



Proofed for Parents by Parents

Participatory One Parent Proofing: Findings

Single Parent Action Network



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SPAN

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ACRONYMS

BME	Black and minority ethnic
CSA	Child Support Agency
CCTC	Childcare element of Child Tax Credit
CTC	Child Tax Credit
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ERA	Employment, Retention and Advancement
EZ	Employment Zones
IS	Income Support
JCP	Jobcentre Plus
JSA	Job Seekers Allowance
LPA	Lone Parent Advisor
LSC	Learning Skills Council
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
NDLP+	New Deal Plus for Lone Parents
POPP	Participatory One Parent Proofing
WFI	Work Focused Interview
WRAP	Work Related Activity Premium
WTC	Working Tax Credit
WFF	Working for Families

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this project 68 single parents, living in five different areas of the UK, have brought to light the specific difficulties that single parents experience when trying to move forward and stay in employment. Through a participatory approach to enquiry and influencing, these single parents have generated new insights into the impact of current policies. Equipped with factual knowledge, they engaged in analytical group work and formulated a set of policy solutions grounded in their everyday lives.

Policies that make sense to single parents and that can fit with their complex and specific needs are more likely to work. These solutions reflect a diversity of experience and need: one third of participants were from BME groups, around one third were employed, some in elementary/low skilled jobs and others in medium skilled/professional jobs, and another third had been on Income Support for over 2 years. All the single parents involved in the project were women.

The key insights and policy solutions that emerged from this work indicate that current policies are not informed by an understanding of the specific needs of those who single-handedly juggle employment with childrearing. This is particularly true in the context of the current flexible labour market, which is characterised by high job insecurity and demands for long or atypical working hours. Employment retention, never mind career advancement, has become almost impossible for single parents particularly those with low skills, who constitute the majority. The challenges that these single parents encounter in their everyday lives illustrate that without this understanding and the creation of policies that address single parents' higher risk of financial and time poverty, the employment and child poverty targets are unlikely to be met. The following policy solutions could enable a single parent to escape poverty, create a work-life balance and sustain employment. Ultimately they show that a universal notion of a single worker/carer should inform current employment and child poverty strategies.

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The positive aspects of being a single parent



Single mothers recognised positive changes as a result of becoming a single parent, ranging from a sense of financial independence and autonomy, to being able to prioritise their relationship with their children and offer them a happier, safe, stable, non-violent family life. Yet this positive side of single parenthood is seldom acknowledged in public discourse. Instead single women voiced their frustration for continuing to be stigmatised as scroungers, fiddlers and bad parents.

“The government penalises us for being single parents, but why should my kids see a violent relationship because I’m with a bloke. Because I’m a single parent now, I think I should be given an award for what I’ve done, and I’m sick of them saying ‘Well you’re a single parent’. Because he did what he did, I’m a single parent, but I’m bloody well proud to be a single parent as well.”

Policy solutions

Strategies aimed at supporting single parents to move forward into sustainable employment are more likely to work if they:

- Foster a recognition that what matters is the quality of relationships and family life, not family structure.
- Value single parents for having exited unhappy and/or unequal family relationships and for single handedly providing and caring for their children.

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Single handed juggling to provide and care for children



Having single-handed responsibility to provide and care for their children entails a very high risk of financial and time poverty. Single parents who rely on benefits struggle to make ends meet, which often involves having to choose between paying for food and bills and buying children's birthday presents, school uniforms or days out. Those who are employed experience a constant and exhausting juggling act, which negatively impacts on their ability to sustain a job, reduces their choices of employment, and renders career aspirations obsolete. Lack of time to oneself and exhaustion often result in high stress levels, sometimes with ill-health implications.

“It’s like juggling balls. Do you buy the food, pay the gas or electric or buy them whatever they need – new shoes, a wee bit of bedding...”

“I can’t be more ambitious and do things like move to pursue my career or work further away and commute.”

“I feel like I don’t see my child because I work. I then come home and force-feed my child because I want them to go to bed so that I can go to bed.”

“Me and only me all the time, having to be Mum and Dad. Having to do everything and having no-one to share these responsibilities with and feeling like the lynchpin holding it all together.”

Policy Solutions

- Increase Income Support rates for adults and the CSA maintenance premium.
- Increase tax credits for single parents to take into account that there is only one income.
- Affordable, good quality childcare to cover atypical hours and emergencies.

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Studying/training to move forward



Studying/training, especially at further or higher education levels, was identified as the most effective step in moving forward. Although the premium attached to accessing training through the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) was seen as a very positive measure, a key limitation of this programme was that it only offers access to NVQ level 2 and below.

“You need to top up with more qualifications to get a reasonable salary.”

“People that have got a few qualifications from school, like GCSEs, they don’t want to be repeating Level 1 or 2 again, they want to go up to Level 3. Why because we are single parents should we go for low paid jobs?”

Policy solutions:

- Funding to cover fees and childcare costs for further and higher education courses.
- Provision of affordable evening or weekend childcare for those who want to engage in part-time studying/training while working.
- NDLP to provide access to NVQ level 3 and taster courses so that single parents can access training which best fits their aspirations and previously acquired qualifications and skills.

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Accessing structured voluntary work to move forward



Loss of self confidence and social networks was a common experience for single parents and therefore the development of soft skills and opportunities to escape isolation were identified as key steps in moving forward. Voluntary work was seen to offer these steps as well as offering the advantage of increasing work readiness without the pitfalls, pressures and risks of paid work. New Deal for Lone Parents and paid work were seen as far less effective.

“Make sure that volunteering is structured in some way, so that you can make sure that you can use it.”

“You need to be able to develop and not go into a low level job. Will you get a CV with everything you have done and learnt? An official documentation? A portfolio of voluntary work or a letter of recommendation?”

Policy solutions:

- Initiatives aimed at supporting single parents to move forward, such as the proposed Work Related Activity Premium (WRAP), should be linked to a structured volunteering programme which: develops soft and hard skills, provides career guidance, ensures proper supervision and performance reviews are conducted and enables the development of accredited work portfolios.
- Lone Parent Advisors to promote structured volunteering opportunities in addition to paid work and training.
- Volunteering to be recognised as an effective way to move forward into employment and as such be supported through financial incentives such as the proposed WRAP.

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Financial support for training and personal development



Single parents identified financial gain, without losing the security of benefits, as key to moving forward. In this respect benefit premiums provided by the New Deal for Lone Parents and the proposed Work Related Activity Premium (WRAP) were seen as very positive. Single parents also highlighted that developing soft and hard skills takes time, during which they need financial security.

“Premiums help you to move on without affecting your benefit.”

“The £20 a week for six months, I mean, personally I think it should last longer than six months because if you have been out of work for eleven years, it is still not enough experience to make you employable really.”

Policy solution:

- Benefit premiums linked to moving forward initiatives, should be increased, for example the proposed WRAP should be increased to £30 and extendable to a maximum of two years with six monthly progress reviews in place.
- Childcare costs covered for Work Focused Interviews, training including soft skills and voluntary work.

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Provision of holistic support



A major concern of single parents relates to the 'work-first' approach that underpins current employment programmes. When visiting Jobcentres and meeting with advisers many felt a pressure to get a job, as if any job was better than no job. Single parents overwhelmingly disagreed with this approach. Those who had not been in work for a long time or had returned to welfare wanted holistic support to tackle acute problems such as debt, isolation, domestic violence, depression, and low-self-confidence as well as the time and opportunities to develop their qualifications and experience. Support from single parent organisations was favoured over Lone Parent Advisors and New Deal for Lone Parents as they provided: holistic, longer term support; advice not singularly aimed at getting parents into paid work and a deep, grounded knowledge of single parents' needs.

Policy solutions:

- Support single parent organisations' delivery of holistic support.
- Holistic Work Focused Interviews to cover acute barriers such as debt, domestic violence, ill-health and housing problems.
- Establishment of local one stop shops so that single parents can receive advice and support on a number of issues simultaneously, with childcare on the premises.
- Ensure good communications and links between single parents' organisations, Lone Parent Advisors and Employment Zones.
- Single parents' organisations could train Lone Parent Advisors.
- Lone Parent Advisors could use the premises of voluntary/community organisations to provide advice.

“They want single parents back into work to fill in all these jobs, you know, all the not so good jobs.”

“Personal advisors should look at the future; focus on career rather than work.”

“It should focus on the individual needs rather than just getting people into any job.”

“[Single parent organisations] give you the kind of skills that you need to stand up for yourself and help you identify the different kinds of support that you need. You feel that you can talk to them.”

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Childcare to enable single parents to move forward



In order to move forward single parents need to be able to try, trust and access good quality childcare. Childcare tasters were seen as a very important measure, and yet the concern was that very often childcare was not available or affordable to single parents who were not in paid work and were trying to move forward. Single parents also identified that there was very little childcare available for children over 11 and stated that this needed addressing given that recent welfare to work initiatives seemed to be focusing on those whose youngest child has reached secondary school age.

“Childcare for 11+ kids is not appropriate. We need more community facilities that are for that age group. It’s not childcare that you want.”

“There is not childcare for them, before or after school. I don’t want him on the streets.”

Policy solutions:

- Childcare costs covered for Work Focused Interviews and training including soft skills and voluntary work.
- Develop more youth/community facilities for children over 11.

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Atypical hours and the need for childcare



For those parents who are single handedly juggling caring and breadwinning responsibilities, changes in working hours including the expectation to work longer or atypical hours was impossible to manage. Parents found that opportunities for advancement were severely curtailed by the lack of affordable good quality childcare during atypical hours, such as weekends and evenings. Given the expansion of employment during atypical hours, and increasing demand for working longer hours, childcare was also essential in order for low-skilled parents to secure and sustain employment. Single parents also talked about the difficulty of meeting childcare costs, which due to marketisation had continued to rise, even with the aid of the childcare element of child tax credit.

“Can’t do the training at the weekend as this is a problem in my current position as a manager in the public sector.”

“When I worked at [supermarket], they were like: “Oh, these are your hours” and they’re 20 hours. You look at them and think “Oh I want more”. But the reason I left was that she wanted me to work on a Sunday, I said I can’t on a Sunday because obviously I’ve got my daughter. Then another time she says “Oh there’s somebody off sick, can you come in at half past 7?” I went, “Well no, ’cos I’ve got my daughter – who’s going to see to her?” And she turned around and said “Childcare is your problem and not ours.”

Policy solutions:

- Home based childcare services in deprived communities.
- Pay informal childcare at cheaper rate than formal childcare through Working Tax Credit.

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Ensuring income security



Single parents identified income security as paramount but difficult to achieve due to the complication and unreliability of tax credits, CSA payments and better-off calculations. Being better off is important for job retention. Unfortunately due to unexpected work-related costs, and loss in housing benefit as well as other passported benefits, many of those in low-pay jobs said that they were no better off, and in some cases less financially secure than they were on benefits. Crucially single parents also lose the advice and support of a Lone Parent Advisor once they enter employment.

“Better off calculations are not accurate, they’re misleading, they don’t take off bus fares and school meals and all these things that you lose.”

“It’s just stupid, because they take all these benefits off you and then because you have to pay for everything else you are actually worse off.”

“Overpayment [of tax credits] is a constant worry and it is not fair.”

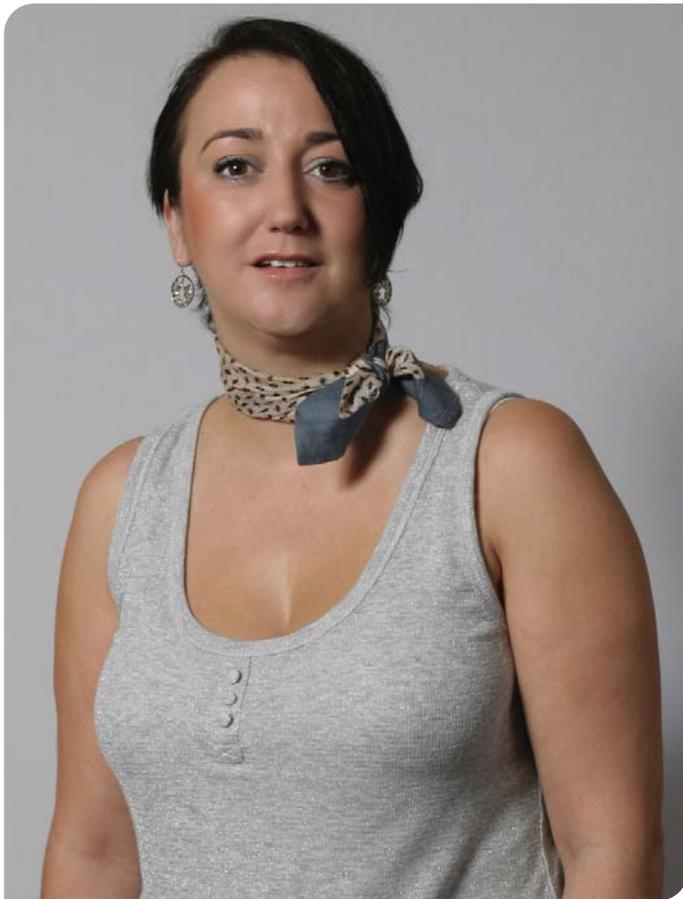
“You’re not getting an incentive to get a better job. If you go to a higher level then if you earn over your threshold you’ve got to pay it back... I had to live on, I think it was, about £50 a week after I’d paid my bills and everything like that. I got myself into debt to keep my house up, to keep my kids on.”

Policy solutions:

- Extend New Deal Plus nationally and guarantee the £40 in work credit, access to emergency fund and mentoring support to all.
- Simplify tax credit applications and award notices and do not claw back overpayments automatically.
- Ensure joined up understanding of tax credit system between Inland Revenue, Lone Parent Advisors and single parents.
- Better-off calculation to include loss of housing benefit, passported benefits and transport costs.
- Better-off calculation to be performed at time of job offer by an independent body.
- Less steep tapering of housing and council tax benefit.
- Passported benefit such as free school meals, dental and NHS costs to continue once in work.

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Opportunities for advancement



The opportunity for advancement was seen as key to sustaining employment, as it often meant being better-off and having increased job satisfaction, self-esteem and motivation. Low skilled parents seldom came across these opportunities, whilst those who were established in middle level/ professional jobs could not advance as their childcare responsibilities did not easily allow for inflexible and time consuming training requirements.

“I had no energy left. The hoops I had to jump through and nobody once offered any support for anything. And I got a young child, she was a toddler then. If they’d said, okay you can have extra time to do this I wouldn’t have been staying up until five o’clock in the morning.”

Policy solutions:

- Increase the threshold of Working Tax Credit to maintain incentive to move into better jobs.
- Ensure equal opportunities for single parents in the work place.
- Provide paid time off to study.

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Time Poverty: the need for time to care



Not having enough time to care was a common everyday experience for the single parents who worked. Parents talked of feeling guilty for not being able to be there at school events and being too tired to spend quality time with their children. Managing childcare breakdown, sickness and school holidays was a frequent problem for them, and they argued that current work-life balance policies were not helpful in this respect. Parents identified paid time off as vital in enabling them to sustain employment. They stated that the unpaid work that they did on top of their job was extensive but unfortunately went unnoticed and unvalued. Not all unpaid care work can be substituted by services because it is bound in the nature of intimate child-parent relationships. Single parents argued that they needed paid time off to make sure

that they can: care for their children when sick; care for their children when formal childcare cannot; spend quality time with their children; chaperone and organise extra school activities; offer emotional support; attend school activities and deal with school related problems as well as maintain a healthy home environment.

Policy solutions:

- Promote shorter working week.
- Right to flexible working for parents of all children, including those aged over 11.
- Paid leave for children's sickness.
- Provision of flexible paid parental leave.
- Grants to small and medium sized enterprises to cover costs of flexible working and paid leave.

“Work places need to be a more friendly environment and realise that parents really need time off to attend school plays, concerts etc. and this is important for children, they need that investment from their parents and society should respect that. They need to realise that children and child minders get sick and that working that day could be a major issue for lone parents because they don't have the other parent to provide childcare.”

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INTRODUCTION

Proofed for Parents by Parents draws on the Participatory One Parent Proofing (POPP) project findings, and stems from the recognition that enabling single parents to influence policies, about entering into and sustaining employment, is vital to improve the lives of single parents and their children.

The POPP project's **main objective** was to:

Influence the development of innovative programmes and policies that can engage single parents in intermediate steps to employment, and enable them to sustain good quality jobs.

The project aimed to achieve this objective by:

1. improving understanding of specific difficulties that single parents encounter when trying to move into and stay in employment, through the generation of participatory evidence;
2. enabling single parents to reflect on their experiences of current policies and define solutions that fit with the complexity of their everyday lives;
3. creating avenues for participants to voice these experiences and solutions directly in dialogue with policy makers and service providers;
4. developing a One Parent Proofing Toolkit; a series of recommendations which help policy makers and service deliverers to address the key challenges faced by single parents, enabling them to move into and stay in good employment.

Why adopt a participatory approach to enquiry and influencing?

Single parents are rarely given the opportunity to participate. Much of the participatory work that is undertaken is rushed and poorly done with no real commitment to enabling participants to bring about change (Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, 2000). Poverty has been identified as a principal barrier to political participation, and as single parents are a key group at risk of poverty, this acts as a primary reason for their lack of opportunities to engage. A significant amount of resources and support are necessary to enable single parents to have the skills, knowledge, time and confidence to actively participate. The participation of single parents was adopted as a central principle of the POPP project for a number of reasons:

- in our democratic society **single parents, the great majority of whom are women, have a right to be listened to and influence change**. Since the early 1980's, and particularly overtly and acutely until the mid 1990s, single parents have been stigmatised in public discourses as welfare scroungers and as deviant families (Alert *et al* 1988; Duncan and Edwards 1999; Pascall, 1999). Since 1997 many initiatives have been developed to move single parents into employment, as paid work became the focus for government welfare reform (DSS, 1998; DWP 2006a). Much of this policy is not neutral; on the contrary it aims to change behaviour. As a stigmatised group and a current policy target, single parents should have a right to influence those policies aimed at changing their behaviour;
- the **value of participatory approaches is being increasingly recognised** in policy and practice arenas. New Labour's clause IV defines

a Government in which '*decisions are taken so far as possible by the communities affected by them*';

- a participatory approach can **increase trust and understanding between policy makers, knowledge producers, and those who experience the impact of policies in their everyday lives**, ultimately improving the effectiveness of policies. Increasing the capacity of single parents to engage with local and national decision-makers **creates a learning dialogue**;
- participation can **build the capacity of those who are involved**. In the case of POPP, single mothers gain more information about policies and in so doing learn that they have social rights and are more likely to claim them. The associated training enabled single parents to develop the self-confidence and skills necessary to identify effective policy solutions and influence policy makers and service providers;
- those who have the power to make changes **learn to listen and act on the voices of those who experience the effect of policies and services** in their everyday lives. Drawing on direct experience can highlight issues that are not easily apparent otherwise (Bennett and Roberts, 2004), thus resulting in a more holistic understanding of the issues in question. POPP allows policy issues to be expressed in the words of, and grounded in the reality of those who experience their impact. **Policies that make sense to single parents and that fit with the complexity of their everyday lives are more likely to work.**

Participatory method adopted in the POPP Project

Despite being a common term heard in both policy and practice arenas, 'participation' can mean very different things to different people. Unfortunately it has often become a 'box-ticking' exercise where tokenistic, one-off consultation events, which result in little or no change in practice or policy, constitute as evidence of participatory practice. The POPP project however, has given single parents the opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge so that they are able to participate to affect change in policy and practice arenas. The project's aim was to enable single parents to *define* issues and solutions for current policy as well as *disseminate* their views in local and national policy arenas.

The POPP project involved the participation of single parents (all women) from five different cities in the United Kingdom: Bristol, Birmingham, Swansea, Sheffield and Glasgow. The table overleaf outlines the proposed development and delivery of the POPP project:

	Activity	Output
Step 1	Identification of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional Partners; Policy Sub-group. 	Five regional partners were identified in: Sheffield, Glasgow, Birmingham, Swansea and Bristol. For details of partners see Appendix 1. In each organisation a regional facilitator was identified to take responsibility for the development of POPP. A Policy Sub-group was created to inform the development of the influencing strategy and facilitate the delivery of the POPP findings in national policy arenas. Appendix 2 illustrates how each group is involved in the POPP project.
Step 2	Regional facilitator training.	Each regional facilitator attended a training workshop on delivering participatory training.
Step 3	Identification of single parents.	Each facilitator aimed to engage 10 single parents to take part in a series of POPP workshops.
Step 4	Delivery of workshops to single parents to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identify areas for policy change; increase knowledge re. current political context; identify policy solutions. 	Single parents attended the following three workshops: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Mapping Positive Experiences and Challenges of Parenthood (delivered by facilitators in local areas); Policy Training (delivered by SPAN Policy and Research Officer); One Parent Proofing Solutions (delivered by facilitators in local areas). See Appendix 3 for details of workshop outlines. See Appendix 4 for profiles of the parents who attended Workshops 1 and 3.
Step 5	Development of influencing material.	Collation of data gathered from workshops into two publications to use in influencing arenas. One publication collates the key findings from the workshops and the second presents a policy proofing tool, with policy solutions as identified by parents in the workshops.
Step 6	Identification of POPP Shadows.	One or two single parents identified from each of the five cities to participate in influencing policy makers and service providers. See Appendix 5: <i>Becoming a POPP Shadow</i>
Step 7	Delivery of workshops to POPP Shadows to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> develop skills in working with the media; presenting the POPP findings; influence local and national policy arenas. 	All Shadows and regional facilitators attend the following three workshops: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Media Training; Presenting POPP Findings; Lobbying and Campaigning Skills.
Step 8	Dissemination of policy solutions to key policy makers.	Shadows, regional facilitators and Policy Sub-group deliver the POPP policy solutions in local and national policy arenas.

'Proofed for Parents by Parents: Findings' draws on the evidence collected from the first series of workshops with single parents (step 4) and presents the realities of being a single parent, the challenges involved in moving forward into sustainable employment and the related policy suggestions for overcoming these challenges.

CONTEXT

Why focus on single parents and employment?

The latest available figures indicate that there are 1.9 million single parents with dependent children in the United Kingdom (LFS spring, 2005), 91% of whom are women. Single parent families continue to face a high risk of poverty. Although this risk has fallen from 58% in 1999 to 47% in 2003, in 2005/6 half of all children living in a single parent family were living below 60% of the median income after housing costs, compared to 23% in two parent families (DWP-HABAI, 2005/06). Poverty is dynamic, with people moving in and out of it; single parents, however, are three times more likely than two parent families to experience persistent poverty (DWP, 2005). This is an issue of household structure, but it is also because single parents score relatively highly on the remaining key predictors of child poverty in the UK, which are: gender, working status, ethnicity, ill health and disability and housing tenure.

Parent working status is the most significant predictor of child poverty; three quarters of children living in households where no one works are living in poverty (Hirsh, 2006). The employment rate of single parents fell dramatically to below 40% in the early 1980s and has since increased to 56% in 2006 (DWP, 2006). However, this rate does not only refer to full-time employment: in 2004, half of all employed single parents were working part-time (ONS, 2006). In 2004, 41% of single mothers had either no or limited qualifications, compared to a quarter of mothers in two parent families (Lyons *et al*, 2006). Single parents on income support tend to have even lower qualifications; in 2000, half had no qualification and no relevant work skills or experience (Lessof *et al*, 2001).

Current policy addressing single parent employment and child poverty

The UK Government has committed to halving child poverty by 2010. Child poverty eradication measures are centred on two main strategies:

- the reduction of 'joblessness'¹ amongst single parents, and more recently;
- an emphasis on second earners in two parent families.

The 'Making Work Pay' strategy, especially directed at single parents, aims to achieve this through employment programmes and by extending opportunities for childcare and flexible employment, resulting in the development of the following targets and policy initiatives:

- the 2000 pre budget report set a 70% employment target for single parents, to be achieved by 2010 (HM Treasury, 2000);
- **New Deal for Lone Parents** (NDLP) was introduced nationally in 1998, followed by **New Deal Plus for Lone Parents** (NDLP+) in 2005². In certain areas private sector-led **Employment Zones** are offered as an alternative to New Deal programmes;
- the recently piloted **Employment Retention and Advancement Project** (ERA), due to report in 2010, is designed to test the impact of continuing

¹ The actual term used by Government is 'worklessness' but here we use the term joblessness because this captures the fact that when a lone parent has no paid job s/he still does care work, albeit unpaid.

² Initiatives such as a £40 in work credit, a £20 work search premium, a work emergency fund, childcare tasters and mentoring opportunities, have been piloted in some areas of the country.

adviser support and bonus payments for retaining work (with additional cash payments for training), on improving the prospects of low-paid workers;

- introduction of the **minimum wage**;
- the introduction of **tax credits** has resulted in a significant redistribution towards the costs of raising children, and has been key to increasing the employment rate. Working Tax Credit (WTC) has been made available to all low-paid workers, although parents have to work at least 16 hours a week to be eligible. The WTC is means-tested and includes a Childcare Tax Credit element, whereby those who use registered formal childcare, can claim up to 80% of their childcare costs, to a maximum of £300 a week, for two children or more. Redistribution towards families is not differentiated by family type: single parents and two parent families receive the same family premium of tax credit;
- the commitment to eradicate child poverty has been demonstrated clearly in the **abolition of the Married Man Tax Allowance** to support the introduction of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) in 2003. This was a significant change, as all the child related elements in benefits and tax credits were now brought together with the aim of creating *“a seamless and transparent system of support for children... portable and secure income bridge spanning welfare to work”* (HM Treasury, 1999 p.39);
- **reform of the Child Support Agency (CSA)**, in line with the Child Poverty and Reduction of Joblessness strategies, has resulted in all single parents on Income Support, from 2008, being able to retain £10 a week from their maintenance. There is also a commitment to substantially increase the amount they can keep by 2010/11 (DWP, 2007);
- the **Work Related Activity Premium (WRAP)**, was proposed in 2006 as a scheme aimed at single parents on Income Support who had been out of work for at least 6 months and had a child who was 11 years old or older. Following a work focused interview single parents would be provided with a work related activity (for example training or voluntary work) for which they would be entitled to a £20 premium for 6 months. The scheme has not been rolled out nationally.
- the **Work-Life Balance** policy has provided a right to request flexible working, guidelines for parental leave and a right to statutory maternity pay for 39 weeks;
- the Green Paper ***In work, better off: next steps for full employment*** (2007) proposes a ‘new social contract with lone parents’ which aims to encourage and support more lone parents to move into employment. The paper proposes that by October 2008, lone parents whose youngest child is aged over 12 will no longer be entitled to Income Support solely on the basis of being a lone parent. They may instead be eligible for Jobseeker’s Allowance where they will receive support in looking for suitable work. By 2010 it is proposed that this age be reduced to 7 years old;
- the Scottish Executive is committed to working towards ending child poverty. The **‘Closing the Opportunity Gap’** strategy presents a number of initiatives to overcome poverty, which include an emphasis on lone parent employment:

- the **Working for Families** (WFF) programme is designed to support disadvantaged parents in deprived areas to move forward into employment by removing childcare and other barriers. £50 million has been allocated to a selection of local authorities from 2004-2008 in order to develop WFF services and projects;
- the **Workforce Plus Employability Strategy** aims to help 66,000 individuals, including 15,000 parents, in seven local Government areas, to move from benefits to work. The initiative will provide a framework for delivering effective services to enable individuals to move forward into sustainable employment.

These are important measures given that paid work does not always lift single parents out of poverty.

While the 'work-first' strategy continues to dominate, it is unlikely that those who are least work-ready and reliant on benefits will escape poverty. Hirsch (2006) has argued that significant increases of Child Tax Credit will not eradicate child poverty and that redistribution measures in the form of raising Income Support levels are also crucial. Harker (2006) also argues that the child poverty target will not be met without selective increases in the value of some adult benefits. In addition, Berthoud (2003) states that achieving the target will require a significant increase in the employment rates of those who have very young children as well as those who are multiply disadvantaged. Single parents represent a group who are often multiply disadvantaged and therefore, in order to move forward, they may require long-term holistic support rather than work-focused initiatives.

Ill health is one factor that has contributed to single parents' levels of disadvantage. The rate of ill health for single parents on benefits doubled from 1991 to 1999 (OPF 2005). 16% of single mothers who took part in the latest FACS sweep reported a long-standing illness or disability compared to 9% of mothers in couples (Lyon *et al*, 2006). According to the Social Exclusion Unit (2004) report on Mental Health and Social Exclusion, 28% of single parents suffer from common mental health problems such as anxiety, panic disorders, depression and post-natal depression, compared to one in six of the general population. It must be noted however that it is women, who represent the majority of single parents, who are generally more likely than men to experience common mental health problems and longer term periods of depression (WBG, 2005). In addition women's mental health issues are likely to be linked to the high rate of domestic violence experienced by single parents, with four in ten of the British Lone Parent Cohort study having experienced domestic violence (Marsh and Vegeris, 2004). The Treasury's Child Poverty Review report also highlights the link between domestic violence and female and child poverty, and states that '*mothers experiencing domestic violence are more likely to become lone parents, less likely to be earning independently, and more likely to report their families getting into financial difficulty*' (HM Treasury, 2004:77, cited in WBG, 2005:6).

Additionally, in 2002 19% of all children living in a single parent family had a disability, in comparison to 15% of those who lived with two parents. Single

parents not in work, and those working less than 16 hours, are more likely to have a child with ill-health or disability (Barnes *et al*, 2004).

Once in employment single parents are twice as likely as any other comparable group to **cycle back to welfare** (Evans *et al*, 2004). Ill-health has been associated with a return to receiving welfare, as well as having young and more than one child, and low qualifications. Single parents' high risk of cycling back to welfare can also be attributed to labour market structure, and juggling employment and childcare responsibilities. **Inequalities in the labour market** are marked, with high-turnover, low-pay and atypical hours for the low skilled (Hirsh, 2006³) and/or those with child rearing responsibilities. As previously stated, a large proportion of single parents are employed part-time and as a result tend to be low-paid, work atypical hours with more insecure positions, providing less working rights, and fewer opportunities for advancement (Millar *et al*, 2006). Evidence from the Employment Retention and Advancement programmes indicates that difficulties for single parents in retaining employment centred around managing parenting responsibilities, breakdown of childcare arrangements and inflexible working conditions (Hoggart *et al*, 2006).

Childcare represents a significant factor in influencing single parents' opportunities to move into sustainable employment. There has been progress in improving childcare provision, through the National Childcare Strategy in 1998, the Ten-Year Childcare strategy in 2004 and the 2006 Childcare Act. The Ten-Year strategy included proposals for free part time early education places for three and four year olds extended to 15 hours per week by 2010 and an out-of-school childcare place for all children aged 3 to 14. Despite significant progress, the childcare 'promise' is yet to be fully delivered. Access is not equal, with children in 'jobless' households, in single parent families, and with special educational needs being less likely to benefit from the expansion in (marketised) provision (Stanley *et al*, 2006). Formal, marketised childcare has a number of limitations for single parents:

- reliance on market provision has increased the cost of childcare, which is amongst the highest in the developed world. Therefore, even those single parents who can qualify for the childcare element of CTC cannot afford to pay the remaining 20% of costs. Daycare Trust figures (2007) indicate that the average cost for full-time weekly childcare is £152;
- although the free places for three and four year olds are welcome, the hours available (12.5 hours a week) are not sufficient to enable parents to work without the financial burden of additional childcare costs;
- market expansion also raises important issues relating to the quality of provision;
- confidence in formal day care remains low amongst single parents, who tend to prefer informal childcare from relatives and friends, partly because it offers continuity and trust and partly because it is embedded in personal relationships of love. The childcare element of CTC cannot be used to pay for informal childcare (Land, 2002; McKay, 2002);

³ In Bell *et al*

- 53% of employed single mothers work atypical hours (La Valle *et al*, 2002), for example at the weekends or during the evening/nights; thus their needs cannot be met through 8am to 6pm wrap-around care.

Furthermore, children's needs are complex and sometimes unpredictable, resulting in the breakdown of childcare arrangements, for example, when children are ill or unhappy with the childcare they receive. Clearly a system of formal childcare, no matter how flexible, can never fully replace the need for parental and/or informal childcare (Giullari and Lewis, 2005), and therefore policies which guarantee '**time to care**' are key.

The focus on reducing joblessness fails to fully recognise the importance that children and parents place on 'time to care'. **Time poverty** can have an everyday impact on children's own experiences of social exclusion, as they end up taking on domestic and childcare responsibilities (Millar and Ridge, 2006). An understanding of the ways in which income poverty and time poverty interact is missing from current childcare and flexible employment agendas. In this respect, the recent **Work Family Act, 2006**, has not gone far enough, as its main focus has been on extended paid maternity leave and in making it transferable to fathers. **Parental leave** remains unpaid, and single parents have no rights to take 'paid leave' when their children are sick. The right to request **flexible working** remains weak, as the employer can refuse it and it is only available to parents who have children under six.

In conclusion, current figures reveal a clear need to support single parents to move forward into sustainable employment. Despite recent policies targeting child poverty and single parent employment rates, one parent families continue to experience disproportionate levels of both financial and time poverty. In order to enable single parents to move forward into sustainable employment, policies and practices need to acknowledge and address the needs of one parent families at the same time as providing good quality sustainable employment which recognises the current inequalities in the labour market (such as pay levels, atypical hours and job security). The following findings present the experiences and challenges of moving forward into employment as identified by single parents themselves and offer policy solutions to inform the development of future policy and practice.

SINGLE PARENTHOOD: POSITIVE EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES

Single parents are a key policy category, particularly in relation to the employment and child poverty eradication strategies. Yet policies and initiatives aimed at single parents are seldom informed by a grounded understanding of what life is like for a single parent. This section outlines the views of 43 single parents (those who attended the first workshop) who reflected on their everyday experiences and identified both the positive and negative aspects of being a single parent.

Positive experiences

Single parenthood is almost always perceived in a negative light both in policy and media discourses, either by being presented as a social problem or a social threat (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Although a tiny minority choose to become single parents, this does not mean that along with specific challenges, there are no positive sides to the single parent family worth celebrating.

Independence from unequal relationships

Overwhelmingly all 43 single parents identified independence as the most positive feature of being a single parent. Independence is a complex concept, which can mean different things to different people, but it is most often associated with financial independence, or the autonomy to do as one pleases. Parents identified the following key dimensions of independence which they experienced since entering single parenthood: control over finances; control over time management; and control over how to raise their own children. Many believe that this experience has turned them into a *“stronger and more capable person”* and as a result they felt a much clearer *“sense of achievement and purpose”*.

Most also stressed that one of the things that they really enjoyed about being a single parent was *“Not having to answer to a man”*; *“Not having to be home and having hubby’s dinner on the table”*. At first glance these statements seem to indicate a fierce female independent stance, but a closer look reveals that dependence on others is not in itself perceived as a bad thing, providing it is within the realm of equal gender relations:

“I love it if I see people and they’re in an equal relationship and that’s cool. You know, if that had happened to me that would be cool, but when I was younger, as I was saying to you last night, I was prepared to put up with second-best but now I’m not. I much prefer being single than being in a relationship which isn’t equal.”

“Then I haven’t got to be so grateful. I used to thank him for looking after the kids, and I realised- why am I saying thanks for having them so I can go out? They’re your kids.”

“My husband refused to change their nappies. I was only like, 17 at the time and I used to think oh well he doesn’t like smelly nappies, and now I’m like - hang on!”

For some of the parents, independence from a man meant having more time and space to prioritise their relationships with their children:

“I’d rather be Karl’s mum than a man’s girlfriend. When you said lose your independence I’d rather lose it to the fact that I’m Karl’s mum, I’m not someone’s missus or other half.”

“My child’s the most important person to me, do you know what I mean? I’d rather put space there rather than anyone else really.”

Independence from oppressive and violent relationships

For many of the women, single parenthood signified an escape for them and their children from violent and oppressive relationships:

“I was a little slave at 16, you know. Then I got pregnant and I could not wear a certain kind of top. If he saw me in this he’d like, beat me. You can’t show your breasts, you can’t do this or that, you know. It was domestic violence, it was mental, physical, and any kind of abuse he could give me he gave it to me. And it’s like, why on earth would that be good for my son?”

“The government penalises us for being single parents, but why should my kids see a violent relationship because I’m with a bloke. Because I’m a single parent now, I think I should be given an award for what I’ve done, and I’m sick of them saying ‘Well you’re a single parent’. Because he did what he did, I’m a single parent, but I’m bloody well proud to be a single parent as well.”

Becoming a single parent family meant a happy care-free house and a more stable environment for their children to grow up in:

“It is not an oppressive atmosphere, so the fact is that I now have a happier home environment.”

“I’d rather be a single parent than be in a relationship where all those arguments are, because I think that the family life that I can offer my daughter now will be more stable.”

The challenges

Despite its positive aspects, parents identified a number of challenges to single parenthood:

Financial poverty and exclusion

Most single parents have only one income to rely on, whether this derives from benefits or employment. Only one third receive regular maintenance (Barnes *et al*, 2004), so it is not surprising that in three out of the five workshops financial poverty was identified as the key challenge to being a single parent. It must be emphasised that most of the single parents in these groups were either relying on benefits, or were in part-time and/or low-paid jobs. The single parents stressed the *difficulties of balancing budgets and affording to pay bills and weekly shopping*. Although balancing budgets was for many a daily effort, things become very difficult when extra expenses arose, such as *'replacing items when they break'*. This is when many fell into debt and, because of financial exclusion, faced exorbitant interest charges:

"You end up with the Provvy, I've had a Provvy loan out before. Provident. But you pay double back though, innit? 50 odd per cent it is. 'Cos I find the interest-free, it's really difficult to get, because then you've got to prove all your wages and everything."

Balancing household expenses with children's provisions

One of the key challenges to balancing budgets relates to not having enough money to spend on the children:

"It's like the juggling balls. Do you buy the food, pay the gas or electric or buy them whatever they need, new shoes, a wee bit of bedding, I need a mattress."

Particularly difficult was having enough money to pay for school trips and uniforms, special treats, birthdays and Christmas. Once again parents found the only way around this was to secure loans:

"First week in September: I've just got a loan off of social so I've got spending money for my kids but then I'm thinking to myself, what am I going to do at Christmas. Where am I going to get money from for Christmas presents?"

Affording holidays and day trips is another major difficulty, something some can only manage once in a lifetime thanks to the financial support from single parent organisations. Once again single parents found themselves excluded from cheaper offers, because many are only targeted towards two parent families:

"Why should we miss out on all these theme parks and stuff like that because we can't afford it. It's like a rite of passage isn't it? Mine have never been to Alton Towers; the only time we've actually been to Butlins, we went with SPAN."

“Once I put in to go on holiday, and they got me a caravan but I had to cancel it ‘cos I had no spending money. It’s alright thinking I’ll have a caravan holiday, but it is so much...you’ve also got to look at your outputs.”

“They have family deals, two adults and two children... Even travel insurance they did this fantastic deal for two adults and two children; I was like, what do you do for one adult and one child? I had to take two different policies.”

“I was going to take the kids to Legoland. And I looked on the Internet and the prices were like, I fell over backwards. But if you buy the annual pass, the annual pass is about £70 and you can go unlimited times. But I mean, you’ve got to go fork out £70 for each adult! So basically the more money you’ve got the cheaper you’re going to get it. You can take your kids loads of times. I mean that is the thing. It’s like on the Internet you get 20% off 25% off, but if you don’t have the Internet you can’t do it.”

Juggling everything single-handedly

Two workshops identified the main challenge as having sole responsibility for being the breadwinner *and* the parent. The majority of these single parents had been working for a while, many in full-time or long part-time hours in skilled managerial or professional jobs. They talked of constant juggling and pressure, splitting themselves between work, the children, the housework and finance management.

They stressed that as single parents they had to do this juggling alone:

“Me and only me all the time, having to be mum and dad. Having to do everything alone and having no one to share these responsibilities with and feeling like the lynch pin holding it all together.”

They talked about having to manage health emergencies on your own:

“Being sick and not being able to care for your child and having no-one to take over.”

“Your child is sick and doctors won’t come out in an emergency and you can’t take the child out but you need to go to the shops to buy prescriptions and food.”

“You need to go into hospital and there is no-one to care for your child.”

Restricted employment opportunities

For some, having dual responsibility meant that they have a limited choice of employment available to them:

“You take jobs such as cleaning so that if your childcare breaks down you can “sneak” the child into your work. You end up taking jobs that fit around your children’s school hours, their holidays.”

Others who managed to get better jobs and worked longer hours talked of having to forgo advancement and career aspirations:

"I think what happens is that you are trapped at home and if you haven't got childcare then you can't go out for education courses or training in the evenings or weekends, which if there's two of you then, yes, you can go to your class on a Monday, and you can juggle it."

The latter group also stressed how difficult it was to *"always be in two places at once"* and how as a single parent you do not have a partner to share that with:

"You cannot say to your partner, today I have a very busy day at work- can you take any calls from the nursery and do the pick up?"

They stressed the implications of this double pressure on their ability to have quality time with their children, on their work and on their health:

"When you are at work you feel guilty about not being with your children and when you are with your children you feel guilty about not being at work."

"I feel like I don't see my child because I work, to then come home and force-feed my child because I want him to go to bed so that I can go to bed myself."

"Yeah, yeah, just juggling everything. Kids, school. Trying to do things that you wanna do. There's never enough time for you to actually do the cleaning or relax."

"Constant stress for everyone and then you get depressed and your children, what happens to them then?"

No real choice of work and care

The 43 single parents who took part in the workshops differ in their experiences of what is beyond reach for a single parent. However, many agreed that single parents did not have the same choices as other parents. For those on benefit this related to the **choice of being a full-time mum**:

"Society says you need to bring up your children as the woman, as the mum, and then on the other hand it feels as though if you're married you can stay at home, but if you're not then you can't."

"But I mean, it's getting to the stage now where the government are trying to get people back into work, but it's single parents they're trying to get back into work. But I wanted to watch him, 'cos I missed his first step 'cos I were working. And so much happened at the beginning that if you're forced out to work... a childminder is going to see him take the first step not you."

Interestingly it was those single parents who were in skilled managerial/professional jobs who argued that for a single parent it was impossible to pursue the career they wanted:

"I am unable to go for a promotion at work because that won't fit with my family needs."

"I can't be more ambitious and do things like moving to pursue my career or work further afield, commute."

"I just can't find the time to train and without that I can't move forward."

Financial impossibilities

Others experience a number of financial impossibilities. They knew that they would never be in a position to own their home, or live in better housing:

"If you want to get a mortgage and there is only one income I mean how are you supposed to move out of rented accommodation? I tried it and the most they would give me was like forty-five thousand for a mortgage. You wouldn't get a shed for that!"

"I want to live in better housing in a better area but I am stuck here."

For others it was an issue of not being able to choose the type of education for my children.

Time for oneself

Many felt that what they simply could not do was find time for themselves, whether it was to have a break, the occasional lie-in, or a social life for themselves:

"I am unable to go anywhere, even an appointment, without my children in tow."

Society's perception of single parents

In one of the workshops, parents felt that changing the way that society perceived single parents was impossible. They felt they had been stereotyped as 'scroungers', 'fiddlers' and 'bad parents' and believed that people did not value the unpaid work they carried out in taking care of their children single-handedly.

"They think you are sat on your arse at home and you've done nothing all day and you're raking it in from government. My next door neighbour swore at my oldest son. I asked her why the next day in a polite manner. Before I'd even got the words out of my mouth she went "Shush! I don't like you. You're a one parent family. I have to get up and go to work."

"It's mostly the middle class who think that single parents are actually fiddling. If your kids get new trainers "Oh where'd she get the money from?"

"My son got sent to the psychologist, because first off he went to the dermatologist, and he got sent to the psychologist, and she turned round and said, "Ah, well if his father was involved then he wouldn't have the issues". I

turned round; I said, "You've read my file - so watching his dad beat me up would be good for him? That would make him a better child?"

Summary and policy solutions

The positive side to single parenthood is seldom acknowledged in public discourse and yet single women were keen to voice the positive changes experienced by them and their children in becoming a single parent family. These changes ranged from a sense of financial independence and autonomy, to escaping domestic violence. Freed from unequal and/or violent relationships, single women were able to prioritise their relationship with their children and offer them a happier, safe, stable, non-violent family life.

In spite of this, single parents voiced their frustration about the impossibility of changing society's perception of single parents, and having to put up with being stereotyped. They felt that, in comparison to two parent families, they have much less choice of work or care. Two policy solutions stem from this:

- Rather than being seen as a problem, single parents want to be valued for having exited unhappy family circumstances and for the hard work that they single-handedly put into caring for their children. Policy therefore needs to recognise that family forms are diverse and what matters is not their structure but the quality of family life and relationships that take place within them.
- Policies aimed at eradicating child poverty and supporting single parents into sustainable employment need to value unpaid care work.

Despite these positive changes, life as a single parent family does present specific and very difficult challenges, which sometimes render things that others take for granted, simply out of reach. Having dual responsibility to provide and care for their children often means that single parents experience financial and/or time poverty. The former can mean having to decide between paying the bills or buying things that the children need, such as birthday presents, days out and school uniforms. Often the only solution is entering into heavy debt as many single parents experience financial exclusion. It also means that buying a house or choosing alternative education for their children is impossible for many single parents. Overwhelmingly parents proposed the following policy solutions:

- Income Support rates for adults are far too low and should be increased.
- Tax credits are too low, and should be increased to take into account the fact that there is only one parent and therefore one income. At present single and two parent families are entitled to the same family premium of tax credit.
- CSA needs reforming- in particular so that all single parents on Income Support should be allowed to keep much more than £10 of the maintenance paid by the absent parent.

The single parents working long part-time hours or full-time, experience constant, exhausting single-handed juggling. This in turn reduces their choice of jobs, often rendering career aspirations obsolete and prevents them from spending enough quality time with their children. The lack of opportunity to have time for themselves, and the associated exhaustion and stress, can also

result in illness or depression. Once again they have to manage it by themselves, as there is no-one to take over the childcare. For these single parents the **policy** solutions were for flexible and affordable childcare to cover atypical hours and emergencies:

- Affordable good quality childcare should be made available in the evenings and weekends so that parents can get a break or take up training and advancement opportunities.
- Provision of safe and accessible childcare to cover emergencies, such as when the parent needs to go into hospital, or is sick or when a child is hospitalised and there is no one to look after the other children.

MOVING FORWARD

Steps, resources and sources of support: what works?

This section identifies the steps, resources and sources of support that participants associated with moving forward. Parents were encouraged to evaluate each method of moving forward and then rank them in terms of effectiveness.

Studying and training

All parents, irrespective of their employment status (the groups included parents from medium skilled employment, as well as those receiving benefits), ranked further/higher education and high-level training as an effective step for moving forward: all five workshops identified it as an important step and three identified it as the *most* effective way to move forward as a single parent.

Parents identified the following advantages to receiving further/higher education and training:

- it provides parents with qualifications, new skills and knowledge that make them more employable;
- it increases parents' choice of jobs and raises their career prospects;
- it increases self-confidence and self-esteem;
- it enables parents to increase their social capital by providing opportunities to escape isolation and meet new and different people.

However, single parents also identified a number of challenges in undertaking further/higher education and training:

- lack of childcare to take up evening/weekend courses;
- lack of funding to pay for childcare costs;
- limited and discretionary funding available to take up full-time further and higher education;
- studying part-time if in paid employment is difficult and tiring for single parents. It requires lots of single-handed juggling to make lesson times and meet course deadlines. It often means not being able to attend all the lessons and opportunities for learning.

Voluntary work

Voluntary work was identified as the second best step for moving forward as a single parent. All five workshops identified voluntary work as a way of moving forward, and two as a key step forward.

Single parents identified a number of advantages to undertaking voluntary work:

- it can increase a parents' employability directly by providing: new skills, work experience, training and examples of experience for a CV;
- it gives parents the opportunity to enter into and experience a work routine;
- it provides information about career opportunities;
- unlike paid work, voluntary work is flexible and parents are able to work at their own pace;
- parents are able to leave without too many repercussions if they decide they are unable to continue to work on a placement;

- voluntary work can be satisfying as it enables parents to give something back to their community;
- it develops self-esteem and confidence;
- helps parents to develop networks as they have an opportunity to leave the home.

Parents also identified a number of disadvantages to voluntary work:

- although some organisations did provide childcare, others did not and this served as a barrier for many single parents;
- money was an issue for single parents, especially if they did not get their expenses paid:

“I don’t even get the bus fare out of my voluntary job because it’s under four hours, you’ve got to have four hours or more.”

- some parents felt that you can be taken advantage of and end up giving too much of your time;
- the value of voluntary work depends on whether it is part of a structured programme aimed at increasing your employability.

“Make sure that volunteering is structured in some way, so that volunteering is recorded and structured so that you make sure that you can use it.”

“You need to be able to develop and not go into a low level job. Will you get a CV with everything you done and learnt on it? An official documentation? A portfolio of voluntary work or a letter of recommendation?”

Confidence-building/personal development courses

In third place, single parents identified confidence building and personal development courses as a resource to enable them to move forward. These courses are aimed at increasing an individual’s sense of self-worth and teaching them how to value themselves. Many of the participants shared their experiences of isolation, loss of self-confidence and self-esteem which they felt were a result of becoming a single parent and/or living in poverty. Policies such as the proposed WRAP - which created incentives for single parents to engage in soft-skills training and other activities, such as voluntary work - were identified as important by single parents. The development of these skills can make it easier for single parents to attend interviews and request help and support. They also provide single parents with the opportunity to have time for themselves and make new friends.

Paid work

Paid work shared some of the positive features of voluntary work, and yet none of the workshops identified paid work as an effective step to moving forward. Like voluntary work, paid work had advantages as it:

- raises confidence and self-esteem;
- provides opportunities to leave the home and meet new people;
- provides opportunities to develop new skills.

However, unlike voluntary work it also:

- provides single parents with financial independence so that they are no longer reliant on benefits;
- increases the number of choices available to single parents as they are seen as taxpayers.

At the same time, single parents identified a significant number of disadvantages associated with paid work:

- it does not necessarily result in families being better off, as parents have to pay for additional costs such as council tax as well as losing free school meals and other passported benefits such as free prescriptions, dental and optical care:

“You spend more money because you have less time to shop cheaply.”

“Tax credits don’t always work and you might get into rent arrears.”

- juggling work with children is very tiring and stressful;
- there are significant childcare implications, such as:
 - in school holidays;
 - when a child is sent home from school unwell;
 - unpredictable work requirements.

“You end up taking work home and doing it when the children are in bed.”

“Employers can change your work hours once you are in a job.”

“Less time with children can often mean more behavioural problems and no time to sort it out.”

Advice, information and guidance

This was ranked as an important resource by two of the workshops. Most of the single parents in these workshops were not in paid work and were in the process of moving forward. In their experience good advice, information and guidance was paramount in enabling them to make the right choices about how to move forward and manage some of the key barriers, such as debt and lack of knowledge about tax credits and childcare entitlements.

Childcare and transport

Two workshops identified access to childcare as a key resource for moving forward. Most of these single parents were not in paid work. They felt that using *“safe, good quality and affordable childcare”* was beneficial to the parent and to the children. It made it possible to take advantage of opportunities for training, studying or voluntary work. It also meant that they could do so without *“dumping the young ones on the older children”*. It was felt that access to childcare had to go hand-in-hand with public, accessible and affordable transport. In their experience both of these resources were very hard to come

by. Parents identified some specific difficulties they had encountered with accessing childcare:

- many could not afford childcare to look for work;
- childcare was often not available when they needed it, for example, when attending Work Focused Interviews, training or voluntary work;
- some childcare providers asked parents to pay in advance;
- limited/unsuitable childcare available for teenagers.

“Childcare for 11+ kids, it’s not appropriate. We need more community facilities that are for that age group. It’s not childcare that you want.”

“There is no childcare for them, before or after school. I don’t want him on the streets.”

- BME women stressed the fact that they may want to be in education or employment when their children are very young; however, they found that there was limited childcare for children under three;
- transport to access childcare was expensive;
- financial support with childcare costs was often left to the discretion of the Lone Parents Advisor and as a result was often not provided.

Health support

Two workshops identified *support* with mental health and disability as important. It was felt that *“counselling and an understanding of what you are going through”* as well as *“support to meet your needs”* was important for moving forward.

Working tax credits (WTC)

Two workshops, both attended by a high number of employed single parents, identified WTC as a resource for moving forward:

“Very complicated but still a fantastic lifesaver; could not have got into work and stayed in it without it.”

Despite this neither workshop identified it as the most effective resource for moving forward, and instead identified the following disadvantages:

- it is *“too complicated”* and *“even worse if you are self-employed”*.
- insufficient information is provided

“The onus is on you to know the rules.”

- the level of support provided is too low:

“You don’t get enough money.”

- risk of overpayment:

“Overpayment is a constant worry and is not fair.”

“cos with these tax credits now, if they’ve given you money they should have got it right. So they shouldn’t have the right to be able to claim it back like they do all the time. That’s down to them. They’ve made a mistake.”

Single parent organisations

Two of the workshops, attended mainly by single parents relying on benefits and in the process of moving forward, identified single parents’ organisations as a key source of support. They identified the following positive features of this support:

- specialist understanding of the issues affecting single parents:

“Enables them to give you the kind of skills you need to stand up for yourself and help you identify the different kind of support that you need. You feel that that you can talk to them.”

“Because you’ve been there, you’ve done it, you’ve bought the T-shirt.”

“You’re more on our side.”

“Plus I think you have more information to pass on than the other ones. The other ones, they’re trying to get you into work all the time... They are there to do their quota. That’s the difference. They’re trying to shove you in one direction and you’re trying to talk and say, “Well, I’ve got these problems first, could you help me that way, before I go that way?”

- provide detailed information about re-entering work;
- No time limit on how long they can offer support.

Unfortunately these organisations were often “*under funded*” and as a result “*have not always got enough staff to help*”.

New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and Personal Advisors

Two workshops identified the NDLP as a source of support. Most of the participants in these groups were relying on benefits. Single parents ranked the following features of the NDLP very positively:

- training opportunities;
- benefit premiums. Single parents felt that experiencing a gain in one financial situation, without losing the security of relying on benefits, was key to moving forward. Policies such as the NDLP+ and the proposed Work Related Activity Premium, which provide benefit premiums attached to engagement in steps to move forward, were considered as very important:

“Premiums help you to move on without affecting your benefit.”

- clothing allowance;
- access to childcare during interviews;
- access to interview skills training and help with completing application forms;

- support with job searches.

Despite this, no participants from either workshop identified it as an effective step for moving forward. Many of the single parents had experienced the following problems:

- inconsistency in quality of advice;
- information provided was sometimes wrong:

“Sometimes it was wrong or very judgemental; better off calculations were often wrong.”

“I had to tell them that you have to pay my childcare while I come here and they were like, no, no, we don’t do it. And I said, look, I read it in a magazine; this is what the Jobcentre offers. So I suggest you go and check it out and phone me back before I phone someone else up at head office to find out. And she phoned back and she said, yes, you’re right “

- employment offered not tailored to meet the needs of the individual:

“I was getting job interviews but they were things like, well they were encouraging me to work in a bakery and stuff like that, which I knew I didn’t want to do. And in the end there was a big hoo-ha because they said that I wasn’t serious about getting a job and I had all these interviews that I’d got the job for but I wasn’t serious. But I was, I just wanted a certain kind of job, somewhere where I could see myself growing and I didn’t think I would grow at British Home Stores”

“Jobcentres just want to put you in any job; they are not worried what job.”

“They want single parents back into work to fill in all these jobs, you know, the all the not so good jobs...”

- advisors often reluctant to listen to the reasons why parents were unable to move forward. Single parents were keen to stress that moving forward is a multidimensional process, with many having to address a number of different issues and barriers. They felt that the current approach was too ‘work-focused’ and not sensitive enough to individual needs:

“Work Focused Interviews need to be more holistic. Lone Parent Advisor should be able to offer personal development plans, which look at financial planning, housing, health, career opportunities.”

“It needs to be more flexible, and suit that particular person’s needs.”

“It should focus on the individual and their needs, rather than just getting people into any job.”

“Personal Advisor should look at the future; focus on career rather than work.”

- training available through the NDLP is for NVQ level 1 and 2. This is very low level training and does not enable single parents to choose learning in line with their needs and career aspirations:

“NVQ 2 is not enough to get a good job, and good childcare, like when I done the SVQ that wasn’t enough, I was unable to go on and do anything with it.”

“You need to top up with more qualifications to get a reasonable salary.”

“People that have got a few qualifications from school, like GCSEs, they don’t want to be repeating Level one or two again, they want to go up to Level three. Why because we’re single parents should we go for low paid jobs? “

“Is not individually based, you can only take up certain courses. Not enough to take account of your previous qualifications and achievements. The choice is very limited.”

- benefit premiums need to be offered over a longer period. Single parents held a strong suspicion that the primary objective of short-term premiums was not to enable single parents to become work-ready but to *push them* into work. They were keen to stress that becoming work-ready takes time and therefore *longer* benefit premiums should be offered. They also suggested that stronger incentives should be given so that engaging in steps that make you work-ready becomes more appealing than taking up the first job that is offered:

“They’re offering £20 a week for six months, after that six months there is much more pressure on her to take any job because she’s had this £20.”

“The £20 a week, I mean personally I think it should last longer than six months because if you’ve been out of work for 11 years, six months it is still not going to be enough experience to make you employable really.”

“The premium should be increased because there is no point otherwise. They are not giving you any extra money really; you can already earn £20 on top of your Income Support.”

Family and friends

Two of the workshops identified this as an important source of support, but not as a key one. Family and friends were often able to provide:

- valuable support, which gave single parents a chance to get some time and space to themselves;
- 24 hour emergency support;
- a good source of childcare - cheaper or free.

However, there were some limitations identified:

- not everyone can rely on family;
- risk of interference or family/friends forcing their views on you;

- feel beholden to family/friends: *“held at ransom sometimes”*;
- not all family members are able to care for children positively.

Sure Start

One workshop identified this as a source of support for moving forward. None of the workshops identified this as one of the most effective forms of support however. Single parents felt that Sure Start was *“good for teenagers”*; *“it’s local and helps you get back to work and provides training”*. But they felt the *“service was too short term, too time-limited and did not cover enough areas”*.

Summary and policy solutions

Single parents identified a range of steps, resources and support which could help them to move forward. They then went on to examine the strength and limitations of current policies and formulated a set of policy solutions.

Gaining relevant skills and qualifications was seen as key to moving forward, and essential to gaining valued, sustainable employment. It is not surprising therefore, that studying and training, especially when in further/higher education, was identified as the most effective step to moving forward for single parents in and out of paid work. As with voluntary and paid work, training enables single parents to increase social capital and soft skills. However, it also substantially increases their chances of moving into good quality employment. Unfortunately this step is seldom available to single parents. Single parents identified the following **policy solutions** to address this:

- Provision of funding to cover training fees and childcare costs for single parents who want to engage in high-level training in further/higher education.
- Provision of affordable evening or weekend childcare for those who want to engage in part-time studying/training whilst working.

Much support with training is channelled through the NDLP and NDLP+. Whilst the premium attached to engaging in training through the NDLP is seen as a very positive measure, a key limitation of this programme is that it only offers access to NVQ level 2 and below. Single parents argued that this is partly due to the 'work-focused' approach of this programme and low expectations about the kind of jobs that single parents should be able to demand. They recommend the following **policy solution**:

- Access to higher level and more varied training; taster courses to enable single parents to try out courses that best fit their aspirations and previously acquired qualifications and skills.

Single parents identified financial gain, without loss of benefits, as key to moving forward. In this respect, benefit premiums provided by the NDLP and the proposed WRAP were seen as very positive. Single parents felt that it was vital that those engaging in soft skills training, voluntary work, mentoring and life skills training should be entitled to these premiums. It was noted that loss of self-confidence and social networks was very common amongst single parents and therefore the development of soft skills and opportunities to escape isolation were identified as key steps to moving forward. Voluntary work was seen to offer these steps and also has the advantage of increasing work readiness, without the pitfalls, pressures and risks of paid work. As a result parents recommended the following **policy solutions**:

- Lone Parent Advisors could highlight volunteering more. At present they focus mainly on training and paid work opportunities.
- Voluntary work should be recognised as an effective way to increase work readiness and as such should be supported through financial incentives, such as the recently proposed WRAP. Soft-skills development therefore, should go hand-in-hand with developing work-related skills and experience.
- Initiatives aimed at supporting parents to move forward, such as the proposed WRAP, should be linked to a structured volunteering programme which: develops soft and hard skills; provides career guidance; ensures proper supervisions and performance appraisals are conducted; and enables the development of accredited work portfolios.

Developing both hard and soft skills requires time and therefore single parents identified a further **key policy solution**:

- Benefit premiums, such as the proposed WRAP, should be increased and extended to provide a clearer and stronger incentive, so that single parents have income security for the length of time it takes them to move forward. After six months, progress and need should be assessed and then, if needed, extended for a further six months to a maximum of two years. Furthermore, interruptions due to health or childcare emergencies should be discounted.

Single parents were very critical of the work-focused advice that underpins the support received through the NDLP. Instead they **propose the following policy solutions**:

- Holistic Work Focused Interviews (WFI), which examine multiple and acute barriers to employment, (including debt, ill-health, domestic violence and housing problems). WFI should also take single parents' aspirations for good jobs seriously.
- Establishment of local one stop shops based on joined-up working so that single parents can receive advice and support on a number of issues simultaneously, with childcare on the premises.

Support from single parent organisations was favoured over LPAs/NDLP as they provided holistic, longer-term support; advice not singularly aimed at getting single parents into paid work; and a deep, grounded knowledge of single parents needs. As a result the following policy **solutions were identified**:

- Policy should support the role of single parent organisations, and ensure good communication links between them, JCP and EZ.
- Advisors could use the premises of voluntary/community organisations more to provide advice.
- Single parents' organisations could train Lone Parent Advisors (as One Parent Families and One Parent Families Scotland already do).

Last but not least, in order to move forward single parents need to be able to try, trust and access childcare. Childcare tasters were seen as a very important measure, and yet the concern was that very often childcare was not available or affordable to single parents who were not in paid work and were trying to move forward. The following **policy solutions** were identified:

- Financial support for single parents to cover full childcare costs during WFIs, training (including soft skills training) and voluntary work.
- More youth facilities for children over 11 – childcare that meets their needs.

In conclusion, single parents identified moving forward as an essential area for policy development, emphasising the need for a holistic approach offering a continuum of support and opportunities to move on.

SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT

In the second set of workshops single parents discussed the issue of sustainable employment. They shared their experiences of employment and discussed what makes a job more likely to be sustainable. They then examined the strengths and limitations of current policy and offered a set of key solutions for change.

Barriers to sustainable employment for single parents

Job insecurity

The current flexible labour market, characterised by high staff turnover and constant pressure on workers to readapt their skills, is very risky for single parent families who rely on a single income:

“I’ve been made redundant from a job I loved. I was getting £8 an hour, and tax credit. It was part time. I lost my job through no fault of my own. I loved my job. I mean I was devastated. Absolutely devastated. I’ve got to go back to square one. And I’m trying you know I’ve been to job interviews and I’m going for work, but the computer skills aren’t up to what they should be. So it looks like I’ll have to go to college so me and my kids are going without for the next six months or maybe a year.”

Negative experiences of employment and its lack of security can deter single parents from wanting to do paid work:

“If the job itself, you go for an interview and it seems alright and things like that, and then you’ve been there a month or something like that and things just change. And you’re worse off emotionally because it gets to the stage where you don’t want to go back to work.”

Losing benefit entitlements

Income security is vital to single parents. Benefits are low but they guarantee a set amount of income that single parents can rely on. Letting go of that security can be very difficult, particularly when tax credit and child support systems have proven to be both complicated and unreliable, and better-off calculations are often inaccurate.

“The system’s very confusing for people. If you go in, it’s very hard - even if you go onto the website and you try and calculate what you’re going to get you come off completely baffled you know. When I first started I was getting £145 a week and now I only get £120 a week and still don’t understand why that is.”

“And you have got to presume it’s alright for this year. But it just worries you. Especially if you’ve got older children, like some of my children sometimes they work, sometimes they don’t.”

“Better Off Calculations are not accurate, they’re misleading, they don’t take off bus fares and school meals and all these things that you lose.”

For some this income insecurity can result in debt.

“I am in so much debt that I have never been in before. They don’t understand that when your tax credit don’t come through or they stop it and you have to wait monthly, and you’ve got direct debits going out, they are not getting paid and you are getting charges. I had to get a credit card to stop me losing my house because I went to them and I said can you give me a crisis loan and they said oh no. In the end I went to the bank and the bank gave me the money instead.”

Paid work is considered to be the most effective route out of poverty by policy makers, and single parents also believe that a job should guarantee a greater income than welfare. Yet in their experiences this is often not the case. Many jobs are low-paid and once in work single parents can lose passported benefits, whilst housing and council tax benefit are tapered at 40%. In addition there are extra work-related costs to consider, and childcare remains very expensive even for those who qualify for the 80% tax credit. Furthermore once earnings go up, single parents lose entitlement to WTC and its childcare element.

“If you’re on working families you have to pay for school dinners so that could cost me anything over £20 a week. You pay for your council tax, the only reduction you get is about 25% for being on your own”

“It’s just stupid because they take all these benefits off you and then because you’ve got to pay for everything else I am actually worse off now.”

“A friend of mine has lost hers because she’s apparently earning too much now and what she’s earning above the level doesn’t make up for all things that she’s losing like dental care, you know the childcare tax credit.”

“You’re not getting an incentive to get a better job. If you go to a higher level then if you earn over your threshold you’ve got to pay it back. So I had to live on, I think it was about £50 a week after I’d paid my bills and everything like that. I got myself into debt to keep my house up, to keep my kids on.”

Lack of opportunities for advancement

Becoming more affluent often requires taking opportunities for career advancement. Advancement also has a positive impact on motivation, job satisfaction and personal development. As we saw in the section on ‘Moving Forward’, the single-handed juggling of caring and employment reduces single parents’ choices and can render career aspirations obsolete. On one hand the low skilled single parents found it difficult to find jobs that enabled them to move forward, through training or further studies. On the other hand, some of those in professional jobs were often expected to engage in further training and yet found it very difficult to respond to those expectations. Sometimes this was an issue of funding costs, however, most of the time it was because they were not given the opportunity to train and develop during work time:

“Can’t do the training at the weekend - this is a problem in my current position as a manager in public sector.”

Many felt that the only opportunity to advance was through Open University courses. However, the lack of financial support available to those in work and the reality of juggling studying on top of a job made this option particularly difficult for single parents:

“I’m doing an Open University degree. Now because I’m on benefit my Open University fees were paid for, just a form signed by the Jobcentre, and the Open University gives me a £250 a year study grant. I know it doesn’t go a long way but it is something. So although those opportunities are few and far between they are out there but they won’t tell you they’re out there, you’ve got to look for them yourself.”

“I had no energy left. The hoops that I had to jump through and nobody, nobody once offered any support for anything. And, I got a young child – she was a toddler then – and if they’d said, okay, you can have extra time to do this I wouldn’t have been staying up until five o’clock in the morning “

Atypical working hours

Many of the single parents, particularly those in low-skilled employment, had experienced a demand for atypical working hours. Sometimes this was a key feature of the job, but often there was an expectation that employees should be flexible in terms of working longer and atypical hours as and when needed. Ultimately for somebody who single-handedly juggles parenting and employment, atypical working is neither desirable, nor possible in many cases.

“When I worked at [supermarket], they were like, “Oh, these are your hours”, and they’re 20 hours. You look at them and think, “Oh I want more” but the reason I left was that she wanted me to work on a Sunday, I says I can’t on a Sunday because obviously I’ve got my daughter. Then another time she says, “Oh there was somebody off sick, can you come in at half past 7?” I went, well no ‘cos I’ve got my daughter, who’s going to see to her? And she turned around and said “Childcare is your problem and not ours.”

“I just had a job come through from the cafe at the Jobcentre where I go to a Lone Parent Advisor and it’s domestic working at a hospital but it’s on a rota basis. Well to me it’s no good on a rota basis because what would I do when they say, “Right this week you’ve got to do Friday, Saturday and Sunday?”

“I went and did a get back to work thing. It was three different jobs and every one of them they asked you to go on a rota. And that was it.”

“I suppose from my child’s point of view if it is when she’s in school that is ok, if it was evenings or weekends it could be dangerous.”

“Yeah, older siblings. That’s the only way I got to work. It’s the only way I could manage to keep working, but then they were often late for college, by doing that. So my kids were sometimes getting in late ‘cos they were taking my kids to school so they missed out.”

“When he’s 11 and started high school, she is gonna be starting infant school, and I’m thinking, how the hell am I gonna be in two places at once? So he’s gonna have to take himself off, and then I was thinking, oh that’s great ‘cos by the time he’s like 13, or 14 he can be picking her up from school. But then I thought no, that’s just awful that he’ll have that responsibility of having to do that”.

Lack of time to care for children

Despite the recent policy focus on flexible working for parents, single parents felt that employers did not go far enough to enable them to have valuable time to care for their children:

“I walked out of my job because I could never get back for my daughter in time, it was a case of getting back for half seven.”

“In my last job I had to beg to get out to see my daughter’s school things, I was not allowed to go to her Thanksgiving meeting, even though I could have just slipped out and been back in 20 minutes to an hour. It wasn’t very nice so I left there. I get quite annoyed for having to ask to spend time with my daughter.”

“Work places need to be a more friendly environment and realise that parents really need time off to attend school plays, concerts etc and this is important for children, they need that investment from their parents and society should respect that. They need to realise that children and child minders get sick and that working that day could be a major issue for lone parents because they don’t have the other parent to provide childcare.”

It was also stated that flexible working patterns did not enable single parents to cope with unforeseen childcare needs such as when a child was sick or when childcare arrangements broke down. Half terms and holidays also provided single parents with frequent childcare problems:

“My 3½ year old was poorly so I had the day off, well I had the night off work to look after her, and when I did go back they had me into the office. They gave me a warning about not going into to work. Even though I’d phoned them up and said that I couldn’t get in they still gave me a warning.”

“I was allowed unpaid parental leave but I needed to plan it well in advance. How can you plan a child being ill well in advance it’s impossible?”

Single parents were keen to stress that these emergencies don’t disappear when the child is older; other issues arise, such as truancy, and sometimes school exclusion:

“I’ve got a lad, and you know if I’d have been in employment I’d have been sacked within the first two weeks. I had to go to school every single day; they excluded him for not one day, for four days, you know...? So it’s behaviour things and it’s not because I don’t care and I let my kid do anything, it’s because he’s got ADHD and they didn’t realise it.”

“I’ve got older children, and my youngest boy is 15 and my eldest one is 20, and I’ve found it much more difficult when they get to secondary school because secondary school doesn’t discipline them the same as when they’re smaller and when they get there they realise they can get away with lots of things. And it’s a lot harder to actually keep them in line when you get them in secondary school and that’s when they can go off the rails. When they’re older it’s a lot more difficult on your stress levels.”

Single parents found managing full-time hours as well as the care of their children exhausting and stressful. Many of the participants often felt guilty for not being there enough and for not having the space and energy to give quality time to their children. Single parents felt that much of the unpaid work that they did single-handedly on a daily basis, in addition to their job, went unnoticed and was certainly undervalued. They argue that some of that work could be taken up by services, but some of it was bound in the intimate parent-child relationship, and therefore (single) parents should be given paid time off so they can provide this. The following table shows the unpaid care work that the single parents did single-handedly on a regular basis. Each activity has been classified by the parents according to whether the work could be taken up by a service or whether parents should be given paid time off to do it themselves.

The unpaid work that single parents do

Unpaid work	Could be provided by a service	Paid time off should be provided
Childcare	✓	✓
Sick care	✓ For example: medical and hospital care	✓
Chaperone, organising events/activities		✓
School Run	✓	
School/extra curricula activities, helping with home work, parents’ evenings, dealing with exclusion/behavioural problems	✓ For example: extra tuition	✓
Emotional support, for example, dealing with absent parent and contact issues	✓ For example: counselling services	✓

Managing household finances	✓ For example: advice services	
Cooking		
Shopping- Cleaning		
DIY-house maintenance	✓	

Summary and policy solutions

The current flexible labour market is characterised by strong inequalities for low-skilled people and women with caring responsibilities (many of whom are single mothers), who are concentrated in low paid jobs with high staff turnover and atypical hours (Hirsh, 2006). This section reports the key features that participants strongly believe would make it more likely for single parents to stay in employment, thus counteracting their increased likelihood of cycling back onto welfare (Evans, 2004).

Single parents identified security (in terms of income, job, and working hours) as key to enabling them to remain in employment. For those who single-handedly juggled caring and breadwinning, frequent redundancy and change in hours were very risky and impossible to manage. This experience was most common amongst the low skilled participants. Single parents identified the following key **policy solution**:

- The idea that *any job is better than no job* should be abandoned and instead single parents should be supported to develop their qualifications so that they can access more secure jobs.

Recent qualitative research on single parents who have just moved into work (Millar 2006) corroborates the importance that the participants attached to income security. For many single parents who work this is very difficult to achieve as employment often results in a new set of unexpected costs. Tax credit overpayment claw backs were common and the CSA was reported as ineffective for the majority of single parents. Some of the participants ended up in debt as a result of moving into paid work. Crucially, single parents also lose the advice and support of a Lone Parent Advisor (LPA) once in work. Single parents identified the following **policy solutions** to address these issues:

- Extend the NDLP+ nationally and guarantee the £40 a week in-work credit for 12 months. Access for all single parents to the emergency fund and provision of in-work mentoring support from either a single parent who has been through the same issue or an LPA.
- Simplification of tax credit applications and notice of awards process. Overpayment should not be automatically clawed back, and only then after it has been established that it is not due to an official error.
- Ensure consistent understanding of tax credit system throughout Inland Revenue, LPAs and single parents.
- Better-off calculations should be much improved at the point at which single parents have been offered a job. The calculations should include housing and transport costs, and loss of passported benefits including school meals and NHS charges. This process should be performed by an independent body to ensure more accuracy.

Single parents felt strongly that they should be better-off once in employment, however, many of them were not. Housing and transport costs were a major

barrier to becoming more affluent once in employment. Single parents therefore **proposed the following policy solution:**

- A less steep tapering of housing and council tax benefit and travel subsidies for the first year in work.

Likewise the marketisation of childcare meant that paying the 20% childcare costs remained very difficult for single parents. Single parents proposed:

- Full childcare costs should be reimbursed.
- Passported benefits should continue to be paid and based on a sliding income scale.
- Low waged parents should be entitled to free school meals.

Advancement is often key to accessing a good wage, and in addition the participants argued that it was important for job satisfaction, self-confidence and self-esteem. Low skilled parents seldom came across these opportunities, whilst those who were established in middle level/professional jobs could not meet the expectation of advancement as they were unable to commit to inflexible and time consuming training opportunities. Single parents offered the following policy solutions:

- Improved employer practice in committing to equal opportunities for single parents and offering opportunities to train during working hours as well as paid time off for study (as already offered by some public sector employers).
- Funds should be made available to employed single parents to take up Open University courses.
- Employers and learning providers should understand single parents' need for flexible training.
- The WTC threshold should be increased as its low level can act as a disincentive to moving into better paid jobs. The increase in the threshold identified in the 2007 budget was very welcome in this respect.

Last but not least taking up opportunities for advancement is severely curtailed by the unavailability of affordable good quality childcare during atypical hours, such as weekends and evenings. Given the expansion of employment during these hours, and increasing demand for longer working hours, this is also essential in order for low-skilled single parents to get and stay in employment. The following **policy solutions** were proposed in this respect:

- Expansion of home-based childcare services in deprived communities. (such as the childcare@home service in Scotland). The advantages of this model in comparison to the home-based approval scheme for individual childminders, is that it is affordable to those on a low-income and is more responsive to emergencies and flexible needs for childcare.
- Parents who pay for informal childcare provided by unregistered relatives/friends should be eligible for the childcare element of Working

Tax Credits. This would make it more sustainable, reliable and frequent. The participants were keen to stress that older children end up paying for the knock on effects of lack of atypical childcare (i.e. by taking on responsibility for younger children themselves).

- Expansion of employer-based childcare by providing tax incentives for large companies. This would address the issue of increasing expectations to work long hours. However, this solution was not seen as a priority because many saw long working hours as problematic for single parents.
- Policy should demonstrate a commitment to encouraging a shorter working week.
- Flexible working should be a right and should be extended to parents of all children, including those over 11, providing that various options are offered (some options such as job share or compressed hours do not work as well for single parent families).
- Jobs should guarantee sufficient paid time off to care.
- Grants to small and medium sized enterprises should be available to enable single parents to cover the extra costs of work-life balance.

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APPENDIX 1: POPP REGIONAL PARTNERS

Swansea Multicultural Women's Resource and Training Centre

Swansea Women's Centre aims to empower all women to develop their potential and enable them to make choices about their own lives. The Centre provides social events, training, resources and short-term support to women living in Swansea and the surrounding areas. It works in a woman-centred, accessible way and is completely committed to involving all women in the Centre's decision-making at all levels. In particular, the Centre encourages the involvement of women who belong to groups who have traditionally been discriminated against, such as BME women; women with mental and physical health problems; lesbian women and women on a low income.

Scoop Aid, Sheffield

Scoop Aid is an advice and support centre for lone parents and their families. It aims to provide a holistic information, advice and support service to lone parents and their families in Sheffield and its environs and promote the needs and views of lone parents both at local and national levels.

Scoop Aid delivers benefit advice; general advice; CSA advice; one to one support; training; home visiting; teenage mums' support and advocacy.

Single Parent Action Network (SPAN) Study Centre

SPAN is a uniquely diverse organisation supporting single parents to empower themselves throughout the UK. SPAN aims to give a voice to one-parent families living in poverty and isolation and supports the setting up and development of self-help groups. SPAN develops partnerships with organisations and agencies to improve policies for one-parent families.

SPAN Study Centre, based in Bristol, provides training and courses, a free on-site crèche and a drop-in service.

Women Acting in Today's Society (WAITS)

WAITS is concerned with local women's fuller involvement in the public life of their communities, from education to employment, personal to social and leadership decision-making. It supports women to address issues such as welfare benefits, employment and education, domestic violence, isolation, health, crime and fear of crime and many more. WAITS membership reflects the diverse communities of Birmingham, Sandwell and other parts of the Midlands.

Four Plus One

Four Plus One is a lone parent mixed gender group in Viewpark, North Lanarkshire. The group formerly met weekly and now maintains an informal network to support the parents and children who participated. They were members of SPAN and took part in AGMs and Distance Learning Courses, and ran their own projects on Stress Management, Parenting and Self-Help Groups. All the adults and many of the children have gone on to full-time training, education or employment.

One Plus

One Plus was the largest lone parent organisation in Europe employing over 650 staff and running a wide range of training, education and employment programmes throughout the West of Scotland including child and domiciliary care provision, mentoring, sustainable employment, personal social development and much more. After more than 20 years of activity and growth, the organisation went into full insolvency on 23 January 2007. Four Plus One then became the Scottish Regional Partner for the remainder of the POPP project.

APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPATORY ONE PARENT PROOFING PROJECT STRUCTURE

NATIONAL WORKING GROUP

Participants: SPAN Management Team, single parent service users, campaigners/representatives from single parent organisations, civil servants, policy researchers, academics.

Activities: attendance at capacity building seminars, provision of advice and feedback on production of Findings and Toolkit documents, promotion of POPP and influencing change.



PROJECT MANAGEMENT TEAM

At Single Parent Action Network (SPAN) Headquarters

Participants: SPAN Director, SPAN Policy and Research Officer, SPAN Policy PR Worker

Activities: development, delivery and management of POPP project



REGIONAL PARTNERS

Participants:

1 organisational representative and 1 or 2 Shadow service users from each of the following regions:

West Midlands: Women Acting in Today's Society (WAITS), Birmingham

Yorkshire and Humberside: Scoop Aid, Sheffield

West Scotland: One Plus and 4+1, Glasgow

Wales: Multicultural Women's Resource and Training Centre, Swansea

South West: Single Parent Action Network Study Centre, Bristol

Activities: attend training workshops, deliver regional workshops, participate in NWG seminars and meetings, disseminate POPP Findings and Toolkit, promote POPP and influence change at a regional and national level.

APPENDIX 3: OUTLINE OF POPP WORKSHOPS

Workshop 1: Mapping Lone Parents' Experiences and Challenges

Series of participative activities designed to encourage single parents to share their own knowledge and experience about what it is like to be a single parent, celebrating the positive aspects and identifying the issues which make it difficult for single parents to move forward. The workshop also provided the opportunity for parents to identify what skills and information they would like to develop in the subsequent policy training workshop.

Workshop 2: Policy Training

This workshop aimed to provide single parents with:

- factual knowledge about lone parents;
- information on current and forthcoming policies relevant to single parents, including training programmes, rights and support for lone parents in work, childcare and tax credits;
- an opportunity to explore public views and beliefs about lone parents and how these impact on policies.

Workshop 3: One Parent Proofing Solutions

Building on the previous two workshops, the final workshop aimed to define solutions for change. Using a series of participatory activities and discussion groups, parents were asked to consider how policies and practices could be changed to ensure that they were meeting the needs and priorities of single parents, both in terms of moving forward and sustaining employment.

APPENDIX 4: PROFILE OF SINGLE PARENTS ATTENDING ‘MAPPING POSITIVE EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES OF LONE PARENTHOOD’ AND ‘ONE PARENT PROOFING’ WORKSHOPS

	Age					Employment status			Benefit status (IS = Income Support)			Occupational status	
	Under 20	20-24	25-34	35-44	45+	Employed	Actively looking for work	Unemployed	IS <1 year	IS 1-2 years	IS > 2 years	Elementary/low skilled	Medium skilled
Year 1: Mapping Positive Experiences and Challenges of Lone Parenthood Total: 43 (all women) BME: 22 Refugee/asylum seekers: 5	2	1	17	12	10	14	10	19	8	4	17	5	9
Year 2: One Parent Proofing Solutions Total: 37 (all women) BME: 12 Refugee/asylum seekers: 3	1	2	8	18	8	11	7	19	3	8	13	7	4

APPENDIX 5: BECOMING A POPP SHADOW LEAFLET



What you need to do next

If you have decided that you would like to commit to being a POPP Shadow please confirm with your regional representative that you are interested in getting involved.

Your regional representative will provide you with a 'Shadow Profile' form which they will support you in filling in. It is important that you complete this form so that we know who is getting involved in the POPP work — all the information that you provide will remain confidential to the POPP project.

If you need any more information about getting involved please feel free to get in touch (see contact details below).



Polly, Susy and Sorrel can be contacted on:

0117 951 4231

Or you can ask your regional representative to contact us on your behalf.

We look forward to working with you in the next stage of POPP!

Becoming a POPP Shadow



SPAN
Single Parent Action Network

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SPAN
Single Parent Action Network



Update on Participatory One Parent Proofing (POPP)

Thank you for all your involvement so far. All the information gathered from the 68 single parents who attended the previous 2 workshops in January and March, is in the process of being written up into 2 publications:

1. **The POPP Findings:** a report on the realities on being a single parent, what you think you need to move forward and what policy makers need to do to help single parents stay in employment
2. **The POPP Policy Solutions Toolkit:** a toolkit to help policy makers and service providers recognise the needs of single parents so that they adapt their policy/service to meet those needs.



What next?

The next step is to make sure that POPP makes a change!

We want single parents to get involved in making sure that the POPP message makes a change to the policies and services which affect single parent's experience of moving forward and staying in employment.

This final phase of POPP will run from July 2007 to September 2008.

What is a POPP Shadow?

There will be a maximum of 10 Shadows (2 from each of the 5 cities previously involved: Sheffield, Birmingham, Bristol, Glasgow and Swansea) who will be invited to take part in the next phase of POPP. A Shadow is a single parent who is trained and supported to represent the views of single parents (as gathered from previous POPP workshops) and influence local and national policies about enabling single parents to move into sustainable employment. Shadows will do this by presenting the messages from the POPP Policy Solutions Toolkit and POPP Findings.

What will being a POPP Shadow involve?

You will *have to attend*:

- 3 training courses which will run over a weekend in Bristol in July, September and January
- The launch of the POPP Toolkit in London on 15th November.

We understand that your situation may change over time, please let us know if you are unable to attend any of these dates

(Accommodation, food and all travel costs will be provided. Childcare cannot be provided on site for the training, however, reasonable childcare expenses will be paid in line with SPAN policy)

Once you have attended the training workshops you will be invited to deliver the key POPP messages to various policy makers and practitioners both in your local area and nationally. This could involve: speaking to your local MP at his surgery, attending local government meetings, delivering presentations at relevant conferences and national single parent forums, speaking to local/national media. Your involvement will, of course depend on when you are available and any other responsibilities you may have.

Why become a POPP Shadow?

- An opportunity to represent the views of single parents from across the UK and influence the people, face to face, who make and deliver the policies which affect your life.
- An opportunity to try and improve policies which affect single parent's experience of trying to move forward into sustainable employment.
- An opportunity to learn more about how policy is made and changed in your local area and nationally.
- An opportunity to learn how to deliver messages to the media and policy makers so that the voice of single parents can make a difference.
- An opportunity to work alongside people from across the UK who are all passionate about improving the lives of single parents.
- An opportunity to develop your portfolio. All your involvement will be developed into a record of achievement, which will be awarded to you at the end of the project.

Who else is involved?
You will be supported throughout the project by:

- Your regional representative:
- SPAN Policy and Research Team:
Polly Wright / Susy Giullari and Sorrel Parsons



SPAN

Participatory
One Parent
Proofing



Participatory One Parent Proofing: Findings Single Parent Action Network

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