



One Parent Families: Policy Options

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Introduction

The increase in lone parenthood has been one of the most prominent demographic and social trends of the last 25 to 30 years. “The increasing recognition of a separation of marriage and parenthood has created a situation in which lone parenthood is increasingly coming to be seen as another phase in the family life cycle, rather than as a departure from ‘normal’ family patterns”.¹

Lone parenthood is the most visible face of these new family patterns. And, in the view of some, it is also the most challenging. The ‘problem’ of lone parenthood has been defined in various ways:

- As a social problem. Lone parenthood is seen by some as an inherently second-rate and imperfect family type, reflecting the selfish choices of adults against the interests of children.
- As a fiscal problem. Lone parenthood generates increased levels of public expenditure, most noticeably in respect of welfare benefits.
- As a problem of poverty. Lone-parent families have a very high risk of poverty and lone parents and their children stay poor for longer than other families.

These competing definitions of the issues around lone parenthood have made it very difficult to take policy forward. However, an improved appreciation of the lives and situation of lone parents can explain the implications of particular policy options.

The reality for Lone Parents

The number of lone parents has grown from just over a half a million at the beginning of the 1970s to about 1.9 million today. Only about one in five lone parents have never lived with a partner. Lone parenthood is a life-cycle stage which is an increasingly common experience for many children. Lone parenthood is not generally a selfish and wilful choice and children in lone-parent families are not neglected and undisciplined.²

Poverty, debt and hardship are everyday experiences for most lone parents, though parents protect their children as far as they can. Lone parents also see positive aspects to their situation, particularly in terms of independence and autonomy and pride in and love for their children.

Principles for Policy Development

Research suggests that a number of underlying principles are appropriate to policy development³

- **Recognise that lone parenthood is a life-cycle stage**, just as parenthood is, but it is a time when there are particular needs and pressures. Given the greater strain on their resources, lone parents have a justifiable claim for some collective support. In the vast majority of cases, lone parenthood is not a selfish choice and children living in lone-parent families are not neglected and undisciplined. Family structure seems less important than factors such as parenting style, family controls, relationships and activities.⁴
- **Support should not necessarily be available only to lone-parent families.** Families, whether one or two parent, have many needs in common. Policies to help all families, all

¹ <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/F4.pdf>

² [gingerbread -OECD-research-blasts-single-parenthood-myth](http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/F4.pdf)

³ <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/F4.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/06/evidence>

children, all mothers will also help lone-parent families, and do so without stigmatising them and without setting their needs in opposition to others. Two areas in particular should be considered: the level and nature of support for children; and the level and nature of support for parents to help them reconcile work and family life.

- **Develop a much more integrated approach to policy**, in particular, looking closely at the interactions between income maintenance policy, childcare policy and housing policy.

Policy Direction

Policy could be taken forward in the following specific areas:

- **Young People:** Improve education, training and job opportunities for young people. These discourage early parenthood - for both young women and young men.
- **Benefit levels:** Review the adequacy of Income Support/JSA levels for families. This should include consideration of the age related benefits for children. Take up of employment is more likely if non-working lone parents on Income Support /JSA are not so poor and demoralised.
- **Childcare:** Increase the availability of quality, accessible, affordable childcare, particularly for older children to enable lone parents' transition to work.
- **Employability** Support lone parents become work-ready sooner. A compulsion to take up paid work is inappropriate because not all lone parents are in a position to work and the labour market cannot absorb them all. Closeness to the labour market is not based on the age/s of children
- **Education and Training:** Support lone parents improve their long-term employment prospects. Access to education and training to improve their human capital is significant in achieving this. Lifetime learning and higher education are important routes to higher incomes.
- **Flexible Employment:** Show employers that lone parents are worthwhile employees and that flexible employment patterns that suit the needs of these workers can also benefit employers.
- **Work First:** Consider the dangers of the 'any job is better than none' approach. Taking low-paid jobs and topping up wages with Tax Credits means that some lone parents are better off than when out of work but may find themselves in a low-pay, low-skill, job market while the state supports them with wage subsidies. Strenuous efforts to promote gender equality and equal pay are key to supporting lone parent sustainable employment.
- **In work Benefits/Tax Credits:** Minimise the complexity of in-work benefits. Housing Benefit is a particular source of problems and there needs to be a general review of alternative ways to deliver support for housing costs.
- **Temporary Housing:** Minimise the use of temporary housing. Such housing requires lone parents to be frequently mobile which can damage the development of the strong social networks that lone-parent families need. Being in the private sector it is also more expensive.

Service Delivery Focus

Prioritising Specific Groups of Lone Parents

There are at least three broad groups of lone parents on Income Support /JSA. The following categories relate to proximity to the labour market

- Those who are job ready but have not made the decision /had the opportunity to work;
- Those who face some barriers to employment but with the right support and development might be encouraged to take up employment or enter the New Deal for Lone Parents;
- Those who face multiple barriers to employment and are the least confident about moving off benefit.

The government are presently implementing a policy based on intervening in lone parents participation in the labour market based on the age of the youngest child. However as lone parents move from simply coping with life to work readiness, they progress through different stages. While

each stage differs depending on the individual's background and circumstances, there are three that are particularly relevant to Lone Parent Employability:

Stages of intervention

- **Pre-New Deal For Lone Parents:** support to build confidence and self-esteem, raise aspirations, increase numbers choosing to enter New Deal;
- **New Deal For Lone Parents:** information and guidance, referral to services and training, job search assistance;
- **Post New Deal For Lone Parents:** in-work support to manage personal and job pressures, encourage continued career progression, increase job retention.

In response service delivery should offer a holistic, integrated response, which is based on an understanding of the complex factors, associated with an individual Lone Parent's capacity to obtain and sustain employment.

Range of support Services

Overall there should be improved access to realistic activities and proven services that have the confidence of Lone Parents and which have the capacity to engage and support at each stage, including post employment. The best way of providing a flexible range of support services is often felt to be through a diverse range of providers. However many Lone Parents prefer to have the support of a trusted intermediary. In many cases the voluntary sector will be best placed to provide the sort of personalised support that expanded programmes will require.

An effective mixed economy will develop on the basis of contracts which are not solely commissioned on the basis of lowest cost. The current contract culture tends to favour larger organisations and the private sector. Any system of outcome-based payments must account for the full range of value added by the provider. In developing this national strategy, the government should consider elements such as a focus on moving people who are most disadvantaged in the labour market towards work readiness rather than into immediate employment.

Work Related Activity

There should be recognition that there are often a variety of pre – employment stages that lone parents need to take before they enter paid work, and the idea of a pathway into work rather than a single entry point. OPFS believes engagement in work-related activity should remain voluntary.

More prominence on access to skills training, relevant to the characteristics of local labour markets is needed. Lone parents furthest from the Labour Market do not easily fit a model which is target driven based on short-term into work outcomes. Measures of "Distance Travelled "are required to be agreed by funders to enable a common set of indicators, which delivery agencies can work towards.

Benefits System/In-Work Costs

Individualisation of benefits and taxation must move forward so that all individuals are entitled to support in their own right and the gender focused dependency model currently prevailing ends. This is the approach taken in the most successful Scandinavian models of welfare.

Lone Parents need to have a stable income during the transition into sustainable employment. This can be achieved by continuing payments of key benefits until Working Tax Credits, reassessed Housing Benefit and first full salary have been paid. This also applies to payments for Child Care in the interim until Childcare Tax Credits payments are received.

Housing Benefit should be adapted to support those moving from welfare to work. The design and delivery of Housing Benefit and how it interacts with Tax Credits should be reformed to provide immediate and reliable support for all those on Income Support, JSA and low income, including those with mortgages. Sustainable employment would be made more achievable if the income from Tax Credits and all child care costs was disregarded when calculating Housing Benefit for those moving into employment.

There remains a gap in assistance to those who work over 16 hours a week and have housing costs as homeowners. The lack of reform in this area runs counter to the Government's wider objectives of promoting welfare to work and reducing child poverty, particularly since homeowners comprise half of all the poorest households. It is therefore necessary to improve transitional provision for mortgage payments – many lone parents are owner-occupiers because of the transfer of the family home.

Housing benefit for full-time students should be simplified. Housing costs are one of the key issues raised by Lone Parent students who aim to improve their qualifications and therefore access to higher paid employment.

Childcare

Childcare costs and availability issues must be addressed if lone parents are to find social inclusion and economic independence. Accessible and affordable childcare is central to a strategy to end child poverty. This is largely because of the importance of parents working, but a related issue is that where childcare remains expensive relative to available wages, parents may have the option of working but this will not allow them to escape poverty.

Efforts both to boost supply and to finance demand have been positive yet have fallen short in different ways. On the supply side, provision remains uneven. The development of childcare services aims to ensure that all communities are covered, but this is not the same as ensuring that all individuals receive adequate options. On the demand side, subsidies through tax credits pay 80 per cent of eligible costs for people on low incomes, but still leave childcare expensive to many users compared to other countries. However it remains unclear to what extent current policy will increase employment rates and improve net earnings for those entering jobs – and thus the contribution that these policies will make to ending child poverty.

Continued investment in affordable, flexible, quality childcare and the development of the childcare workforce will be crucial for any strategy to support Lone Parents into employment. Childcare should also be available for lone parents who wish to take up training or continue their education before returning to work. Some assistance is available through NDLP but this is discretionary and limited to lower qualifications.

Training & Education

Education and training access is the route to economic independence and a means of breaking the poverty cycle. Early school leaving patterns must be addressed – providing access to return to education is vital; ensuring young girls don't leave school early is also vital. Early school leaving prevention programmes aimed at young women should be developed and supported.

A lack of good, affordable childcare is delaying lone parents from taking up education and training chances. Although local lone parents are enthusiastic about taking up education and training as a first step towards returning to work, the lack of childcare places and the cost of those which are available act as a brake on their ambitions

While local employers provide basic in-house training, they have low awareness of external training courses and few links with colleges in the community.

Lone parents who had managed to move into studying had struggled to find basic information about course provision and about the Government's adult learning initiatives. Lone Parents consulted by OPFS have highlighted that in addition to more childcare, lone parents say they needed community-based, one-stop advice on local courses and application procedures. IT courses were the most popular option but many lone parents found it difficult to afford their own computers and not all colleges could offer sufficiently flexible access to PCs.

Closer links between employers and education and training providers is required to ensure that lone parents can access the training they need in order to enter secure jobs and to improve longer-term job prospects. Lone parents should be actively targeted in the promotion of learning opportunities, with schools, community health facilities and local college/s

Although lone parents want vocational training and education chances are that it is extremely hard for them to get off the starting block. Many embrace the idea of adult learning as a way of getting better job prospects and long-term earning potential but the shortfall in good, affordable, local childcare and a lack of information can keep them trapped on income support. Single parents planning to go into education or training need more childcare in their area as well as easily accessible information and practical support.⁵

Employability

Programmes to support confidence-building of lone parents are a vital stepping stone to help lone parents rebuild their confidence in themselves and their ability to support their families into the future. This includes mentoring initiatives as well as PSD initiatives and the development of soft and hard skills at appropriate points and the development of job search and work experience at appropriate stages.

More investment in sustainability is required to ensure employment, which is sustainable for Lone Parents. We require a more long term approach to aftercare and in-work support, which offers a one to one caseworker approach provided by trusted intermediaries.

Employment & Work Life Balance

Locations of work, school and childcare providers, transport and flexibility of both work and childcare are key determinants of a lone parents effective coordination of work & caring responsibilities. Strategies to create proximity between home, work, childcare and education settings exist alongside negotiations with employers regarding working hours, and with family and friends regarding informal childcare arrangements and coordination support. Of relevance to policy is the evidence that coordination difficulties can act as disincentives to work, that the lack of support from the non-resident parent can have large 'time costs' for lone parents, and that changes in employment policies could play a crucial role in supporting parents disadvantaged by having to face problems alone.⁶

Efforts to improve women's pay, access to childcare and family friendly employment should be speeded up to assist future parents to thrive in the labour market. Employers have a responsibility to provide well - rewarded, sustainable, family friendly job opportunities for lone parents. For example flexible workforce practices should enable 10am–3pm working hours, across term time, to be available.⁷

⁵ <http://www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk/1/lx3x1olx85x1oix2165x1/0/0/270309/1/0/lone-parents-education-chance.htm>

⁶ <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2005-2006/rrep230.pdf>

⁷ http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/working_age/wa2001/esr64sum.pdf

Health

The fact that most lone parents are women is important to understanding why so many one parent families are poor. Women are likely to earn significantly less than men and likely to be in low paid work which has poor terms and conditions. The responsibility for the sole care and cost of children along with the lack of affordable, flexible childcare and family friendly employment leads to reliance on Income Support & JSA and the associated unemployment and poverty traps.

Lone parents fall into a “hardship trap” which means they suffer severe hardship, poor housing, and in the end ill health. This in turn leads to low self-esteem, a lack of confidence and isolation, which are barriers to training, education and employment opportunities. The link between poverty and ill health is well documented. It is of some consequence that one parent families are one of the groups most vulnerable to poverty. Welfare to work policies must take into account the fact that lone parents are particularly vulnerable to illness, that this is largely related to poverty and the very specific pressure of lone parenthood. Evidence suggests that further investigation into the health of lone parents is essential.

There are also broader policy considerations, and a number of points should be brought to the attention of policy makers.

- Recognition of high levels of poverty among lone parents and the subsequent impact on health.
- Ill health will impact on a parents’s ability to work or train and this has implications for many other Government initiatives.
- The lack of research into the health of lone parents in Scotland.
- Young single mothers need extra support because of the health pressures they face.
- Ill-health leads to social exclusion and impacts on every facet of an individual’s life.

Housing

Lone Parents have often experienced overcrowded accommodation or has been forced into more insecure, expensive and poor quality privately rented housing. But acquiring a tenancy is only the first hurdle. Applying for Housing Benefit can be a lengthy and anxious process. Delay can lead to eviction notices being issued. Private landlords are especially intolerant of delays and may refuse tenancies to lone parent families on Housing Benefit. The interaction between housing and other benefits and tax credits can limit how much better off lone parents are as they move into work. Lone parents who are owner-occupiers do not receive adequate support for housing costs whilst having to meet the full cost of repairs and maintenance through the more expensive private sector. They are adversely affected when they move into work by loss of support for mortgage interest repayments.

Housing provision for lone parents must address housing list allocation, social housing allocation and affordability, if lone parents are to have the security of tenure so fundamental to all individuals and families.

Information & Advice

Many lone parents are grappling alone with issues around benefits, debt and contact, well beyond the initial crisis of separation. For some the problems go on and on and yet they have little idea where to turn. Particularly in light of its child poverty reduction targets and of its social inclusion aims, the Government should now take action to increase funding for advice provision to give proper weight to the holistic advice service required by lone parents. When parents have persistent problems with debt

or benefits or housing, it is likely to have a serious impact on children's lives. Research confirms that many lone parents do not see a solicitor even for problems within traditional family law.

Lone parents struggle with a poisonous cocktail of legal and social problems that often run on for years after relationship breakdown. Incidence of depression is high and lone parents routinely struggled with debt, contact, violence and benefit problems unaided. It is difficult to imagine a clearer case for strong support from the Community Legal Service and yet far too many lone parents struggle to find the advice that they need. Whether the cause is advice “deserts” or something more subtle, what we need to remember is that a lack of access to appropriate advice has human consequences.⁸

Conclusion: The interaction between ‘care work ‘ and paid employment

Achieving the target requires much faster progress but those LPs out of the labour market are:

- ❖ Hard to reach
- ❖ High level of disadvantage
- ❖ Least work ready
- ❖ Cannot afford childcare

Lone parents are twice as likely to ‘cycle’ between work and welfare and therefore the issue of sustainable employment and aftercare are crucial. This brings to light the complex issue of the interaction between ‘care work’ and paid employment and ‘time and income poverty ‘ Understanding better how to enable this crucial interaction is key to achieving the child poverty target and enabling lone parents into sustainable employment.⁹

The current policy model in UK is that of the ‘**adult worker model**’ and assumes that formal care is enough, viable, desired and effective and ignores the intimate nature of parenting. A move towards an “**individual worker /carer model**” has the potential to effectively address the barriers to employment of the most disadvantaged families. At the core of the approach is the view that the most successful models offer an integrated training & employment continuum, which creates pathways to sustainable employment. This links group-based, pre-vocational training, with vocational training & employment and access to a range of support mechanisms including specialist advice, childcare, mentoring, travelling expenses and aftercare.¹⁰

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⁸ http://www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk/1/x3x1opx20x1oix1304x1/0/0/160409/1/0/The_Advice_Needs_of_Lone_Parents.htm

⁹ Staying on, stepping up: how can advancement and retention policies be made to work for lone parents? Nuffield Foundation 2006
<http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/0330.pdf>

¹⁰ Providing training and support for lone parents: evaluation of the SPAN Study Centre
<http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/821.pdf>