay will

⁸ Speech on 'Building Sustainable Communities Through Partnership: Eradicating Child Poverty', 30 January 2007

⁹ *Reducing dependency, increasing opportunity: options for the future of welfare to work*

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p91

be if they get the job. We will also examine the experience of the in-Work Credit to see what role such direct financial incentives can play.¹¹

The subsequent December 2007 White Paper, *Ready for work: full employment in our generation*¹², while acknowledging that many respondents to the Green Paper did not support the proposal to require lone parents to seek work on the basis that they should be able to choose to stay home to look after their children full-time, pointed towards evidence of the negative long-term effects for parents and children of long-term economic inactivity. It therefore announced the Government's intention to implement the proposals in the Green Paper:

Consistent with the principle of rights and responsibilities, we consider that once children are older, lone parents who are able to work and are claiming benefits should be expected to look for work.

Therefore, as proposed in the Green Paper, we intend that from October 2008 lone parents with older children will no longer be entitled to Income Support solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. Instead those able to work may claim Jobseeker's Allowance. They will be expected to look for suitable work and, if necessary, acquire the skills they need to do so, in return for personalised help and support.

To ensure each individual is fully supported during the change, this will be implemented over three years. The change will be introduced for lone parents with:

- a youngest child aged 12 or over from October 2008;
- a youngest child aged 10 or over from October 2009; and
- a youngest child aged 7 or over from October 2010.

The middle step in this process was not part of the proposals in the Green Paper. This stepped approach will allow us to provide more support in helping lone parents make the transition between benefits and move into employment. In addition, any growth in the demand for childcare or other services will be easier to manage.

We have decided to place the threshold at a youngest child aged seven because by this age a family will have established a routine with the child going to school. The parent returning to work will therefore cause minimal disruption. Also, by the time this change is implemented for the youngest age group in October 2010, schools in England will be able to offer all children childcare between 8am and 6pm throughout the year.¹³

Increased obligations would however be supported by 'affordable childcare, suitable and flexible jobs and tailored employment and skills provision, with Jobcentre Plus advisers given more discretion to assess individual circumstances.' In addition, a number of new 'flexibilities' and services would be introduced to help lone parents meet their obligations to look for, take up and stay in work.

1.2 SSAC consultation

Draft regulations to implement the new 'Lone Parent Obligations' were submitted to the Social Security Advisory Committee in April 2008 and on 15 May 2008 the SSAC launched a

¹¹ Cm 7130, paras 34-36

¹² Cm 7290

¹³ *Ibid.* p37

public consultation on the proposals. A total of 42 responses were received from organisations and individuals, and in August 2008 SSAC presented its report on the draft *Social Security (Lone Parents and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2008* to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. The Committee's report, and the Government's response to it, was published in October 2008.¹⁴

The SSAC concluded that the Government should not proceed with the changes:

5.5 We are not persuaded that the general policy direction of mandating lone parents, with younger children, to actively seek work is likely to be either effective or without potential negative impacts. It is currently considered that a lone parent should seek work when their child is old enough to have achieved some degree of independence; this is currently set at 16 years old. We have seen no evidence to support the introduction of a mandatory regime for the parents of younger children, or the assertion that it will lead to an improvement in the employment rate for lone parents and contribute to a reduction in child poverty. The Department's argument – further advanced in the recently published Green Paper 'No one written off: reforming welfare to reward responsibility' - that it is appropriate to make lone parents take more responsibility for moving into employment and financial self-sufficiency does not always sit comfortably with other Government initiatives designed to reinforce parents' responsibility for the care and control of their children.

5.6 The circumstances of lone parents are diverse. However, the majority of lone parents are female, and one common characteristic of their circumstances may be the greater pressures they face when seeking to balance the demands posed by their responsibilities for their children with the demands around seeking or engaging in paid work. These pressures are likely to be more challenging than those facing couple parents who may have more choice and flexibility when balancing home life and employment (indeed, the benefit system does not currently extend conditionality to the partners of parents of younger children – an inconsistency that the recently published Green Paper proposes to address). The flexibilities within the proposed JSA regime for lone parents are intended to recognise and mitigate some of the pressures on lone parents, but we doubt whether these will be sufficient to avoid some lone parents falling foul of the proposed new rules through no real fault of their own.¹⁵

The Committee's report raised a number of specific concerns about the proposals, including:

- doubts about whether the proposed measures would lead to an improvement in the employment rate for lone parents and contribute to an actual reduction in child poverty, as argued by the Government;
- the Committee's concern that the proposals exposed a number of inconsistencies and tensions between the stated policy objectives and the objectives of other Government plans and programmes;
- the treatment of lone parents who were also full-time students or who had a child in receipt of the lowest rate care component of Disability Living Allowance;
- the potentially negative impacts on the family, with possible wider social impacts;

¹⁴ Cm 7480

¹⁵ *The Social Security (Lone Parents and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2008 Report by the Social Security Advisory Committee under Section 174(1) of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 and the statement by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in accordance with Section 174(2) of that Act*, Cm 7480

- the availability and affordability of 'wrap-around' childcare;
- the ability of lone parents to meet the needs of their employers and those of their children;
- the role of Jobcentre Plus Personal advisers;
- the application and rate of benefit sanctions;
- the treatment of lone parents who were 'home educating'; and
- a number of key operational issues.

While recommending that the Government not proceed with the changes, the SSAC recommended that, should the Government decide to go ahead with the changes, it should make a number of 'modifications':

- Proceed with the changes for lone parents with children aged 12 or over, but postpone implementation for lone parents with younger children until results from evaluations of the impact of the first stage were available, and comprehensive childcare provision was available throughout Great Britain;
- Exempt lone parents in full-time education or training, and those with a child receiving the lower rate DLA care component;
- Place the burden of proof of suitability of childcare upon Jobcentre plus;
- Not to use Social Fund Crisis Loans to support lone parents moving from Income Support to JSA;
- Limit sanctions to a maximum of 20 per cent of benefit entitlement; and
- Improve 'Better-Off-In-Work' calculations so that they reflected all aspects of a person's in-work circumstances

In its response to the SSAC, the Government said that while it had 'carefully considered' the views of the Committee and those who submitted responses to the Committee's consultation, it had decided to proceed with the proposed legislation:

Helping more lone parents into work is vital if the Government is to eradicate child poverty by 2020. Paid work, for those who can, is the most sustainable route out of poverty. So, requiring lone parents who are capable of paid work to look for and take such work is an important way of helping the Government meet its objectives and to maximise life chances for all. In return, the Government has increased the level of assistance and support it provides to help lone parents move into paid work. It has also introduced measures to assist them remain and progress in their job, such as In Work Credit, In Work Emergency Discretion Fund and In Work Advisory Support.

While noting the Committee's concerns that lone parents need to balance responsibilities for their children with work requirements, paid work has benefits that go beyond making families better off. It improves the health and well-being and future prospects of both parents and children. However, the draft regulations recognise that

some lone parents face circumstances that need special consideration and provide additional flexibilities and easements to accommodate such needs.¹⁶

Further information on the 'additional flexibilities and easements' is given in section 3 of this note. The Government accepted none of the SSAC's recommended 'modifications', although it said it was willing to discuss further how Better-Off-In-Work calculations might be improved.

1.3 The implementing regulations

The regulations which implemented the changes – *The Social Security (Lone Parents and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2008*¹⁷ – came into force on 28 November 2008. The draft regulations were considered by the [Sixth Delegated Legislation Committee](#) on 30 October 2008, and in the House of Lords on 12 November 2008.¹⁸

The changes to lone parents' benefits were controversial. Prior to their introduction, Sir Richard Tilt, Chair of the Social Security Advisory Committee, urged the Government to delay its plan to extend 'conditionality' for lone parents, expressing concern about the availability of suitable, affordable childcare for lone parents, and about the possible impact of benefit sanctions.¹⁹ He commented:

Benefit rates are relatively low and if you are going to reduce someone's benefit for a few weeks by 40% you are pushing people much closer to poverty. Of course, the child will suffer, but it's not the child that has fallen foul of the system.²⁰

In addition, Sir Richard said that there was often a particular reason that the lone parent was staying at home -

It may be to do with disability or chronic illness, or in some cases it may be to do with behavioural problems. So pushing the lone parent in those circumstances into work may actually not be in everybody's interest. In many cases it will be harmful and lead to further behavioural problems.²¹

The Government's welfare to work programme risked 'falling into disrepute', Sir Richard added, calling on it to delay its plans to extend welfare to work conditionality by one or two years.

Kate Green, the then Chief Executive of the Child Poverty Action Group, argued that the changes could worsen child poverty and took no account of the worsening economic climate. Noting Sir Richard Tilt's call for the changes to be delayed, she added:

Most lone parents do have a job and many more want one. The big problems lone parents face include lack of affordable childcare and employers who won't be flexible around childcare needs. This means a lot more lone parents lose their job in the first year than other employees.

Tough penalties to make lone parents look for work may grab headlines, but they won't work in practice. They could force parents into poverty pay work that leaves them

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p4

¹⁷ [SI 2008/3051](#)

¹⁸ HL Deb 12 November 2008 [cc22-44GC](#)

¹⁹ BBC News website, [Welfare plans 'may cause poverty'](#), 21 November 2008

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

financially worse off, or cut their benefits by 40%, seriously undermining the Government's promise to end child poverty.

With recession looming, lone parents will have to compete with more flexible, higher skilled claimants recently made redundant. The resources behind this misguided approach would be better invested in childcare and training. And if the government is going to get tough, it should be with employers who discriminate against lone parents.

The Government's expert advisers are right – these changes should be immediately suspended.²²

Citizens Advice also voiced concerns. Its Chief Executive, David Harker, said:

In going down this route the government seems bent on ignoring the lessons of its own research. CAB evidence and the government's own research both show very clearly that sanctions are neither necessary nor effective in moving people off benefits into work, and that they tend to hurt the most vulnerable. What is really needed now is more carrot and less stick. All the evidence shows that most lone parents want to work and will do so if they can, especially as their children get older. What they really need to help them do this, especially in the current economic climate where unemployment is rising and competition for jobs may be fierce, is support in overcoming the barriers facing them. That means reorganising the tax and welfare systems to ensure work always pays, increasing the availability of good quality, affordable childcare, and working with employers to ensure they can provide the flexible jobs lone parents need.²³

Further information on the Government's policies regarding childcare can be found in Annex 8 of the DWP memorandum in the SSAC's report on the draft regulations.²⁴

In Parliament, Lynne Jones tabled an Early Day Motion on 3 December 2008:

SOCIAL SECURITY (LONE PARENTS AND MISCELLANEOUS AMENDMENTS) REGULATIONS 2008

That this House notes the report by the Social Security Advisory Committee on the Social Security (Lone Parents and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2008 that will force lone parents with children as young as seven years to seek work or suffer benefits cuts of up to 40 per cent.; endorses the Committee's view that in the absence of high quality and reliable 'wrap around childcare' this could increase hardship and be detrimental to family life; further notes that the report states that 'lone parents who are sanctioned face financial penalties that will increase child poverty - an outcome at odds with the primary rationale that the Department for Work and Pensions has put forward'; further notes that the reforms could also damage lone parents' health by causing worry and stress and have negative wider social impacts including on children; and considers that the Government should accept the Committee's recommendation not to implement the regulations and should not even contemplate any recommendation to force lone parents with children as young as one to return to work.²⁵

It attracted 32 signatures.

²² CPAG press notice, 'Lone parent changes may worsen child poverty', 23 November 2008

²³ Citizens Advice press release, *Stopping benefits not the way to get lone parents into work, say CAB*, 21 November 2008

²⁴ Cm 7480

²⁵ EDM 48 2008-09

2 Lone Parent Obligations: the detailed rules

2.1 Income Support and JSA: the existing position

Income Support

Income Support is a benefit for people not in full-time work who are not required to be available for, or to actively seek work. The main groups of people who have been eligible for Income Support are:²⁶

- lone parents with a child under 16
- sick or disabled people²⁷
- people who have to stay at home to look after elderly, sick or disabled relatives

Since April 2001 lone parents on Income Support have been required to attend regular **'Work-Focused Interviews' (WFIs)** with Jobcentre Plus advisers. The aim of WFIs is to encourage claimants to address barriers to work and to move towards employment, and to make them aware of the range of help and support that may be available (including the New Deal for Lone Parents). Where a lone parent is required to attend a WFI, they must attend and participate in discussions with an adviser. This includes answering questions on various matters and helping the adviser to complete an 'action plan'. Failure to take part in a WFI, without 'good cause', may result in a benefit sanction. At present, lone parents are not required to engage in any activity or follow the action plan; any action beyond attending and taking part in the WFI is entirely voluntary.²⁸

Jobseeker's Allowance

To be entitled to Jobseeker's Allowance a person must, among other things:

- be **available for work** for at least 40 hours a week. Certain groups are able to restrict their availability to less than 40 hours depending upon their personal circumstances, so long as they retain reasonable prospects of employment.
- be **actively seeking work**. The claimant must be able to demonstrate this by undertaking a certain number of 'steps' each week, such as preparing a CV, applying for jobs, or registering with an employment agency.
- enter into a **Jobseeker's Agreement** with Jobcentre Plus. The Agreement sets out the claimant's agreed availability, including any restrictions on their availability for work; the steps the claimant intends to take to look for work; and the range of help to be provided by Jobcentre Plus to help them find work.

When a claim is made for JSA the claimant is required to attend a **'New Jobseeker Interview'**. This has two parts:

- The first part focuses on the benefit claim itself.

²⁶ For further details see DWP Technical Guide IS20, [A guide to Income Support](#)

²⁷ From October 2008 income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) replaced Income Support for people making new claims for benefit on the basis of incapacity for work. Existing IS claimants who are incapable of work because of sickness or disability continue to receive their benefit in the meantime, but are to be moved to ESA between 2010 and 2014, provided they satisfy the new 'Work Capability Assessment'.

²⁸ It is however expected that from October 2010, lone parents with a youngest child aged between three and six will be required to undertake 'work-related activity' in four Jobcentre Plus districts. See **SN/SP/????**, *Lone parents with younger children: the Progression to Work Pathfinders*

- The second part consists of a meeting with a personal adviser who will advise the claimant about work and training issues. This involves a discussion of the claimant's personal circumstances.

The Jobseeker's Agreement is drawn up at the interview.

Claimants are normally required to attend **Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviews (FJR)** - at which they 'sign on' - but they can be asked to attend more frequently. A claimant may be required to sign on weekly for six weeks after they have been claiming JSA for 13 weeks; more intensive job search assistance is given during this period.

In 'signing on' the claimant is making a declaration that they still meet the conditions for entitlement for JSA. At the same time, an employment officer interviews the claimant to check on their job search activities, to discuss any difficulties they are experiencing and what help and support might be provided, to check whether there have been any relevant changes in circumstances, and to refer the claimant to job, training or employment scheme vacancies.

After 13 weeks, the claimant undertakes a more in-depth interview where the Jobseeker's Agreement is reviewed and updated if necessary. Further in-depth interviews are likely to take place at 6 month intervals. Following an in-depth interview, a claimant may be issued with a '**jobseeker's direction**'. This is a written notice giving the claimant specific instructions on looking for work, attending training, or improving their behaviour or appearance to help their employment prospects.

From April 2009 Jobcentre Plus commenced the roll-out of the revised '**Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal**' (**JRFND**), which is divided into four stages, with the fourth being delivered by contracted, external providers rather than Jobcentre Plus:

- Stage 1 (first 13 weeks of the claim): 'self-directed' job search and FJRs, with a new mandatory 'Back to Work' group session
- Stage 2 (13-26 weeks): 'directed' job search with increased expectations of job search activity; weekly signing-on for six weeks followed by FJRs
- Stage 3 (26-52 weeks): 'supported' job search with an adviser, with FJRs and mandatory 'Back-to-work' action plans
- Stage 4 (52-104 weeks): Flexible New Deal (FND) provider stage, involving mandatory referral for up to a year to a contracted provider able to provide work preparation and job search support matched to the claimant's needs. Claimants agree action plans of mandatory activities, and must attend FJRs throughout

In some situations claimants may be 'fast-tracked' to Stage 3 at the start of their claim.

Further details of the new JRFND regime are given in a recent DWP Research Report.²⁹

Jobseeker's Allowance may be **disallowed** (i.e. it may be decided that the person does not satisfy the conditions for entitlement to benefit) for a number of reasons including:

- not satisfying the availability condition

²⁹ *Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal, the Six Month Offer and Support for the Newly Unemployed evaluations: An early process study*, [DWP Research Report 624](#), January 2010, pp10-12

- not actively seeking work
- failure to have a Jobseeker's Agreement in force
- failure to attend an interview or sign a declaration

Payment of benefit can be suspended (**'sanctioned'**) for a period of time in various situations, including where the claimant:

- Left their job voluntarily without good cause
- Lost their job through misconduct
- Was dismissed or discharged from the Armed Forces
- Refused, failed to apply for or accept a job, without good cause
- Neglected to avail themselves of an employment opportunity
- Refused to carry out a 'jobseeker's direction'
- Refused, failed to apply for or failed to attend a compulsory training scheme or employment programme, without good cause
- Lost their place on a compulsory training scheme or employment programme because of misconduct.

The length of a sanction depends upon the situation, but in some situations it can be for up to 26 weeks.

Hardship payments may be available to some claimants who are subject to a disallowance or sanction. These are reduced-rate payments of income-based JSA (usually the relevant personal allowance, less 40 per cent). To be eligible for hardship payments the person must be in a 'vulnerable group' (this currently includes lone parents) or, if not in a vulnerable group, the Jobcentre Plus decision maker must be satisfied that the claimant, or their partner, would experience hardship if they were not paid. Hardship payments are not automatic; a claim must be made.

2.2 Transfer of lone parents to Jobseeker's Allowance

Timetable, exemptions and transitional provisions

The transfer of lone parents to Jobseeker's Allowance is taking place in three phases.

The changes affect lone parents making **new or repeat claims** for benefit

- From November 2008 for those with a youngest child aged 12-15
- From October 2009 for those with a youngest child aged 10 or over
- From October 2010 for those with a youngest child aged 7 or over

Existing awards of income Support cease by

- December 2009 for those with a youngest child aged 12-15

- September 2010 for those with a youngest child aged 10 or over
- April 2011 for those with a youngest child aged 7 or over

The changes only apply to those who are (or would be) eligible for Income Support solely because they are a lone parent. Some lone parents will be eligible for Income Support on other grounds, and will be able to continue to receive Income Support. This includes:

- Lone parents with children for whom the middle or higher rate DLA care component is payable
- Those entitled to Carer's Allowance
- Foster parents
- Lone parents receiving Income Support on the grounds of incapacity for work

Incapacity benefits were replaced by the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) for people making new claims from October 2008. Lone parents with a 'limited capability for work' because of a health condition or disability who claim benefit for the first time after this date receive ESA rather than Income Support. Lone parents already in receipt of Income Support because of incapacity for work will continue to receive IS for the time being, but the remaining claimants of incapacity benefits are due to be reassessed using the 'Work Capability Assessment' between 2010 and 2014. Those found to have a 'limited capability for work' by the test will transfer to ESA. Those failing the test will have to claim Jobseeker's Allowance, if their youngest child is over the relevant age threshold. Lone parents with children *under* the relevant age threshold will however still be able to claim Income Support.

One group affected by the changes is lone parent students. While people in receipt of JSA may (with the agreement of Jobcentre plus) be able to undertake short, employment-related education or training courses, a person cannot usually get JSA if they are in full-time education. Lone parents on Income Support could claim benefit while studying, so the new rules will disadvantage some transferred from Income Support to JSA. Transitional protection allows lone parents to continue to receive Income Support for a period, where they would otherwise have lost entitlement to benefit in the middle of their studies because their youngest child reached the relevant age threshold, but this protection does not extend to parents who were not entitled to Income Support when they began their course.³⁰

For lone parents still in receipt of Income Support, there have also been changes to the requirements regarding 'Work Focused Interviews' (WFIs) as a result of the extension of JSA. To help lone parents prepare for the move to JSA, more frequent WFIs have been introduced in the period before their entitlement to Income Support is due to end. The Jobcentre Plus information pack gives details.³¹

New 'flexibilities' in the JSA regime

Lone parents who move onto JSA will be expected to meet the requirements set out above. However, the JSA regulations have been amended to provide additional 'flexibilities' in

³⁰ Further information on the transitional provisions can be found in the Jobcentre Plus guide, [Changes to Income Support for lone parents and Jobseeker's Allowance for all parents: Information pack](#), paras 4.2-4.4 CPAG Scotland has also produced a factsheet, [Benefits and tax credits for lone parent students](#), which explains the implications of the new benefits regime

³¹ *Ibid.* para 1.10-1.11

recognition of the particular needs and circumstances of lone parents. The additional flexibilities include:

- When considering whether it was unreasonable for a lone parent to remain in a job, or to take up a job or follow a 'jobseeker's direction' given by an employment officer, a Jobcentre Plus adviser must consider the availability and suitability of childcare, and whether any childcare expenses the lone parent would have to incur would be an unreasonably high proportion of their earnings.
- The rules concerning the circumstances where a lone parent may be allowed to restrict the number of hours per week they are available for work have been relaxed, subject to a minimum of 16 hours availability.
- Jobseekers with caring responsibilities could be expected to take up a job within seven days notice, or attend a job interview within 48 hours notice. Where a lone parent can show that it is unreasonable to meet these criteria because of their caring responsibilities, the notice periods are now 7 days and 28 days respectively.
- Greater flexibility to waive the requirements to be available for work, and to attend fortnightly interviews, if there is a death, serious illness or 'domestic emergency' involving the lone parent or a close relative or friend. Requirements could be waived for up to four weekly periods in any twelve months; the rules now allow one of the periods to be for up to eight weeks.
- Lone parents subject to a parenting order or parenting contract can restrict their availability for work, provided it is 'reasonable', and having such an order or contract may be accepted as good cause for not attending a fortnightly interview.
- Where it is agreed that no appropriate, affordable childcare is available in school holidays or when a child is excluded from school, a lone parent may be treated as available for work and excused attendance at fortnightly interviews.³²

In addition, further changes are to be made to the JSA regime as a result of provisions in the *Welfare Reform Act 2009* (introduced as Government amendments following undertakings given during the passage of the Bill). These include:

- A provision to exempt people who have been victims of, or threatened with, domestic violence from the main JSA conditions for a period of 13 weeks
- A provision to ensure that, when considering whether a claimant had 'good cause' for failing to comply with a mandatory requirement, the availability of childcare and the claimant's physical or mental health condition are always taken into account
- A provision requiring that the impact on the well-being of any child is considered when agreeing activities to be undertaken as part of the jobseeker's agreement.³³

³² For full details see [The Social Security \(Lone Parents and Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2008](#); SI 2008/3051. See also [Changes to Income Support for lone parents and Jobseeker's Allowance for all parents: Information pack](#)

³³ Sections 29-31 respectively of the *Welfare Reform Act 2009*

A further change to the rules came into force on 26 April 2010. From that date, lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 and under to restrict their availability for work to their child's normal school hours.³⁴

Operational changes

In addition to the changes to the JSA rules themselves, other 'operational changes' have been made to the JSA regime. The Jobcentre Plus information pack for advisers gives an outline:

Postal signing

2.11 If a jobseeker with caring responsibilities for a child is unable to arrange short-term childcare to enable them to sign on, they should contact the Jobcentre to discuss alternatives. If it is accepted that suitable childcare is not available, arrangements can be put in place to allow the parent to sign on for the period in question by post.

Fail to attend/fail to provide a signed declaration

2.12 Claims could be disallowed if a jobseeker with caring responsibilities for a child does not attend when required or the claim could be closed if they have not shown good cause for the failure within 5 working days. We will make at least one attempt at contact by telephone on the day a jobseeker fails to attend their Jobcentre Plus interview. We will also send a letter that day to advise them of the need to make urgent contact within 5 working days of their planned attendance advising them that their benefit will be affected. If they do not respond their benefit will end after 5 working days.

Travelling time

2.13 In establishing the Jobseeker's Agreement, advisers will take the person's circumstances into account when considering what travel time to a job is reasonable. Jobseeker's Allowance rules stipulate travel time of up to 1 hour each way within the first 13 weeks of a Jobseeker's Allowance claim and 1.5 hours each way thereafter. Jobcentre Plus staff will take health or caring responsibilities into account and consider whether travel time to a job is reasonable, and would include any reasonable time required to drop off and pick up their children from school or childcare.

Other support for lone parents

The changes to lone parents' benefits have also been accompanied by measures to support lone parents to prepare for and move into work. The DWP website lists the various forms of pre-employment and in-work support:

Lone parents claiming Jobseeker's Allowance will continue to have access to pre-employment and in-work support aimed at helping them move into paid work, make work pay, help sustainability and progression in work and ease the transition from benefit to employment. This support includes:

- **New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP)** a voluntary programme introduced in October 1998 to help lone parents overcome barriers to work and improve their chances of taking up paid employment.
- **New Deal Plus for Lone Parents (ND+fLP)** pilots extended and expanded.

³⁴ *Jobseeker's Allowance (Lone Parents) (Availability for Work) Regulations 2010*; [SI 2010/837](#). The accompanying *Explanatory Memorandum* also gives a detailed overview of 'Lone Parent Obligations' in the JSA regime and policy background

- **Six monthly Work Focused Interviews** for lone parents with a youngest child aged 10 or under
- **Quarterly Work Focused Interviews** for all lone parents in the last year before their child reaches the age where they may lose eligibility to Income Support and may move onto Jobseekers Allowance.
- **Options and Choices events** group sessions that will enable lone parents to understand how Jobcentre Plus and its partners can help them prepare for work and how the local labour market works.
- **Work Trials** giving lone parents (and other unemployed customers) the opportunity to try out a job for up to 6 weeks without having to give up benefit.
- **In Work Credit** paid at £40 a week (£60 in London) for 52 weeks to lone parents leaving benefits for work of 16 hours or more. In Work Credit is also available to couple parents in New Deal Plus for Lone Parents pilot districts throughout the country.
- **In Work Emergency Discretionary Fund** provides financial help to lone parents for the first 26 weeks of their employment, to overcome any unexpected financial barriers which might otherwise prevent them from remaining in their jobs.
- **In Work Advisory Support** from Jobcentre Plus Advisers for all lone parents in their first 26 weeks of employment to help resolve any difficulties, and direct individuals towards any support needed such as skills and training.
- **Upfront Childcare Fund pilot** in London provides financial support to lone parents to cover advance childcare costs such as registration fees, deposits and advance payments.
- **In Work Retention pilot** a two-year pilot to test the effectiveness of using In Work Credit as an aid to job retention and progression. After a period of weekly payments to support the transition into work, lone parents will receive lump sum payments if they attend further meetings with a Personal Adviser.³⁵

3 Impact of the changes

To date, there is little firm evidence of the impact of the changes so far on lone parents. However, initial findings have been published from a study carried out by the pressure group Gingerbread, and from the DWP's own evaluation programme.

3.1 Gingerbread report

On 26 October 2009 Gingerbread published a report, *Signing on Stepping up? Single parents' experience of moving on to Jobseeker's Allowance*, which presented the findings from a qualitative study based on interviews with 34 lone parents both before and after their move to JSA, carried out between January and August 2009. The Gingerbread website summarises the main findings from the study and the organisation's response:

Some of the first single parents to be affected by the changes took part in this work and we interviewed them in-depth before and after they moved off Income Support.

- Before the move, parents expected to feel under considerable pressure to find work once they were on JSA. Once they were on JSA many parents did indeed feel

³⁵ DWP website, [Welfare reform: lone parents](#) [accessed 14 May 2010]

under pressure and some were applying for jobs that would not really be suitable. In general the increase in pressure was not accompanied by more support to find a job; once on JSA many parents said that they had not had any support or advice about job hunting apart from hurried fortnightly sign-on appointments.

- Many parents said that Jobseeker's Allowance is more stigmatised than Income Support, and parents felt embarrassed about signing on at the Jobcentre.
- Jobseeker's Allowance is paid every two weeks, whereas Income Support is paid every week. The change to fortnightly payments was very unpopular and caused problems for many parents.
- There was evidence that parents are not getting enough clear information about the change to JSA. Some parents did not know well in advance when their benefits would change, others were worried that their JSA might be stopped if they didn't find work, and many did not understand the conditions and flexibilities around JSA.
- Many of these parents had health conditions or other responsibilities that would make it difficult for them to work, and many had children with health issues or problems at school.

Gingerbread is calling for:

- Earlier support for single parents, so that intensive personalised support, rather than pressure, is available from the first day of the claim.
- Clear information at all stages of the process so that parents know well ahead of time when they will move to JSA, what this will entail, their rights to support and how their treatment will change over time.
- Recognition that single parents form a distinct 'client group' by virtue of their sole responsibility for children. Access to 'lone parent expertise' is essential and claims should have a clear 'lone parent marker' on DWP's IT system.
- A clear commitment from Jobcentre Plus to allow parents to undertake training or studying so that they can move into sustainable employment
- The individual circumstances and needs of parents and children must be considered by advisors. There should be more 'childcare' for teenagers which is tailored to their interests, to resolve some of parents' concerns about leaving young people unsupervised.³⁶

The full report is available at the Gingerbread website.

3.2 DWP Research Report

In March 2010 the Department for Work and Pensions published a Research Report, *Lone Parent Obligations: early findings of implementation as well as experiences of the Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance regimes*, which gave initial findings from the DWP's evaluation programme.³⁷ The report, which was based on in-depth interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff and lone parents, found that:

³⁶ Gingerbread website, [Signing on and stepping up? Lone parents' experience of welfare reform](#)

³⁷ [DWP Research Report 645](#)

- The implementation of the changes had gone well so far; staff felt well-supported and most of the lone parents interviewed were aware of the changes to their benefits and why they were happening
- For those lone parents on JSA, there were differences in their confidence and ability to 'self-help' during the first stage of the JSA regime
- There were no instances of lone parents being 'fast-tracked' within the JSA regime or accessing support through the New Deal for Lone Parents
- Both specialist Lone Parent Advisers and generalist staff supported lone parents on JSA; the former were felt to be more aware of the range of financial support for lone parents, but less confident working within the JSA regime
- Staff had good awareness of the 'JSA parent flexibilities', but limited experience in applying them
- Within the JSA parent flexibilities, staff reported difficulty in defining appropriate childcare; this was seen as subjective and 'claimant-led', while it was easier to determine what constituted affordable childcare
- Many of the lone parents described themselves as 'carers by choice' and some were strongly resistant to using formal childcare; where alternatives to parental care were considered, they tended to focus on childcare that could be provided by close family members and friends
- At this stage, there was little experience of disallowances or sanctions
- Staff felt that being on JSA had had a positive effect on claimants' attitudes to work and job search behaviour, in part because lone parents disliked attending appointments to sign on
- Lone parents with older children were more likely to find the idea of returning to work more daunting than those with younger children, since they were less likely to have a recent work history
- Lone parents highlighted concerns about the availability of part-time and flexible work, how 'family-friendly' employers would be, and other factors including the cost and availability of transport

The authors concluded that the roll-out of the 'Lone Parent Obligations' had gone well, on the whole, but identified a number of issues they thought might need to be considered further as the changes were implemented. These included:

- making sure that staff working with lone parents, particularly as they move on to JSA, have access to all the information they need to fully support lone parents and their need to balance caring for their children with the requirement to job search and move into work;
- ensuring that there is suitable childcare available to lone parents moving into work and that staff feel confident in applying the parent flexibilities around childcare within the jobseekers regime;

- putting in place further measures to help allay any fears lone parents may have about a move into work, particularly around financial and practical support.³⁸

Later stages of the evaluation programme will consider the experiences of lone parents affected by the changes and outcomes over time.

³⁸ [DWP Research Summary](#)