



Under Pressure?

Single Parents in the UK

Martina Klett-Davies
on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

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Foreword

In 2015, there were two million single parent families with dependent children in the UK. Among EU member states, the UK has one of the highest rates of single parenthood. Since 1996, the number of lone parent families has increased by 21.5 percent. Today, a quarter of all families in the UK with dependent children are headed by one parent. Some three million children live in these families.

The present study, undertaken by Dr Martina Klett-Davies, sociologist and guest lecturer at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences, shows the everyday reality of lone parents and their children in the UK. The study presents empirical data on lone parent families and analyses the relevant societal and legal conditions, such as family law, social policies, social reforms, childcare and welfare-state services. In addition, it summarises findings on lone parents' health issues and the wellbeing of children after separation. We thank Martina Klett-Davies for giving us the opportunity to gain such deep insight into the situation of single parents and their children in the UK.

But why is a German think tank interested in conditions affecting lone parents in the UK? Two years ago, the Bertelsmann Stiftung carried out a similar study on single parent families in Germany which showed that quite a number of these families face enormous challenges. Even though the UK's welfare system is different from Germany's, a comparison of the two can be helpful for discovering mutual developments and identifying specific problems. Furthermore, it provides each country with the opportunity to learn from the other.

In many cases, being a single parent means caring for children, working outside the home and managing the household - all on one's own. Many single parents in the UK and Germany - some 90 percent of whom are female - cope well with these responsibilities. But in both countries the risk of living in income poverty for children in single parent families is high: Even though socio-political reforms in the UK have managed to decrease child poverty and teenage pregnancies and the employment rate for single mothers has risen in both countries in recent years. In the UK as well as in Germany, single parents are almost five times more likely to receive welfare benefits than are couples with children. The enforcement of child maintenance arrangements has not been very successful in either country. As a result, only one child in two in a lone parent family receives child maintenance payments on a regular basis. Financial problems are therefore an everyday challenge for many single parent families, and too many children grow up in poverty.



As these figures show, the situation of single parents and their children requires urgent attention. Action is needed in the UK and in Germany to implement reforms that provide single parent families with adequate support. In her study, Martina Klett-Davies suggests numerous reform options that can improve the situation of single parents and their children in the UK. For Germany lessons from the UK include a system of child tax credits, working tax credits and the exclusion of maintenance payments when welfare benefits for children are calculated.

Moreover, it would be helpful if policymakers in both countries started thinking from the children's point of view. Given the increasing diversity of families in the UK and Germany, policy responses and economic and welfare systems must focus more on the needs and wellbeing of children. This is one of the issues the Bertelsmann Stiftung will be addressing in the coming years as part of its project "Families and Education: Creating Child-Centered Policies".



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jörg Dräger".

Dr. Jörg Dräger,
Member of the
Bertelsmann Stiftung Executive Board



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "A. Stein".

Anette Stein,
Program Director
Effective Investments in Education

1. Introduction – Single parents in the UK

The UK¹ has one of the highest if not the highest prevalence of single parent families in the EU (Bradshaw 2011). The purpose of this study is to map the situation of lone parents in the UK, allowing comparisons to be made with Germany as well as with other countries. Examining single parents in other countries allows us not only a new perspective on the issues but, by comparison, also a better understanding of the influences on the situation of single parents in each country, and how social policies, the law and government agendas affect the situation of single parents in the UK and elsewhere.

The UK has been identified as a liberal welfare state in contrast to Germany which has been described as a conservative welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990). Since the mid-1990s however, Germany has shifted from the conservative welfare state model towards a more liberal welfare state model (Giesselmann 2015). The Third Way debate in the UK has had considerable influence on this social reorientation in Germany with respect to welfare reform and deregulation of the labour market (Seeleib-Kaiser & Fleckenstein 2007). This study analyses the situation of single parents within the liberal welfare state in Britain from a multi-dimensional perspective, with the aim of providing a comprehensive account of their situation.

The phrase “single parents” is used interchangeably with “lone parents” as both are being widely used in the UK. Support organisations tend to prefer “single parents” while governmental organisations use the term “lone parents”, probably to avoid confusion with the term “single” that could also denote unmarried. In some cases, the term lone or single mother is used when the sources explicitly refer to female lone parents.

The report begins with an overview of single parents’ prevalence over time and their typical demographic characteristics as found in the UK, their route into single parenthood as well as regional differences. Chapter 2 also investigates single parents’ labour market participation and their experience in paid employment. It considers child poverty rates, the particular issues that teenage parenthood brings and concerns associated with poverty such as mental health and debt. Single parents’ trends and characteristics it is argued interrelate with their treatment by the British welfare state.

Chapter 3 explores the legal aspects of being a single parent after a separation such as spousal maintenance and the trend towards shared parenting. The chapter then considers how successive governments influenced child maintenance policies through institutions such as the Child Support Agency (CSA) and the Child Maintenance Service Agency. It also highlights the impact of cuts to legal aid on court procedures and the take up of mediation and discusses the research evidence on the effect of divorce on the wellbeing of children.

¹ The UK is comprised of four countries: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The term ‘Great Britain’ refers to England, Scotland, and Wales, excluding Northern Ireland.



The fourth chapter is concerned with single parents' positioning within the British welfare state and it traces how successive governments have shaped the welfare state according to their political complexion. The New Labour Government (1997-2010) and the Coalition Government (2010-2015) have successively altered the situation of single parents with social policies, cash transfers and tax credits, and this chapter elaborates on how welfare to work programmes and policies such as the New Deal for Lone Parents and Working Tax Credit, Lone Parent Obligations and Universal Credit have transformed single parents from "citizen-carers" to "citizen-workers". Chapter 4 also argues that the Coalition Government (2010-2015) has introduced other more punitive measures that also fit the discourse of cost-cutting and budget reduction such as the Bedroom tax and the Benefit cap that has made tenants feel insecure about their homes. The Conservative Government (2015-) is set to continue along this path.

Chapter 5 analyses the provision of childcare and the demand led childcare system in the UK that is dominated by the private sector. The New Labour Government (1997-2010) made considerable investments into expanding access to early education and childcare with the aim of reducing child poverty and increasing social capital. There are the early years policies, the Sure Start programmes, the Childcare Acts and universal entitlements to part-time free early education. Local authorities in England and Wales are now obliged to ensure sufficient childcare and the free childcare take-up rate for three- and four-year-olds is near universal. The Coalition Government (2010-2015) has moved childcare towards more targeted provision, such as the free childcare provision for disadvantaged two-year-olds. The Conservative Government (2015-) plans to increase the hours of free entitlement but only for working parents. Still, childcare in the UK is expensive and this chapter describes the average costs of specific childcare providers in more detail and, by using case studies, the reader can get an idea of the proportion that single parents have to allow for its cost.

Chapter 5 also investigates the history of Parenting Programmes under the successive governments and considers the impact that single parent's social networks have on their wellbeing before moving on to the formal support and advice available to single parents from governmental and nongovernmental organisations.

Chapter 6 evaluates the evidence and issues raised in this report. It reconsiders the situation of single parents in the UK and their positioning in the British welfare state, within English Law and under successive governments. Gaps in the provision are identified and suggestions for social policies and reform options are made, with a particular focus on social inequality, contact and maintenance arrangements, childcare, education and training and employment support.

2. Trends, characteristics, employment, health and poverty

This chapter gives an overview of single parents' prevalence over time and their typical demographic characteristics as well as their route into single parenthood and regional differences. It also investigates single parents' labour market participation and their experience in paid employment and considers the particular issues that teenage parenthood brings, child poverty and concerns associated with it, such as mental health and debt.

2.1 Trends in single parenthood

The total number of families in the UK has increased from 17.1 million in 2003 to 18.7 million in 2015 according to Labour Force Survey (LFS) data (ONS 2015a). This is a rise of 9.4 percent, close to half the 16.3 percent growth of the number of lone parents: in 2003 there were 2.6 million lone parents in the UK, 3.0 million in 2015. This figure is dwarfed by the most common type of family, the 7.8 million married (or civil partner) couple families whose children are now no longer dependent, or those who have never had children. This figure is close to the number of families with dependent children (ONS 2015a). A family is statistically defined as a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with or without children, or a lone parent with at least one child. Children may be dependent or non-dependent.²

In comparison with the rest of Europe, current fertility in England and Wales is relatively high at 1.93 in 2011 (ONS 2013a). The fertility rate in Germany in 2012 was 1.38. However, a larger proportion of women remain childless by the end of their childbearing years in the UK (18.9%) (Freijka 2008).

In 2015, there were 7.9 million families with dependent children of which 2 million (25%) were lone parents with dependent children.³ This percentage is nearly unchanged from eleven years earlier, in 2003, when the figure for lone parents with dependent children was 1.8 million and 7.37 million for all families with dependent children (24.5%) (ONS 2015a).⁴

In 2014, 13.3 million dependent children lived in all families in the UK of which nearly two thirds lived in married couple families (63%) and three million children lived in a single parent family (23%); the same as in 2003. Even fewer dependent children live in opposite sex cohabiting couple families (14%) (figure 1). However, this family type has increased greatly.

² Dependent children are those living with their parent/s and either aged under 16, or aged 16 to 18 in full-time education. This excludes children aged 16 to 18 who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household (ONS 2013).

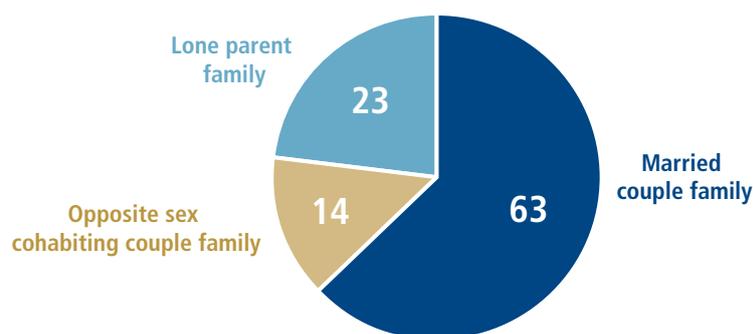
³ Exact number of all families with dependent children is 7,916,000 and for lone parents with dependent children is 1,981,000 (ONS 2015).

⁴ The exact figure is 1,804,000 for lone parents with dependent children and 7,370,000 for all families with dependent children (ONS 2015).



Figure 1: Number of dependent children in families by family type in percent, 2014⁵

in percent



Source: ONS 2015.

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The increased number of all families can only partly be explained by the growth of lone parents with dependent children and not at all by married families with dependent children. Their number is at 4.7 million in 2015 unchanged from 2003 (ONS 2015a).⁶ The growth of a third family type can mainly explain the growth in the number of families with dependent children. The number of opposite sex cohabiting couples with dependent children has increased greatly since 2003, up from 0.8 million to 1.25 million in 2015, an increase of 56 percent.⁷

Civil partnership couples with dependent children have been categorised from 2007 and their number, albeit small, has increased most, from 4 thousand to 12 thousand in 2014, an increase of 200 percent. Likewise, the number of same sex cohabiting couples with dependent children has increased by 200 percent from 3 thousand in 2005 to 9 thousand in 2014 (ONS 2015).

From 1996 to 2014, the number of single parent families increased by nearly twice as much as the number of all families (23% and 12% respectively) (ONS 2015).⁸ The gap between the percentage increases becomes even larger when only the increase of single parent families and all families with dependent children are considered (21.5% and 7% respectively) (figure 2).

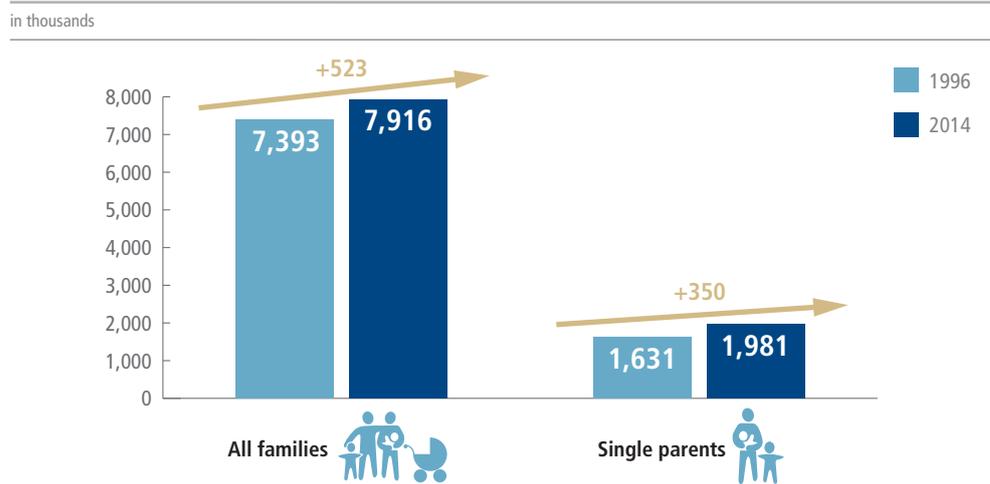
⁵ The number of dependent children is calculated from the information available of the number of dependent children in families by family type with one, two or three children (ONS 2015). In other words, fourth and subsequent children are not counted.

⁶ The 2011 Census has different data, but on households. Between 2001 and 2011 the number of married or civil partnered one-family households declined by 2 percent; cohabiting family households increased by 28 percent; lone parent family households increased by 21 percent (ONS 2013b).

⁷ The exact figures are 819,000 in 2003 and 1,251,000 in 2015 (ONS 2015).

⁸ 1996 is the earliest year for which these data are available on a consistent basis (ONS 2013).

Figure 2: Trend of the number in thousands of all families and single parent families with dependent children from 1996 to 2014

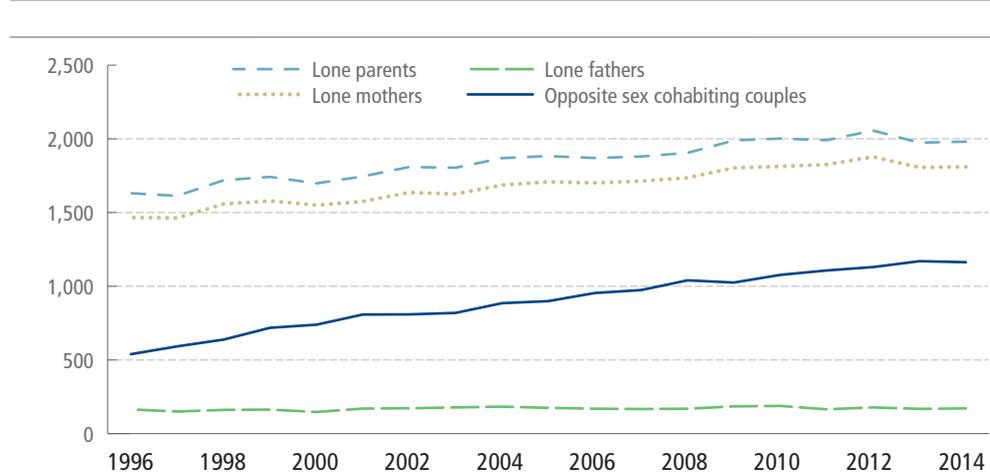


Source: ONS 2015.

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The rate of increase of single parents with dependent children has not been uniform though. The prevalence of single parents with dependent children increased by 11 percentage points in the seven years between 1996 and 2003 and again by 11 percentage points in the seven years between 2003 to 2010 (figure 3).

Figure 3: Trend in the number of single mother families, single father families and opposite sex cohabiting parents with dependent children



Source: ONS 2015.

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It has been predicted that the recession contributes to a rise in break-ups because of the increased financial strain and employment insecurities (Vaitilingham 2011). This is not supported by data concerning the prevalence of single parents (figure 3). The rate of increase of single parents with dependent children has been severely arrested since 2009; the year after the UK entered a recession. In the five years from 2009 to 2014 the number of lone parents with dependent children has slightly declined by 0.4 percentage points.

An alternative theory suggests that partnerships are less likely to dissolve during more economically difficult periods; in light of economic insecurities and low house price values there may be greater levels of family cohesion. However, divorces and separations may just be postponed until such a time as couples feel they can afford to separate (Wilcox 2011).

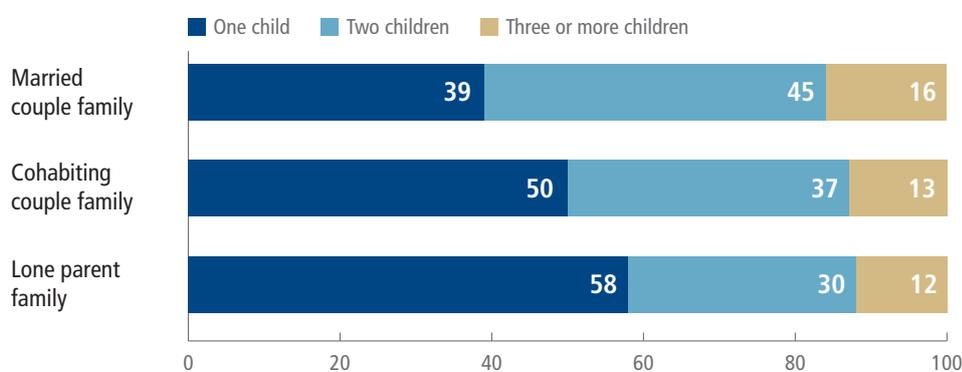
Women in the UK, as in many other countries, are more likely to take the main caring responsibilities when relationships break down. The overwhelming majority of single parents are female (91%) and the proportion of single fathers with dependent children has remained more or less constant at around nine percent since 1996 (figure 3).

2.2 Single mothers' characteristics

Single parents' families tend to be smaller than other family types (figure 4). While 58 percent of lone parents with dependent children have only one child, only 39 percent of married couples have one child. Conversely, only 12 percent of single parents have three or more children compared to 16 percent of married couples. There is a similar trend with respect to two children (30% and 45% respectively) (ONS 2015). These patterns are likely to reflect the timing of separations as well as marital status.

Figure 4: Families with dependent children by family type and number of dependent children, UK, 2014⁹

in percent



Source: ONS 2015.

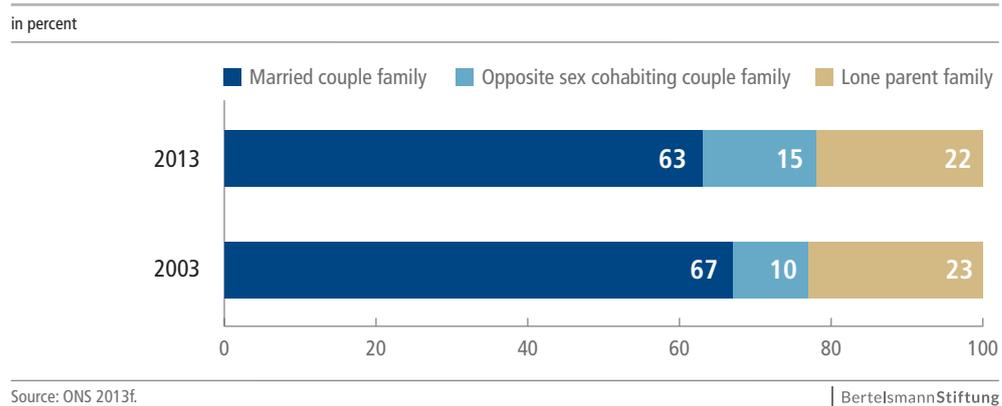
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⁹ Cohabiting families are opposite sex cohabiting families (ONS data).

There is also a trend for lone parent families to become smaller yet, and possibly older, as dependent children attain independence and the proportion of single parent families with non-dependent children increases. In 2004, lone parent families with only non-dependent children accounted for 26 percent of all lone parent families. By 2014 the proportion had increased to 30 percent (ONS 2015).

The number of dependent children in single parent families has reduced slightly from 3.03 million in 2003 to 2.97 million in 2013. In 2013, they made up 22 percent of all dependent children in all families with dependent children, down from 23 percent in 2003. The proportion of dependent children living in cohabiting couple families has increased by 5 percent during these 10 years (from 10% to 15%) (figure 5).

Figure 5: Percentage of dependent children by family type, 2003 and 2013



The increase in cohabitation has also had an influence on changes in the nature of single parent families since 2001. Marriage rates have fallen and cohabitation increased, and the proportion of lone parents who have never been married has also increased, from below 40 percent in the mid-1990s to 54 percent in 2012 (Tinsley 2014). A single mother would be characterised as a never married mother even if her situation was due to a cohabitation break up. Therefore, having never been married reveals a limited amount about the different routes into lone parenthood, particularly given the rise of cohabitation – families whose relationships are known to be less stable than married couples (Wilson & Stuchbury 2010).¹⁰ As a result, an increasing number of lone parent families are caused by the dissolution of cohabiting couple families and the majority of never married lone mothers have previously been in a cohabiting partnership (Barrington 2014).

¹⁰ In 2001, 25 percent of live births in England and Wales were to cohabiting women, which increased to 31 percent by 2012 (ONS 2012b).



Barrington (ibid.) also finds that fewer partnerships are breaking down and this might explain the slowdown in the growth of lone parenthood in Britain.

It is more informative to examine the origin of lone parent households, which indicates that the greatest proportion, 57 percent, derive from couple breakdown, 15 percent had their children after divorce, separation or widowhood, with only 28 percent of single parent households being instances of the parent never having married or cohabited. Of the 57 percent where the couple has separated, 27 percent are due to marital separations but before or instead of a legal divorce, six percent due to divorce and 22 percent due to cohabitation separation and two percent because of entry into widowhood (Tinsley 2014).

There are differences between male and female lone parents with dependent children; seven percent of male lone parents with dependent children are widowed, more than double the percentage of female lone parents. Single fathers are also less likely to have never been married than single mothers (35% and 52% respectively, ONS 2012a). Single fathers also tend to live with older children. While 56 percent of single fathers have non-dependent children only, only 31 percent of single mothers have only non-dependent children in 2014 (ONS 2015).

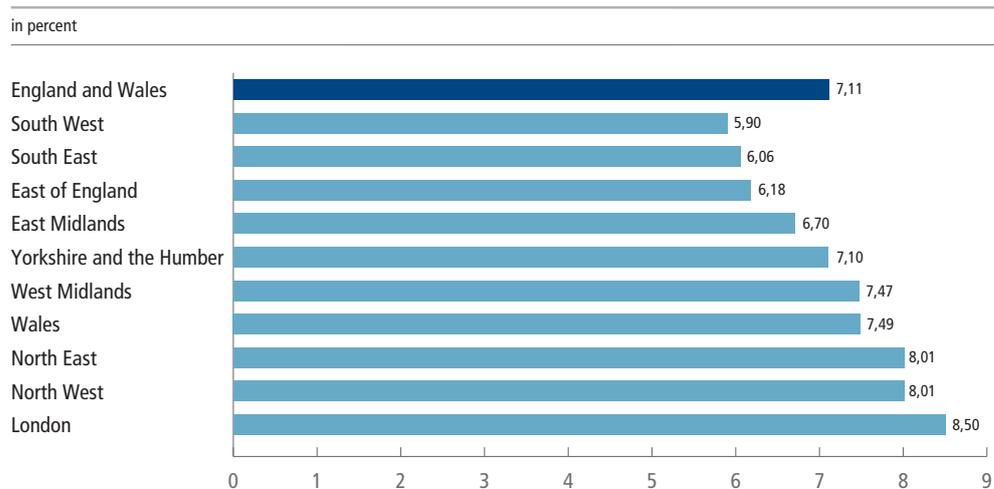
There are major differences within single mother families. Never married lone mothers and mothers from cohabiting relationships tend to have had their children significantly younger, at around 20 years of age. In contrast, mothers who are married or who have been previously married have their children around a decade later, at 30 years old (2012 LFS data in Tinsley 2014). The age difference tends to be connected to different education levels that are perceived as predictors of disadvantage as the next sections will show.

No recent data is available that shows the average number of children in the different types of lone parent families but in 1996, the General Household Survey could show that the type of lone parent family inevitably makes a difference to the number of children in that family. Separated lone mother families tend to have more children (2.1) than couple families (1.8), divorced lone mothers (1.7) and single lone mothers (1.5), probably reflecting the age of the mothers (Finch 2003).

Reflecting the entry into lone parenthood, 45 percent of lone parents were aged 40 or over, and the average age of lone parents with dependent children in the UK in 2011 was 38.1 years, a slight increase of 2.3 years since 2001 as women generally have tended to postpone their childbearing in recent years (ONS 2012a).

The regional distribution of single parents indicates London is distinct from the rest of England and Wales (figure 6). The 2011 Census found that London has the highest proportion of lone parent households with dependent children. This also corresponds to the younger age structure of the population in London in common with other urban areas. A higher number of single parent households with dependent children is also found in urban areas such as Bristol, Birmingham, Nottingham/Derby, Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Tyneside/Wearside and Teesside as well as South East Wales and North Kent. Rural areas of England and Wales have the lowest levels of single parent households; partly because these areas have a higher proportion of older people, which lowers the relative proportion of younger people with dependent children (ONS 2013b). Urban areas are more attractive to lone parents because they experience fewer prejudices there and a better infrastructure for them such as other lone parents and support networks (Klett-Davies 2007).

Figure 6: Percentages of all households consisting of lone parents with dependent children; English regions and Wales, Census 2011



Source: ONS 2013b.

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Education, duration and ethnicity

A disproportionate number of lone parents have more disadvantaged backgrounds and, with regards to education, far fewer lone parents hold university degrees than the rate for the population as a whole (14% compared to 25%). Lone parents are also 13 percentage points more likely than the population as a whole to have no qualifications above GCSE level, a situation exacerbated for lone teenage mothers.¹¹ However, the number of single parents with no qualifications has shown

¹¹ The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is a compulsory school-leavers examination that is commonly taken at the age of 16. A GCSE is awarded in a specified subject and pupils generally take a number of subjects. They are generally required of pupils wishing to pursue A Level courses, the BTEC Level 3 and International Baccalaureate.



a decrease, and the proportion of lone parents with at least A-Level qualifications has increased at a greater rate than for the rest of the population (2008-2012 LFS data in Tinsley 2014).¹²

The average duration of lone parenthood in the UK is five years. The median duration of lone motherhood for single never married women is between five and six years, in contrast to a median duration of between four and five years for those becoming a lone mother through the separation of a previous partnership (Shaw et al. 2008). Other research finds that half of lone parents start a new co-residential partnership within five years and around two-thirds re-partner within ten years. However, lone mothers with younger children are slower to re-partner than childless women (Barrington 2014).

Longitudinal research indicates that demographic and socio-economic characteristics are important predictors of re-partnering among lone mothers. The most important of these are age together with the number of children and employment status. Those with two children remain lone parents for longer than those with only one child. Those who become a lone mother at an older age are significantly less likely to re-partner than those entering lone motherhood at a younger age. Furthermore, those who are unemployed or economically inactive are considerably less likely to re-partner than those in employment, partly because the work place offers opportunities to re-partner (Skew 2009).

The odds of re-partnering are lowest for single never married lone mothers, although not significantly. Interestingly, those single never married lone mothers who receive state benefits are less likely to (re-)partner than those not receiving benefits; possibly these lone mothers are less attractive to a potential new partner (ibid.). Alternatively, these mothers might not want to re-partner, because they do not want to lose their individual entitlements to state benefits. Benefits might be more secure as well as more likely to be long-term than a new partner with his or her possibly insecure paid employment income. Therefore, embracing a Living-Apart-Together relationship instead might be more attractive.

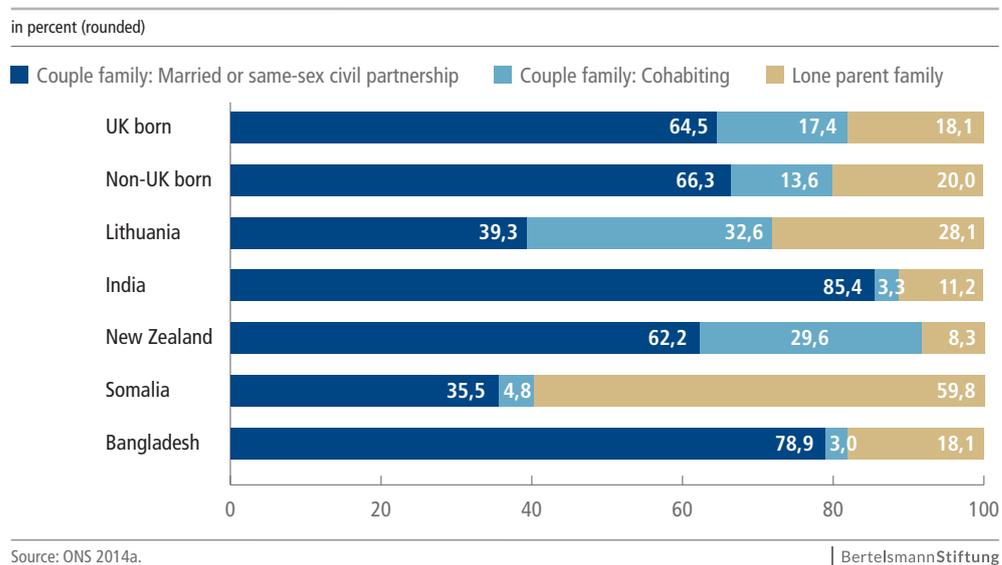
In the UK, the proportion of single parents varies greatly by ethnicity. Asian and Asian British single parents have the lowest proportion of single parents (11%) while Black, African, Caribbean and Black British single parents make up more than half of all families in the same ethnicity category (51%) in comparison to Whites, where single parents make up 22 percent.

The comprehensive 2011 Census data supports this LFS finding and provides more detail (figure 7). The highest proportion of lone parent families with dependent children in England and Wales were born in the African or the Caribbean countries. The highest proportion were lone parents born in Somalia (61%), other Central and Western Africa (56%), Jamaica (55%), Ghana

¹² The General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A-Level) is a school leaving qualification completing secondary or pre-university education, typically at age 18.

(44%) and other Caribbean countries (44%). In contrast, the lowest proportions were for those born in southern Asia (6.9%), India (9.5%), Sri Lanka (11%), Afghanistan (11%) and New Zealand (14%). The varying figures show how the number of lone parent families relates partly to varying attitudes towards marriage and partnership formation in different regions, and also to the arrival profiles and age structures of population from different countries of birth (figure 7) (ONS 2014a).

Figure 7: Family types by partnership status for selected countries of birth of family reference person (FRP); England and Wales, Census 2011¹³



More than half of Somali families in England and Wales were headed by a single parent; Somali lone parents also had the highest proportion of three or more dependent children according to the 2011 Census (47%) while the families including three or more dependent children accounted for seven percent of all families in England and Wales (ONS 2014a). This high proportion may be related to the age structure of the Somali-born UK population, to cultural differences in desired and actual family size as well as to their migration history (ONS 2014a). The Somali lone parents tend to be younger, with 79 percent aged under 45, compared with 58 percent of the population as a whole in 2011. They have arrived relatively recently, prompted by instability associated with the Somali civil war in 1991. Many women and children may have left Somalia without their partner during this period. It is thought that some came as widows or had left their partners behind to

13 A Family Reference Person (FRP) is identified by criteria based on the family make up. In a lone parent family it is taken to be the lone parent. In a couple family, the FRP is chosen from the two people in the couple on the basis of their economic activity or their age if they have the same economic activity (ONS 2014a).



fight (Harris 2004). Between 1985 and 2006, Somalis figured among the top ten largest countries of origin of people seeking asylum in the UK (Dissanayake 2008). The 2011 Census recorded 99,484 Somali-born residents of England (ONS 2014a).

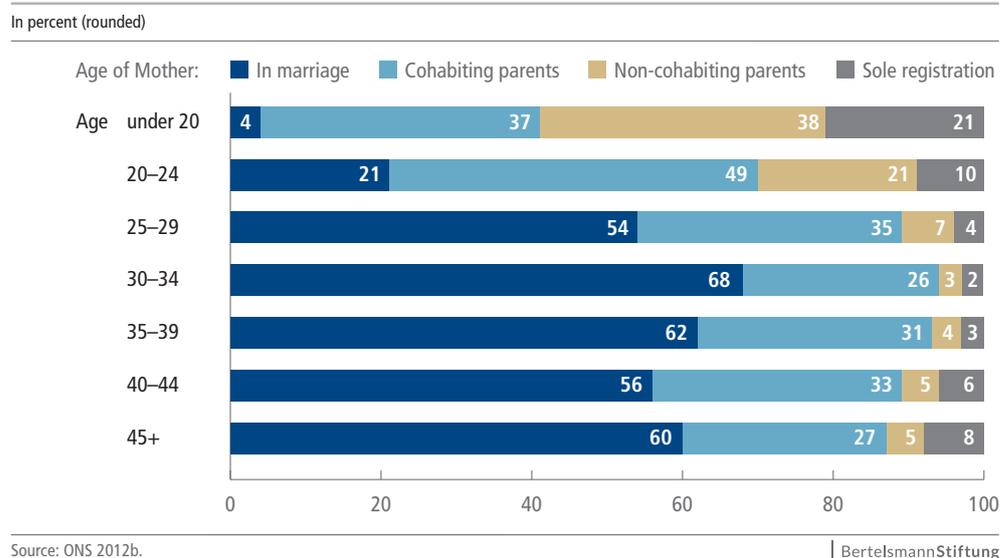
2.3 Teenage mothers

The UK rate of teenage motherhood (aged 15-19) in 2004 was 26.9 per 1,000 women compared with the EU-28 rate of 15.4 births (ONS 2014c). Since, 2004 that UK birth rate has fallen by more than a quarter (26.8%). Yet, the UK still has one of the highest rates of teenage motherhood in the developed world. In 2012, the UK birth rate among women aged 15-19 was 19.7 births per 1,000 women compared with 12.6 births among the 28 European countries. The UK is in fourth position after Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia (ONS 2014c). Considering the high rates of UK teenage pregnancy rates, the British public estimates that teenage pregnancy rates are even higher in the UK, which goes to show how it is perceived to be a problem (The Guardian 2014).

The 2000 UK social policy initiative “Teenage Pregnancy Strategy” contributed to, or was at least associated with the decrease in teenage motherhood. However, the successes tended to be localised. While some areas managed to reduce their under-18 conception rates by up to 45 percent in 10 years; other areas failed to implement the strategy effectively and, as a consequence, their teenage pregnancy rate remained stable – or in some cases increased. Nationwide, there has been a reduction of the conception rates among 15 and 17 year olds indicating increased use of contraceptives or abstinence. The birth rate arising from under-18 conceptions fell by 25 percent, also indicating a corresponding increase in terminations (Teenage Pregnancy Independent Advisory Group 2010).

The Coalition Government (2010-2015) has included the under 18 teenage conception (pregnancy) rate as one of its three sexual health indicators in its Public Health Outcomes Framework (2013-2016) in England, and it is an important measure of progress on child poverty. Hence, there is a continued focus on preventing teenage conceptions as well as improving the social and health impact upon teenage mothers and their children (ONS 2014c).

However, the proportion of lone parents with dependent children who are teenage parents is very small at two percent in 2011, the same percentage as 10 years earlier (ONS 2012b). Not all teenage mothers are single mothers, but the proportion of mothers who register the birth of their child in their sole name or jointly with the father, but give different addresses, is highest for mothers who give birth under the age of 20. The percentages in the registration groups in figure 8 are based on the information supplied at birth registration. More than half of teenage mothers are single mothers as they either registered the birth in their own name only or as a non-cohabiting parent. In fact, of all age groups, teenage mothers are by far most likely to be single mothers.

Figure 8: Number of live births by age of mother and registration type, England and Wales, 2012

Childbearing age is often associated with employment status and educational attainment. Over half (52%) of lone mothers who had their first child as a teenager (16-19) are not in work or looking for work, compared to 19 percent who had their first child in their early thirties (LFS data in Tinsley 2014). Regarding educational attainment: almost a quarter (24%) of lone mothers who had their first child as a teenager have no qualifications, in comparison to 11 percent of single mothers who had their first child in their early thirties (LFS data in Tinsley 2014).

Additionally, only six percent of lone mothers who had their first child as a teenager have higher or degree level qualifications. Of those with no formal qualifications, 26 percent are in work, while 84 percent of lone mothers who have degrees are in work (Tinsley 2014). Educational qualifications are not only important for lone parents' employment prospects, but also impact on children's life chances, as will be discussed below.

Explanations for the high rate of teenage mothers in the UK vary. Duncan (2007) reviewed the research evidence and found that the age at which pregnancy occurs has little effect on social outcomes. Teenage pregnancies are shaped by current and local labour market opportunities, gender roles and attitudes towards family and community. Teenage parenting may be more of an opportunity than a catastrophe, as many teenage mothers describe how motherhood makes them feel stronger and how it seems to provide an impetus to take up education, training and employment (Duncan 2007).

UK's number of teenage pregnancies might be perpetuated by a neighbourhood effect, as neighbourhood characteristics influence decisions, including local acceptance of young

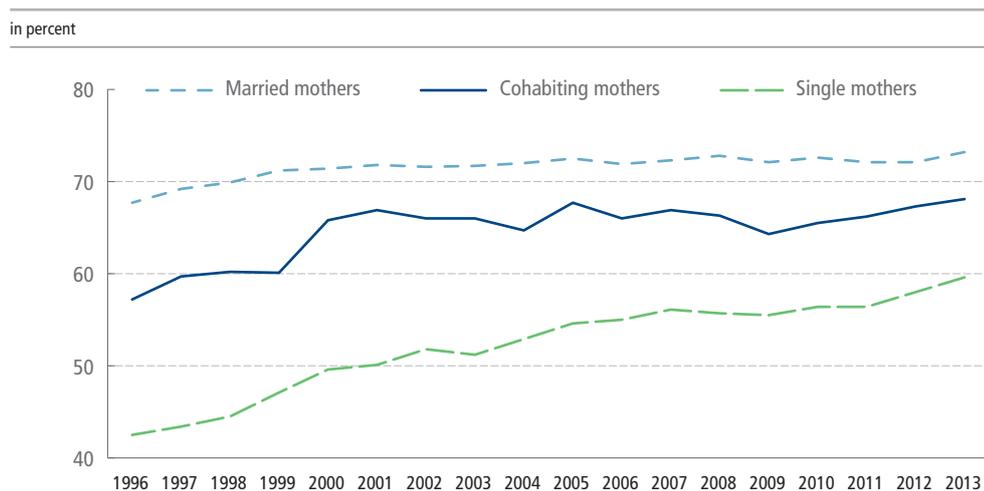


parenthood as well as limited employment and training opportunities (Lupton & Kneale 2010). Cater and Coleman (2006) found that “planned” early motherhood was preferred to having a low paid, “dead-end” job. Some young mothers, often compensating for their own bad experiences of childhood, see parenthood as providing an opportunity to create a loving family. Sometimes, early motherhood is perceived as an opportunity that can give a new sense of identity, capability and self-worth together with a motivation to change life for the better (Cater & Coleman 2006).

2.4 Single mothers and paid employment

Female employment rates have been increasing for some time now, but there has been a substantial increase in single mother’s employment rate since 1996, incidentally the year before the election of the New Labour Government (1997-2010). Since 1996, single mothers’ employment rate for those in full-time and part-time employment (and not economically inactive and not registered unemployed) increased gradually from 43 percent to 60 percent in 2013 with a consequent fall in the number who are economically inactive. This contrasts with 73 percent of mothers in a married couple who are in paid employment. Their number has been increasing by a mere five percentage points since 1996 while the rate for single mothers has increased by more than three times as much (17 percentage points). The rate of cohabiting mothers has risen more erratically, but increased by 11 percentage points (figure 9).

Figure 9: Employment rates of mothers with dependent children by family unit type, measured each year from April to June, 1996 to 2013, UK



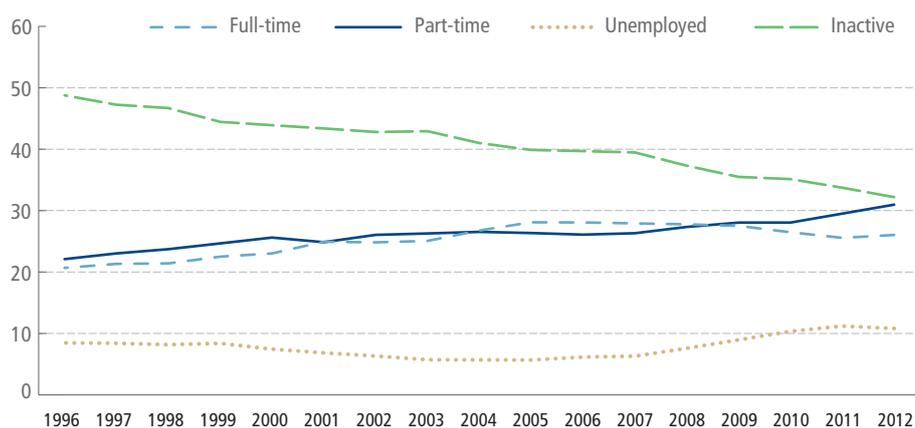
Source: ONS 2014b.

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One possible factor for the rise could be the fact that lone parents, amongst other claimants for unemployment benefit, are increasingly required to look for and be available for work. Additionally, the development can be partly accounted for by an increase in the availability of part-time work (that is, under 30 hours per week), rather than due to any great increase in the proportion of single parents working full-time. The full-time rate peaked in 2005 and has been decreasing since. Figure 10 shows the development over time for both, lone fathers and lone mothers, as data for mothers only, as in figure 9, is not available. The unemployment rate has been increasing steadily since 2007, and this might be explained by the start of the economic recession and by the increased conditionality of state benefits that will be discussed later.

Figure 10: Employment status of lone parents over time (aged 16-64)

in percent



Source: LFS data from Tinsley 2014.

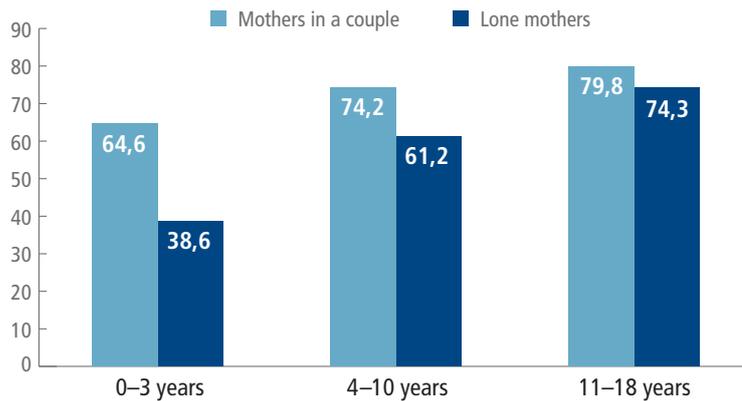
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The employment rate of both mothers in a couple relationship and lone mothers increases with the age of the children, although the coupled mothers' rate is always higher. However, when only single parents with children aged 12 or older are taken into account, their employment rate is similar to coupled mothers (figure 11). This goes to show that for lone mothers, economic inactivity is inextricably linked to the perceived needs of the child, childcare facilities and work opportunities.



Figure 11: Employment rates for couple mothers and lone mothers by age of child in percent, April to June 2013, UK¹⁴

in percent



Source: ONS 2013f.

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Explaining single parents' employment rates

Since 2008, single parents with a child over five years have to register for Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) and are registered as unemployed rather than as economically inactive if they are not in paid employment (chapter 4). In 2012, 16 percent of lone parents were registered unemployed, double the national average (Tinsley 2014).

Lone parents' unemployment rate can be understood by structural constraints, such as local labour markets, the lack of flexible jobs, and the state of the economy as well as educational levels and the age of the mother when she had her first child. The UK has fewer vocational training opportunities in comparison to Germany and attempts to revive and to restructure apprenticeships in the UK have not been very successful (Dreissinger 2008).

In Germany, more than 50 percent of young Germans undertake an apprenticeship, and employers do not review the contracts of only 10 percent of apprentices upon completion. Therefore, young Germans have less need to search for a good job than do young British people (Ryan 2000). It has been argued that apprenticeship can thrive only in the presence of powerful employer associations, social partnership and national skill standards. In the less regulated economies such as the UK, such institutional support may not be feasible or undesirable (*ibid.*).¹⁵

¹⁴ The employment rate for each age is the number in employment as a percentage of all women that age.

¹⁵ In Germany, the 1969 Vocational Training Act, which increased the educational content and deepened the collective regulation of apprenticeship in medium-sized and large firms, constituted a landmark (Ryan 2000).

Single mothers' unemployment rates are similar to mothers in couples who had children at the same age. The younger the mothers were when they had children, the more likely they are not to be in paid employment. While over half (52%) of single mothers who had their first child as a teenager (16-19) are neither in work nor looking for work, only 19 percent of mothers who had their first child in their early thirties are not in paid work (Tinsley 2014).¹⁶

This highlights the importance of the family's background in explaining single parents' employment rates. Other factors, such as single parents' characteristics, including age and education, and material circumstances, working history, access to childcare and attitudes to work also affect the likelihood of lone parents moving into work. Nonetheless, there has been an increase in the number of single parents in work compared to the 1990s, partly due to more stringent job search requirements introduced by the New Labour Government (1997-2010), and the increased availability of part-time work and in-work benefits (chapter 4).

The experiences of lone mothers in paid employment

Being a single mother in paid employment is challenging, not only because the mother is the sole carer for the children, but also because of the likelihood of experiencing high levels of job insecurity and consequently income insecurity.

Ridge and Millar (2008) have found that those lone mothers who are not in income poverty, may lack financial security though. A longitudinal study of 50 working lone mothers, initiated in 2002, indicated these mothers were keen to work to improve their income and living standards. Most did manage to stay in work but almost all changed jobs and several experienced periods of unemployment or inactivity because of sickness or changes in family circumstances. While the mothers remained generally positive about working, there was also some ambivalence, mainly due to the sense of insecurity related to the temporary or unstable nature of their jobs and their associated income. Most mothers' income was made up of a combination of wages, benefits and tax credits with each of these elements subject to change in ways that were beyond their control.

Job insecurity and low pay can be explained by the type of work that single mothers do. Figure 12 shows that, compared with mothers who are part of a couple, single mothers are almost twice as likely to be in low-skilled – and low paid – jobs (15% and 8% respectively). Single mothers are also more likely to work at lower middle skilled occupational skill levels than mothers in couples (52% and 43% respectively, ONS 2014e).¹⁷ The low skill level equates to the competence acquired through compulsory education. Examples of occupations at this level include postal workers, hotel porters, cleaners and catering assistants. The lower-middle skill level covers occupations that

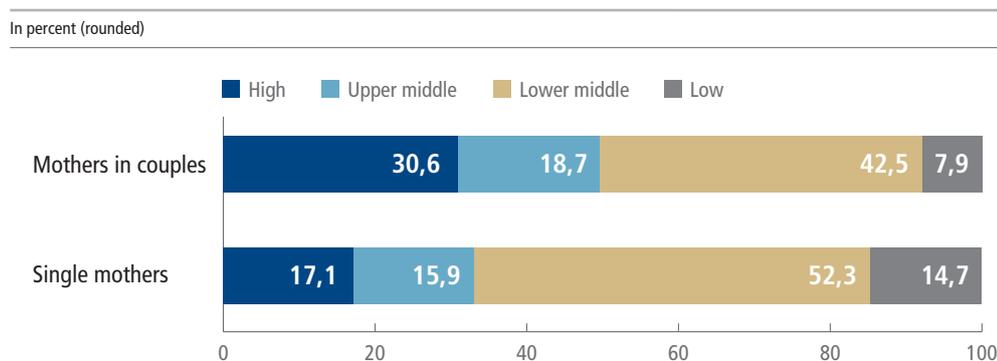
¹⁶ This compared to 40 percent who had their first child aged 20-23 and 29 percent of those who had their first child aged 24-29 (Tinsley 2014).

¹⁷ The skill level groups are created by grouping jobs together based on their occupation according to the Standard Occupation Classification (SOC).



require the same competence acquired through compulsory education, but involve a longer period of work-related training and experience. Examples of occupations at this level include machine operation, driving, caring occupations, retailing, and clerical and secretarial occupations.

Figure 12: Mothers (16 to 64 years old) in employment with dependent children by family type and occupational skill level in percent, UK, April to June 2014



Source: ONS 2014e.

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Twice as many mothers in couples are in high skill level professions also termed professional or managerial positions, than single mothers (17% and 31% respectively).¹⁸ In other words, single mothers are a lot less likely than mothers in couples to be senior government officials, financial managers, scientists, engineers, medical doctors, teachers and accountants. The type of work that single mothers do or do not do is also related to their mental health as the next section shows.

Paid work and mental health

An analysis of the longitudinal British Household Panel Survey and a small-scale survey of lone mothers, explored the factors influencing the relationship between work and depression (Harkness 2013). It found a ten percent decrease in the rates of single parents reporting depression in ten years (30% in the mid-1990s to about 20% a decade later). The authors found that paid work was strongly associated with improved mental health: mental health improvement was concentrated amongst those in paid employment and this decrease occurred alongside a sharp rise in the employment rates of lone mothers.

¹⁸ 16 per cent of single mothers and 19 percent of mothers in couples are in upper-middle skilled occupations. This includes a variety of technical and trades occupations, and proprietors of small business. For the latter, significant work experience may be typical. Examples of occupations at this level include catering managers, building inspectors, nurses, police officers (sergeant and below), electricians and plumbers.

Further analysis revealed that a satisfactory work-life balance of being able to fit paid work around childcare responsibilities is more relevant to mothers' mental health improvements than earnings. However, the study examined the labour market only up-until 2008. Since then the economic recession as well as an even more punitive approach, compelling claimants to find paid employment, has changed the context for lone parents. A weaker labour market together with increased pressure on lone parents to find jobs may well push up the rate of maternal depression (Harkness & Skipp 2013).

This echoes the findings by the comprehensive and influential Marmot Review (2010).¹⁹ This review analysed and summarised a wealth of research concerning health inequalities and found that many of the social and economic problems that lone mothers face are exacerbated by exclusion from paid work and/or a lack of income that leads to an increase in anxiety and depression, while paid work and an increased income can enhance a mothers' psychological wellbeing. As lone mothers tend to be in a cycle of low paid, poor quality work and unemployment, the review suggests that employers need to be encouraged and incentivised to create or adapt jobs that are suitable for lone parents and people with mental and physical health problems (ibid.).

2.5 Single parents and physical and mental health

The comparatively poorer health of single parents is evidenced in research. It is well documented that single parents are more likely to suffer from mental and physical health issues than coupled parents. Lone mothers are more likely than couple mothers to report less than good health and limiting longstanding illnesses (Burström et al. 2010). Lone parents with older children, who are a target group for recent welfare to work reforms, are more likely to report sickness, illness or disability as a reason for not seeking paid work (Rafferty & Wiggan 2011).

Four percent of single parents with dependent children receive Employment and Support Allowance, a benefit for ill and disabled people; twice as many as coupled parents, and single parents are also more likely to receive Disability Living Allowance than coupled parents (8% and 6% respectively, DWP 2014g).

Data from the Millennium Cohort Study supports these findings as lone parents, who had given birth in 2000-2002, were more likely than coupled women to report a life limiting illness (19.5% vs 13.9%). These include musculoskeletal, respiratory and mental disorders (Dana et al. 2012).

Diseases of the musculoskeletal system and connective tissue, particularly those with back disorders were the most prevalent. Diseases of the respiratory system (particularly asthma) and mental health problems (particularly recurrent depressive disorder) were also more common

¹⁹ In November 2008, the Secretary of State for Health commissioned an independent review to propose the most effective evidence-based strategies for reducing health inequalities in England. The review includes policies and interventions that address the social determinants of health inequalities (Marmot Review 2010).



in single mothers than coupled mothers (49.3% vs 35.3%, 20.4% vs 15.0%). The presence of a life limiting illness is associated with social and economic inequalities as a significantly higher proportion of these women received means-tested financial benefits and had no educational qualifications (Dana et al. 2012).

2.6 Children in income poverty

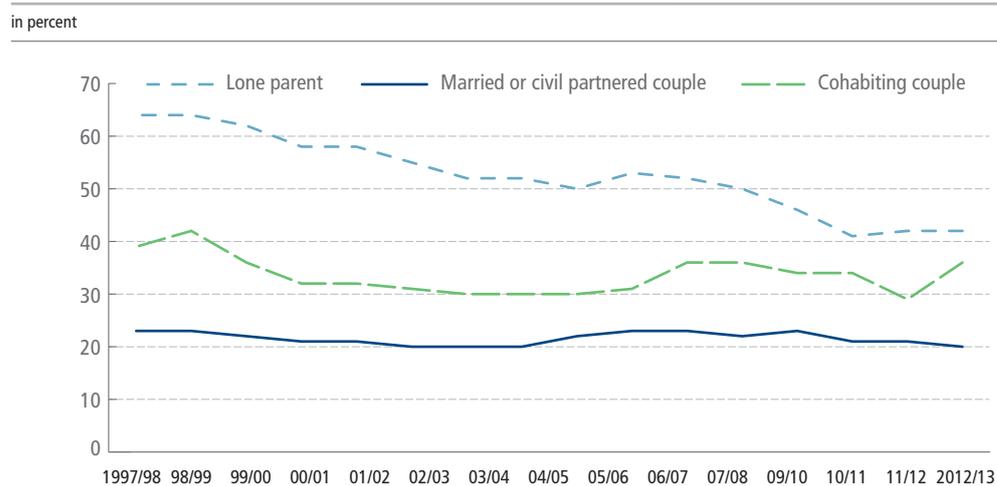
Poverty leads to negative child outcomes in terms of wellbeing, educational achievement and emotional, mental and physical health as well as social capital. The risk of income poverty for children in single parent families remains high in the UK despite the policy attention it has received since the late 1990s. In 2012/13, of the 3.1 million dependent children of lone parents, 1.3 million children or 42 percent live in relative income poverty. Income poverty is defined as individuals living in households with income of less than 60 percent of the median. Household size and housing costs are taken into account (DWP 2014i).

A different calculation works out that 3.7 million children live in relative income poverty after housing costs and of those more than a third are children that live with lone parent families (1.3 million) (DWP 2014i). Income poverty after housing costs is a better guide to poverty as the cost of housing is unavoidable and essential and single parents' standard of living is dependent on the disposable incomes they have after paying for their housing.

The relative poverty rate is halved if housing costs are excluded. The percentage of children living in households with less than 60 per cent of contemporary median household income before housing costs was 22 per cent in 2012/2013, more than half the rate of 49 per cent in 1996/1997 (ONS 2015a). The proportion of children in lone parent families in relative income poverty after housing costs also fell steadily from 1997 to 2010 (figure 13). Although there has been a clear reduction in the percentage of children in lone parent families in income poverty, from 62 percent in 1994/95 to 42 percent in 2012/13, there has been no further reduction since 2010 to 2013.

Living with a lone parent is clearly still a high risk factor for child poverty: 42 percent of all children in the UK who lived in lone parent households lived in income poverty in 2012/13, in contrast, 20 percent of children in married couples or civil partnered couples lived in income poverty in the same period (DWP 2014i). However, children in cohabiting couples are also more at increased risk of income poverty and their rate is getting closer to the rate of children in lone parent families in 2012/13 (36% and 42% respectively).

Social policies, such as cash transfers and credits, such as the In Work Credit that acts as a wage supplement, have been identified as making an important contribution towards reducing child poverty (Griffiths 2011). These interventions, as well as tax credits supplementing income and the introduction of the national minimum wage in 1999, seem to have had the desired effect of reducing the number of households whose incomes were low relative to the median. Single mothers who

Figure 13: Percentage of children living in households with less than 60 percent of contemporary median household income, by family type and economic status of the family, after housing costs, UK

Source: Family Resources Survey (FRS) data DWP 2014i.

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are in paid work are also often in typically female-dominated service sector occupations that tend to be low paid. Benefits such as tax credits, which will be discussed later in the report, have made it possible for lone mothers to take part-time jobs with relatively low pay (Millar 2010).

Child poverty rates have clearly been reduced due to tax credits and financial support that are also available to nonworking single parents. Income for a workless lone parent with one child was some 20 percent higher in real terms in 2010 than in 1997 and 36 percent higher for a lone parent working part-time on a low wage (Brewer 2012).

Also, as a result of the economic recession from 2008, relative child poverty continues to fall, but only due to a sharp decline in median income and the subsequent lowering of the relative poverty line. On average, the poor have undoubtedly been getting worse off in absolute terms (Cribb et al. 2012). As a result of the recession, lone parent households who are disproportionately reliant on benefit income saw their incomes squeezed less than couples with children who were at greater risk of having their earnings from the labour market fall rapidly in real terms during this period. Median income before taxes and benefits in 2010/11 was 7.8 percent lower than during its 2007/08 peaks (ibid.). The gap between single parents' and married or civil partnered families' income poverty duly narrowed before stabilising in 2010/11, from a 41 percent gap in 1997/98 to a 22 percent gap in 2012/13 after housing costs (figure 13).²⁰ Therefore, while income inequality

²⁰ Compared to 2011/12, the percentage of children in lone parent families in relative low income before housing costs (BHC) has fallen slightly by 1 percentage point to 22 percent in 2012/13, but this change is not statistically significant (DWP 2014a).

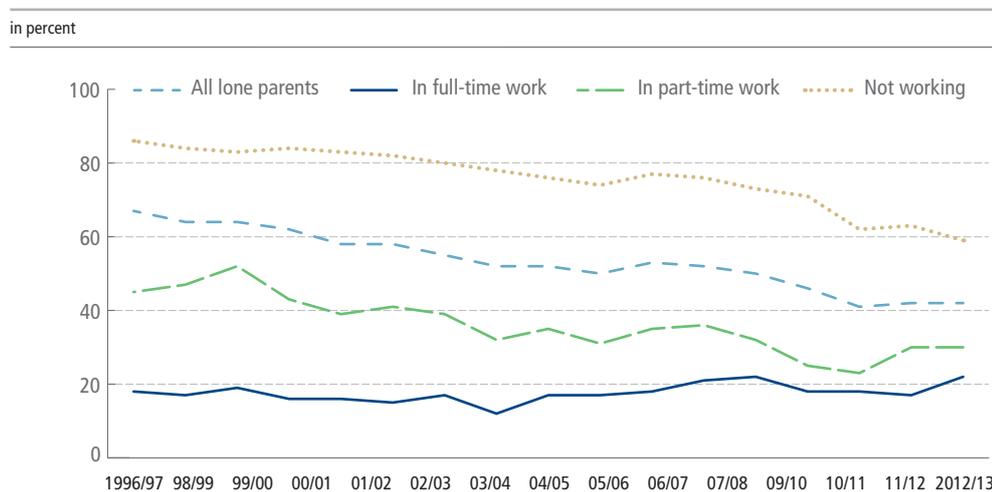


between single parent households and the rest of the population has seen a reduction in recent years, the measure is of limited use for understanding lone parents' living standards.

However, the greatest reduction of income poverty after housing costs has been for children living in lone parent families that are not working.²¹ The percentage of children living in non-working lone parent households with less than 60 percent of contemporary median household income, has decreased from 86 percent in 1996/97 to 59 percent in 2012/13, a decrease of 27 percentage points. In comparison, in the same period, the decrease for children living in poverty with part-time working single parents has been 15 percentage points and has even increased for those children living with full-time working single parents (4%). The likelihood of children living in relative income poverty is reduced if the lone parent is in full-time work, but the trends for lone parent families who work full-time are difficult to analyse due to small sample size (figure 14).

Nevertheless, between 2011 and 2013, income poverty has increased for children living with full-time working single parent families and remained stagnant for those living with part-time working single parent families, perhaps as a result of the recession (figure 14).

Figure 14: Percentage of children living in households with less than 60 percent of contemporary median household income, by family type – mothers and fathers – and economic status of the family, UK, after housing costs



Source: Family Resources Survey (FRS), DWP, 2014i.

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²¹ Income poverty rates below housing costs are about half that of the rates for before housing costs but have followed a similar trend. The likelihood of being in relative low income is reduced if the lone parent is in full-time work rather than working part-time or not working (12% compared to 16% and 30% respectively before housing costs as supposed to 22% compared to 30% and 59% after housing costs, ONS 2014i).

Reasons for income poverty

In the UK, the US and Italy, poverty is often explained as a product of the strong relationship between the economic position of the parents in the earnings distribution and that of their children. In other words, the UK has high income inequality and relatively low level of earnings mobility. In comparison, in the Nordic countries, Germany and Canada, intergenerational earnings mobility tends to be higher (D'Addio 2007).

Recent research has found that the intergenerational transmission of poverty in the UK can be accounted for by the relationship between people's educational outcomes and their mother's and father's educational level, the number of adults and children living in the household, the employment status of the parents and the childhood household's financial situation (Serafino & Tonkin 2014). This chapter has cited evidence that lone parents with young children are less likely to be in paid employment. Serafino and Tonkin (*ibid.*) show that growing up in a workless household is likely to have wide ranging and largely negative repercussions for children. Those who lived in a workless household at age 14 are around 1.5 times as likely to be in poverty, compared with those where one adult was working.

However, it seems that educational attainment is an important factor that explains income poverty even more than either growing up in a workless household or household income. The previous section has shown that single mothers are particularly disadvantaged here. People are around three times more likely to have a low educational outcome if their mother has a low level of education. People with a low level of educational attainment are almost five times more likely to be in poverty than those with a high level of education (*ibid.*).

A major finding of the national representative Millenium Cohort Study (MCS) is that children fare better if their mother has higher qualifications. No other factors are associated with all five developmental outcomes such as non-verbal cognitive skills, verbal cognitive skills, maths skills, Key Stage 1 attainment and behaviour at age seven (Jones et al. 2013).

The other major finding of the MCS is that children, who have a mother who suffered or had suffered from depression, have lower educational attainment and greater behavioural difficulties (*ibid.*).

Effects of income poverty: debts

The UK has seen significant growth of consumer debt over the past three decades and especially since the economic downturn in 2008. Single parents are the family type most likely to have debts. Their debts might typically be smaller than those in couple households (£1,600 compared with £4,600 for couples in 2008-2010), but single parents with dependent children are almost twice as likely to perceive debt as a heavy burden than couples with dependent children (38% and 20% respectively, ONS 2013e). This different attitude may be related to couples' confidence that their



mortgage repayments will lead to owning a home eventually, while single parents are more likely to rent their home and struggle to pay their bills on a low income.

Data from the English and Welsh Civil and Social Justice Survey indicates that single parents along with those who have a long-term illness or disability and people with no educational qualifications are particularly vulnerable to debt problems and especially unmanageable debt (Patel et al. 2012). Lone parents are three times more likely to report a debt/finance problem than married couples with children (9.5% and 2.7%) (ibid.). Patel et al. (ibid.) also suggest that debt counselling should become part of social welfare advice services. However, the Coalition Government (2010–2015) has made cuts to legal aid and charitable organisations that offer debt advice services (chapter 3).

An online survey with 643 single parent respondents revealed that more than half ran out of money before the end of almost every month (55%). 40 percent of single parents with arrears were behind on rent or mortgage and on gas or electricity bills while 41 percent were behind on water payments (Rabindrakumar 2013).

Almost everyone in the survey had borrowed money or sought emergency welfare support in the last year (87%), mostly from friends and family (62%), but 13 percent had taken a loan from a payday or doorstep lender typified by extremely high interest rates. Many single parents had exhausted their savings when they became single parents. They may have had to cover legal bills, remaining debts after selling the family home and loans from setting up new homes after separation. Therefore, they had no financial safety net after they became single parents (Rabindrakumar 2013).

The Marmot Review relates debt to mental health, quoting studies that found that the more debts people have, the more likely they are to suffer a mental disorder. Lone mothers are particularly at-risk of psychiatric morbidity related to debt and financial strain (Fitch et al. 2009, Beddington et al. 2008). One study found that single parents are more likely to experience common mental disorders, but that this effect disappears after controlling for financial strain and social support. The authors actually advise debt management as a strategy to address mental health issues (Cooper et al. 2000).

2.7 Conclusions

This chapter has given an overview of the trends and background characteristics of single parents in the UK. The number of single parents is showing signs of slowed growth, perhaps as a result of the recession that might improve resilience among couples or make it less affordable to separate. While single parents are a heterogeneous group, they tend to be overwhelmingly female and in comparison with coupled parents they tend to be younger, have fewer children and fewer educational qualifications. This might be partly explained by the time when their separation took place.

The proportion of single parent households of all households is highest in urban areas in England and Wales, with London having the highest proportion of single parent households of all households. The proportion of single parents also varies greatly by ethnicity and Black African, Caribbean and Black British single parents make up more than half of all families in the same ethnicity category, in contrast to a fifth of White single parents and a tenth of Asian and Asian British single parents.

The majority of lone parent households result from a couple break down, either a divorce or a separation from a cohabitation, and less than a third of single parent households are never married never cohabited single parents. Marital status seems to be a divisive factor in explaining single mothers' background and situation. Single mothers who have never been married had their children younger and have lower educational qualification and are more likely to receive state benefits.

Teenage single mothers have the lowest educational qualifications of all single mothers. The proportion of lone parents with dependent children who are teenage parents is very small but more than half of all teenage mothers are single mothers. The UK has still one of the highest rates of teenage motherhood in the developed world, but its rate is steadily decreasing. This can be attributed to the general increase in age of fertility and specific social policy efforts such as improved sex education in school and increased use of contraceptives and terminations.

The average duration of lone parenthood in the UK is five years, but single never married mothers who receive state benefits are least likely to (re-)partner than those in paid employment.

There has been a substantial increase in single mother's employment rate and the gap between single mothers' and married mothers employment rate is closing due to changes in benefit regulations, the availability of part-time work together with in-work benefits as well as the state of the economy. Since the start of the benefit changes and the economic recession in 2008, the unemployment rate has increased and single parents are more likely to be registered unemployed than the national average of unemployed men and women.

Those single mothers who are in paid work tend to be twice as likely to be in lower skilled and low paid jobs and half as likely to be in high occupational level jobs, compared to couple mothers. Therefore, single mothers lack job security and consequently financial security, as their jobs are unstable and low paid. This means that their income is made up of earnings, tax credits and benefits. Lone parents are also much more likely to report a debt/finance problem than married parents. Debt and paid work are often associated with lone parents' mental health issues which in turn have an effect on child wellbeing. Single parents' comparatively poorer mental and physical health is well established.



Changes to the tax credit and benefit system have resulted in a clear reduction in the percentage of children in lone parent families who live in poverty. The relative income poverty gap between single parents' and married or civil partnered families' duly narrowed from 41 percent in 1997/98 to 22 percent in 2012/13 (after housing costs). However, the rate of income poverty for children in single parent families remains high at 42 percent after housing costs. This rate is more than double the rate for children in poverty in married or civil partnered families (20%). Tax credits and benefits associated with paid work lift some children in single parent families out of poverty: the poverty rate after housing costs for children whose lone parent works part-time is 30 percent, half the rate of those children in non-working lone parent families (59%).

3. Post separation parenting – legal issues and maintenance

Single parenthood has become much more socially accepted in the UK, even if governments of different persuasions still tend to frame marriage as the preferred state in which to raise children. This chapter describes and analyses the way in which English law regulates and successive governments position parents post separation. Development of policies such as the cuts to Legal Aid, the promotion of Mediation and shared parenting, and their impact on single parents are being discussed as well as the dissonance between child maintenance policy and reality. This chapter will conclude with analysing research into the effects of divorce on children's wellbeing.

3.1 Legal issues and shared parenting

Parental Responsibility – duties towards the child

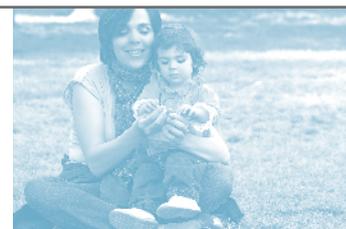
The phrase Parental Responsibility was coined in English law to emphasise the parent's duties towards their child rather than the parent's rights over their child as defined in 3(1) Children Act 1989: "all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his property".

Shared Parental Responsibility means that both parents consult on important matters concerning their child, with the understanding that the child's welfare comes first while day to day decisions should be taken by the resident parent (Martin 2014). In the UK, the mother is generally the one who becomes the parent with care in the event of a separation or divorce and a mother automatically has Parental Responsibility.

Until 2003, married fathers automatically had Parental Responsibility, but not unmarried fathers even if their name appeared on the birth certificate, nor fathers whose name was not on the birth certificate. Parental Responsibility, in such circumstances, had to be obtained by other means, such as marriage to the mother, a Parental Responsibility agreement with the mother or a Parental Responsibility Order from the court (Coram Children's Legal Centre 2015).

This had wide implications as fathers without Parental Responsibility had no automatic contact rights. Non-resident fathers struggling for contact with their children formed pressure groups such as Fathers Direct in 1999 and they have been successful in lobbying for legislation that considers the role fathers play before and after separation.

Under the New Labour Government (1997-2010) the law was changed to give unmarried fathers Parental Responsibility automatically as long as the father's name is on the birth certificate, and the 2003 Employment Act established a two week paid statutory paternity leave for all men, in recognition of their increased involvement (Lewis 2013).



Even in cases of separation without shared Parental Responsibility, the father still has a duty towards paying child maintenance. If parents are unable to agree about a decision concerning the upbringing of their child, they are advised to try family mediation rather than family court (Coram Children's Legal Centre 2015).

Family Mediation – Refocus on the needs of children?

Divorce and separation rates have been increasing since the introduction of the Divorce Reform Act in 1971, as have the case volumes in family courts. For example, the number of children involved in these cases is increasing and the courts take about one year to decide whether to make a care order that gives social services parental responsibility. In 2012, there were 20,000 children waiting for a public law decision, almost double the number in 2008. It is estimated that the cost of public law cases in 2009/10 was over £1 billion (Ministry of Justice & Department for Education 2012).

The Ministry of Justice made radical changes to the family justice system in England and Wales with the introduction of mediation in 2012, following an independent review under the Coalition Government (2010–2015). Mediation is not about keeping couples together, but is designed to reduce the time and money spent on lawyers and in courts. It tends to provide a more cost-effective and quicker way to proceed with separation, divorce or dissolution of a civil partnership. Mediation enables people to make their own arrangements for children, property and finance, rather than relying on lawyers negotiating on behalf of the separating partners. While a divorce lawyer may charge between £5,000 and £10,000 to negotiate a settlement, the total costs for lawyer-supported mediation is unlikely to be more than £5,000 outside Central London.²² Figures indicate that mediators achieve full agreement in over 80 percent of cases (Ministry of Justice 2014b).

The increased use of mediation would free up capacity in family courts and therefore decrease delay and costs of family courts which presents a re-focus on the needs of children (Ministry of Justice & Department for Education 2012). The Coalition Government has since increased the amount of public funding available for mediation from £15 million to £25 million per annum, mainly to support the voluntary sector in England and Wales to train mediators and offer mediation (Ministry of Justice & Department for Education 2012).

Research has shown that mediation helps reduce co-parenting conflict and the likelihood of parents entering adversarial legal proceedings; additionally, children find it less stressful when their parents cooperate (Ministry of Justice 2014b, Walker 2010).

²² <http://lawyersupportedmediation.com/fees> (accessed January 29, 2015).

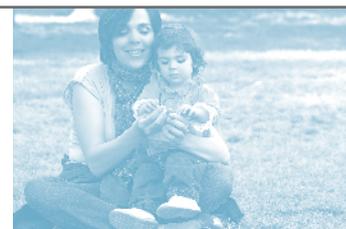
Family mediators come from a range of backgrounds. A Family Mediation training course is delivered in three modules each of three days over a three/four month period as well as course work. It is not necessary to have studied law, but education to degree or diploma level or equivalent or significant work experience with responsibility for the conduct of interpersonal relations is an essential entry requirement for a trainee mediator. Further professional development courses are also available (National Family Mediation 2015).²³

There has been little research in the UK into mediation processes yet and it is unclear which particular characteristics are important in the mediation process and for successful outcomes. Findings from research in other countries suggest that a mediator's background tends to dispose them towards engaging in particular areas; some are more comfortable dealing with children and parenting issues while others, often with a legal background, feel more comfortable addressing finance and property issues. Hence, mediators from a social welfare background and lawyer-mediators seem to practise in systematically different ways (Walker 2010). Mediation may not be an attractive option for everyone. A US study found that men were more positive about entering mediation as clients than women. Also, higher income couples were more open to mediation than lower income couples. Therefore, the clients' socio-economic background, their personal histories and their levels of communication will have an impact on the outcomes of mediation (Walker 2010).

Mediation meetings have become, since 1997, a requirement for people proceeding with a family law dispute who seek public funding or legal aid. They must first attend a meeting to assess their suitability for mediation, unless they meet specific exemption criteria. However, few separating couples participate in mediation. Data from the Legal Services Commission for the period 2010/11 showed that only around 14,000 out of the 30,000 couples referred to mediation assessments actually participated in publicly funded mediation that year (Quartermain 2011). In 2012, the figure rose to 17,000 publicly funded mediation cases. This is still only 14 percent of the 118,140 recorded divorces in England and Wales in that year (Ministry of Justice 2014c). There is no data about how many privately funded clients use mediation in England and Wales for family law court issues but the number is thought to be low. 58 percent of the publicly funded mediation started in 2010/11 was attended by parties who were both publicly funded, and 42 percent were attended by one party who was publicly funded and one party who was privately funded (Quartermain 2011).

The reasons for the low take of publicly and privately funded mediation may lie in the fact that both parties need to agree to take part in mediation for a session to proceed whereas an application to the court for dispute resolution can be submitted by a single party. There is also a surprising lack of awareness of mediation and divorce proceedings among the general public (Peacey & Hunt 2009). Support and advice services are fragmented and its navigation is complicated. Confusion

²³ <http://nfm.org.uk/index.php/about-nfm/what-nfm-does> (accessed 29.1.2015)



over what's on offer and scepticism might also be a reason and one mediator advocates lawyer supported mediation:

“Divorcees are one-time shoppers making a distressed purchase. In effect, you don't have any interest in family law services until you're impacted. And when this happens, you reach out for someone on your side. That's not a mediator despite mediation being demonstrably efficient and child-centred. You have to bring the lawyers along too.” (Lopatin 2015)

The effects of cuts to Legal Aid

Since 2013, legal aid has been unavailable for family law cases unless they involve allegations of domestic violence or child abuse. However, couples are not turning to mediation instead as they are either unaware of the services or do not realise that legal aid remains available to fund it (Lopatin 2014b). Consequently, the number of couples attending out of court sessions to resolve family disputes has almost halved (*ibid.*).²⁴ Now, many separating couples go straight to court as litigants in person and pursue their claims through the family division without any legal support or advice. Therefore, the number of private cases in family courts has increased and this has led to delays (The Guardian 2013c).

As a further consequence of cuts to legal aid, legal aid funded family solicitors and barristers saw their case load reduced by 40 percent between April and June 2014 compared to the same period the year before.²⁵ Fewer cases mean that legal aid solicitors refer fewer couples to mediation, which subsequently increased the financial pressure on many mediation providers, and some have already gone out of business (Ministry of Justice 2014a). This is exactly the opposite of what was intended with the introduction of mediation.

In 2014, the law changed again and anyone considering court action is now legally obliged to attend a mediation information meeting and consider this as an alternative; yet, the take up rates for mediations have been declining further (*ibid.*). Low income parents continue to bear the brunt of legal aid cuts to family law services. In 2014/15, 62 percent of parents were without any legal representation at court to contest arrangements for their children such as child contact, residency and maintenance payment, up from 42 percent in 2012/13.

At the same time parents are turning their back on the family justice system: between 2013 and 2014 there was a 40 percent fall in the number of cases featuring ex-partners going to court over

²⁴ Between April and June 2012, 7,381 couples attended mediation information and assessment meetings in England and Wales. Over the same three months in 2013, the numbers fell to almost half that to 3,854 (Ministry of Justice, Freedom of Information request 2013). The numbers shrank even more from April to June 2014, to 1,778 (Lopatin 2014a).

²⁵ The number of cases featuring ex-partners going to court over child arrangements or finances fell to 9,291 between April and June 2014, a drop of 40 percent compared to the same time period in 2013 (Lopatin 2014a).

child arrangements or finances (Lopatin 2014b).²⁶ This could mean that children are being denied access to their parents. The Law Society warns that the lack of access to legal advice and to the courts may mean that while some parents simply give up, others may abduct their children. This clearly undermines the concept of pro-contact parenting that was introduced by the Children and Families Bill (Baksi 2014). The results of the massive cuts to legal aid are clearly detrimental to the welfare of the child. Legal aid cuts cannot be offset by commercial law firms undertaking more pro bono work as has been suggested by the Conservative Government (2015-). Perhaps, as part of the solution of reversing the cuts, legal aid could be treated as an indemnity fund, where a proportion of damages and costs recovered could be paid into the fund, in order to finance future claims (Rose 2015).

The Children and Families Act 2014 – shared parenting

The terms shared care, shared residence or shared parenting apply to cases where parents jointly share the care of their child/ren either equally, or at least to 30 percent by each parent. This arrangement can be organised by the parents themselves privately, through mediation, or through the family courts.

The prevalence of shared parenting arrangements has not been measured in the UK, but estimates suggest that between three percent and 17 percent of post separation and divorce families have shared arrangements (Peacey & Hunt 2009).

The legal position with respect to child contact after parental separation is that parents can agree arrangements informally with no requirement to seek a court order. The majority of separated parents do not go to court over contact issues, but tend to leave contact arrangements open, or arrive at somewhat more formal arrangements, sometimes with the use of a solicitor. The 10 percent of cases that go through the court system because parents cannot agree are those where the conflict between the parents is likely to be highest, the issues most complex to resolve and the impact on children's lives greatest (Peacey & Hunt 2009).

Smart and May (2004) found that arguments over the residence of children could, in fact, often have aspects of broader concerns about the financial or property settlement on divorce; and arguments over contact were often enmeshed with arguments over child support. Although the arguments over the residence of children can be seen as simply arising from spite or vindictiveness, they might encompass a variety of quite thorny ethical issues such as about parenting styles, appropriate financial support, fairness, responsibility and the welfare of children.

²⁶ In the time period from April to June 2014, 12,554 parents of the 20,126 parents in England and Wales went to court without a lawyer to contest arrangements for their children. The number of cases featuring ex-partners going to court over child arrangements or finances fell to 9,291 between April and June 2014, a drop of 40 percent compared to the same period in 2013 (Lopatin 2014b).



Public policy and case law in the courts strongly promotes the maintenance of children's relationships with their non-resident parent after parental separation and divorce (Hunt & Macleod 2008). However, fathers tend to perceive a bias in the family justice system (including in mediation) in favour of mothers over issues such as custody and contact (Walker 2010). Nonetheless, in a review of 300 files covering cases heard in all three tiers of court, the family proceedings court, county court and high court, no evidence was found of a bias against non-resident parents. When the courts denied contact it was usually because they believe contact presents a serious risk to the welfare of the child or the resident parent, because of domestic violence or child sexual abuse (Smart & May 2004).

A court order is governed by the welfare principle, where “the welfare of the child is paramount” and this became a legal principle under section 8 of the Children Act 1989. However, a consistent theme in the House of Lords debates during the passage of the Children and Adoption Act 2006 was that courts are too ready to accept weak arguments put forward by resident parents for denying or reducing contact to sound non-resident parents. This is in contrast to research evidence that shows that courts are not minded to deny any face-to-face contact (Hunt & Macleod 2008).

The Labour Government resisted calls to introduce a “shared parenting” presumption into the Children Act 1989 which is relatively neutral regarding contact. However, the Coalition Government (2010–2015) initiated a number of reviews, including the Family Justice Review (Family Justice Review Panel 2011), and continued to endorse shared parenting on the basis that it is in the best interest of the child and on a principle of fairness:

“It is in the best interests of the child to have a full and continuing relationship with both parents. We are aware of the debate on this issue, and the arguments are finely balanced. However, if we are to improve the effectiveness of private family law, we firmly believe that families’ confidence in its fairness must be strengthened.” (Ministry of Justice & Department for Education 2012)

This Family Justice Review resulted in the Children and Families Act 2014 (Children and Families Act 2014). This act not only includes legislation for post separation mediation, but also a presumption in favour of a child having a relationship with both parents where it is safe and consistent with the child's welfare: “to presume, unless the contrary is shown, that involvement of that parent in the life of the child concerned will further the child's welfare” (Clause 11, Poole et al. 2013). Hence, the Children and Families Act 2014 does not legislate for automatic shared residence, but it is argued that shared parenting might become the normative model for organizing post separation family life.

The fathers' rights organisation Fathers4Justice mainly uses stunts and protests, often conducted in costume, in pursuit of changes in UK legislation concerning fathers' rights such as shared parenting, family law reform and equal contact for divorced parents with children (Fathers4Justice

2015). The group continue to perceive a gender bias and makes apparent that family diversity is increasing and that the discourse of the married biological father that is emotionally detached and more of a provider than a caregiver has become outdated if it ever existed (Lewis 2013, Harris-Short 2010).²⁷

Shared parenting – a critic's view

Shared parenting and the government agenda to engage fathers is driven by the rationale that father's involvement with their children promotes good outcomes, particularly in disadvantaged families. This agenda is worthy of critique as it does not put gender equality on the agenda, but instead constructs the father-child relationship as a dyadic relationship whereby obscuring the mothers' contributions to parenting and childcare (Featherstone 2010).

The agenda of fostering father involvement may not be perceived as this by the parents. Research with fathers' experiences of social care services showed that the fathers felt disempowered and were preoccupied with mothers and their perceived power which were supported by social services that were perceived as feminized (Featherstone 2013). In other words, for non-resident fathers, the fostering fathers' involvement agenda may be more about regaining power rather than being involved with their children.

According to the "maternal gate keeping" hypothesis, mothers can either facilitate or prevent a father's involvement. However, research has shown that both parents are responsible for creating and maintaining the gates because both construct the role of the mother as the "gatekeeper" and the father as the secondary parent or the "helper". Nonetheless, the displays of anger and the father's sense of loss at the separation from their children also questions traditional images of the emotionally detached father (Lewis 2013).

There is increasing support for the idea that fatherhood has become an important and much more visible role in its own right. This is supported by research that does show the importance of fathers' engagement for children's outcomes and because of research that shows that fathers spending more time with their children. Women are increasingly participating in paid employment and it can no longer be taken for granted that they will be the homemaker and not the breadwinner. Research also shows that children would like an ongoing relationship with both their parents after separation. Furthermore, the recent family law reforms are likely to have heightened fathers' expectations of being able to have high levels of involvement after a separation and mothers' attitudes towards the involvement of fathers after separation are also changing (Smyth 2009).

²⁷ In 2007, former members of the group have claimed Fathers4Justice has now "lost its way" by being side tracked from reforming family law, and descending into personal attacks and illegal acts which included climbing onto the roof of an MP's residence (The Guardian 2008).



Australia is “ahead” in terms of shared parenting as it was first given a policy and legislative prominence there in 2006. Subsequently, the number of families participating in shared parenting increased from six percent in 2002 to 12 percent in 2008 (ibid.). Research conducted in Australia concludes that shared care is more risky for children where there are safety concerns, high ongoing parental conflict, and for children younger than four years. There was also widespread misunderstanding of the law amongst parents, leading many fathers to believe that they have a right to shared time and many mothers to believe that they cannot raise issues relevant to children’s best interests, especially family violence (ibid.).

Shared parenting assumes gender equality for fathers and mothers but the most common family arrangement in the UK is still the male-breadwinner and female-carer and part-time-worker (Klett-Davies 2007). Shared parenting may then be associated with anxiety for a mother who is concerned about the father’s untested parenting abilities. A father may fear his lack of experience as a hands-on carer and that he could be regarded as an inferior parent (Davies 2013). Also, the full-time working parent who has shared care might have to contract out childcare support which might not be in the best interest of the child.

Shared parenting can only be a practical option for a wealthy segment of the population as the material resources necessary for shared parenting arrangements, such as children’s bedrooms, may well be unaffordable for many separated parents. Parents might be unable or unwilling to live close to each other or close to their child/ren’s school, hence making shared parenting impractical. Also, no support for shared parenting is available to parents who rely on the welfare state for some or all of their income and housing needs.

Shared parenting is concerned with the parent-child relationship and effectively excludes the children’s relationships with siblings as well as resources that the parents may or may not have (Davies 2013). Research is necessary into the outcomes of shared parenting and living in two homes for children’s wellbeing.

Post separation parenting – a research study

Despite the shared parenting and pro-contact stance in both government policy and case law, around 30 percent of children lose touch with their non-resident parent in contrast to between three and 17 percent of post separation and divorce families who have shared arrangements (Peacey & Hunt 2009). Nonetheless, figures about contact between non-resident fathers and their children vary not only from study to study but also by type of respondent. Non-resident fathers seem to over report while the resident parents tend to under-estimate the amount of contact (Hunt & MacLeod 2008).

A national survey of 559 separated parents who were part of an Office for National Statistics (ONS) Omnibus Survey between 2006 and 2007, found that 65 percent of resident parents and

85 percent of non-resident parents reported some contact by the non-resident parent. The most common contact pattern was at least weekly. Resident parents reported at least weekly contact in 34 percent of cases, and non-resident parents reported this pattern in 47 percent of cases, with 65 percent of resident and 79 percent of non-resident parents reporting that it included overnight stays. Where there was no contact, about half said it was the non-parent decision, in seven percent it was the court decision, and 24 percent said it was their own decision as the resident parent (Peacey & Hunt 2009).

Contact was, for most parents, relatively unproblematic but even in cases where problems occur, they did not seem to terminate contact. The most common problem reported was arguments over child maintenance, but this did not tend to affect levels of contact.

Contact between children and the non-resident parent varied in several respects. Contact was less likely to happen where the relationship between the parents was hostile, if the non-resident partner had new children and where parents had been separated for six years or more. Additionally, as children grew older, the amount of contact became less frequent (ibid.).

Non-resident parents' satisfaction levels with the level of contact were consistently lower than those of resident parents: approximately two third of non-resident parents in the national survey wanted more contact. The key concern they expressed was that the resident partners were in control of contact. The major issues for resident parents relating to the absent parent concerned a lack of commitment. Resident parents (42%) were more likely than non-resident parents (29%) to mention that the other parent had issues with unreliability, non-commitment and inflexibility. Almost a quarter of resident parents (24%) whose child/ren had contact had, at some point, raised concerns about alcohol or drug abuse, mental illness or child abuse (ibid.).

The children who were part of the qualitative element of the national survey, which interviewed 41 parents and 20 children, were generally satisfied with their current contact arrangements but a few would prefer slightly increased levels of contact. It seems that the quality rather than the quantity of contact was the issue for children identified as "unhappy". They wanted to be consulted about the arrangements, be assured that their parents were reliable and took account of other demands on their time. Non-residents' new partners or new children were sometimes seen as a barrier to spending time with their parent alone, and some children felt unable to talk about their emotions to their non-resident parent. The children in the study advised parents to cooperate and communicate with each other and not to argue in front of them (ibid.).

The national survey concludes that children benefit from continuing and regular contact with both parents but only when the parents cooperate, communicate, and exhibit low levels of conflict. With regards to shared parenting, the authors found that it is not the amount of parenting time that is related to better outcomes for children, but that positive outcomes are related to certain families who choose shared time and who can parent cooperatively and in a child-responsive way.



Where children are caught up in parental conflict and where there is poor parenting, contact can be very damaging and courts can, at least occasionally, take insufficient account of the risks such situations pose to children and parents (ibid.).

The value in considering the Peacey and Hunt (ibid.) study in such details lies in the series of points they make emphasising the children's viewpoints and that arguments over child maintenance should not impede contact between the non-resident parent and the child.

Case Study 1

Anne (42) lives in London and has been a single parent for two years with a ten year old son and a seven year old daughter. She asked her partner of 20 years and the father of her two children, Tim, to move out of their house when she discovered a hidden birthday present and a card that was addressed to his "mistress" of 1.5 years.

Anne and Tim were not married and separated shortly after: they neither discussed the separation nor went through mediation or counselling. They had been in couple counselling twice over the 20 years they were together and Tim started the affair while they were in couple counselling the second time.

Post separation parenting

Tim moved in with his mother and is still with his girlfriend. The children stay with him for one night every weekend and for one weeknight every two weeks. He also visits one night during the week and puts the children to bed. Anne plans her leisure time around this arrangement, and tends to go out on this night. Anne hates waking up on a Saturday morning when the house is empty: it makes her feel lonely and the house seems deserted when it should be a family home.

Anne doesn't think highly of Tim's ability to make commitments. It has always been her, who has managed the children's activities and their free time. Their father doesn't, for example, plan nor commit to taking them on holiday. Anne considers Tim to be irresponsible and childlike. Now his mother is caring and cooking for him, and she helps out when he has the children.

Anne thinks that shared parenting would have not worked for her family as she feels it would have been too disruptive for her young children. Her children fare quite well having just one home and under the current arrangements, particularly in comparison to other separated families she knows. Her daughter has taken the separation quite hard and feels partly responsible. She questions her father's love for her and seems to spend less time with him. She vents her anger, frustration and sadness at home. Anne thinks that Tim has a more comfortable relationship with their son as they have an established bond associated with playing and watching football. However, even the son has expressed worries over his dad having another child with his girlfriend.

A carer looks after the children three mornings and afternoons after school. The woman helps with the breakfast and the homework for about 25 hours a week for £10 an hour (the minimum wage is £6.70 in 2015). The carer might be unqualified but she has been with them for four years and provides continuity for the children after the separation, possibly for Anne too. Anne calls her 'her other half'. During the holidays, the children tend to go to a play centre three days a week for six weeks of the 14 weeks of school holidays.

Managing the finances

Anne is a breastfeeding counsellor for a national charity, and works part-time (25 hours three days a week). Tim works as a salesman and has a second job some evenings when he looks after new music groups.

Tim makes regular maintenance payments as part of an informal child maintenance arrangement. This pays for the running of the house, the bills, mortgage, insurance, utilities, internet and TV. Tim also pays for half of the son's tutor costs and piano lessons. Anne thinks he will reduce the money in the future as he seems to have great debts despite the fact that he earns about £5,000 a month and doesn't pay bills or rent at his mother's house.

Anne's mother pays for half of the childcare costs partly because she is unable to help out in person. In addition to her income as a breastfeeding counsellor, Anne receives a monthly income from managing her father's estate who was an artist. She also has a lodger in one of the rooms in her house that she will eventually own after she has paid off the mortgage. Anne has an above average household income and after the bills and utilities have been paid, she has £3,074 a month to pay for food and other items (see table 1).

**Table 1: Case Study 1 – monthly net income and outgoings**

	Income after tax	Outgoings
Income from managing her father's estate	£1,600	
Income as a breastfeeding counsellor	£918	
Child maintenance	£1,836	
Children's father's gifts (e.g. meals out, clothes, presents, tutors)	£200	
Child Benefit	£136	
Rent paid by lodger	£600	
Anne's mother's contribution to childcare	£500	
Total income	£5,790	
Childcare (child carer)		£1,000
Council tax		£101
Mortgage		£524
Credit card repayments		£37
Credit card repayment 2		£90
School dinners for one child		£40
Children's savings		£25
Gas and electricity		£127
Water		£42
Netflix movies		£6
Telephone landline and broadband (SKY)		£125
One mobile phone on contract		£47
Travel to and from work (Oyster)		£60
Gym membership		£45
Tutors (piano, and entrance exam)		£165
Childcare (holiday clubs)		£30
Clubs/tutors/ballet classes		£252
Total fixed outgoings		£2,716
To spend on food/clothes/extras after fixed outgoings		£3,074

Source: Data compiled by Martina Klett-Davies.

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3.2 Child Maintenance arrangements

Child maintenance provides funds intended to be used towards the cost of raising a child, specifically to pay for educational and extracurricular activities, shelter, clothing and food. It is paid up to age 16 or 20 if the child remains in full-time education, but only up to A-levels (or equivalent), and not through university. Providing child maintenance is the responsibility of the child's birth parents, irrespective of whether the resident parent later cohabits with a new partner or gets married, the non-resident parent's maintenance obligations to his children remain unaffected (The Guardian 2013b).

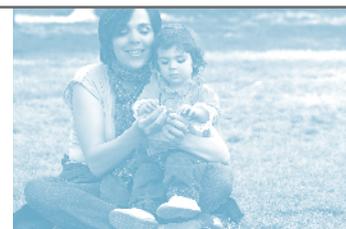
The resident parent, who tends to be the mother, is entitled to claim maintenance from her child's father, on behalf of the child. She does not have to have shared Parental Responsibility with him in order to ask for Child Support payments to be calculated and collected from him. Maintenance agreements can either be made privately or can be arranged through the Child Support Agency (CSA) and what is now the Child Maintenance Service (Martin 2014).

In 2008, 2.5 million households were eligible to receive child maintenance payments. About half, 1.2 million of eligible households, used the CSA in the UK: of the families who did not use the CSA, a large-scale survey found that around six in ten did not receive child maintenance as they had no arrangements at all. About three in ten had a private arrangement, and one in ten received child maintenance via a court order (Wikeley et al. 2008). Where child maintenance has been agreed via a consent order at court it may be a part of a larger financial settlement negotiated between the parents after separation (Gingerbread 2013).

Many parents do not involve the Child Maintenance Service and arrange child maintenance privately. This may well help avoid conflict and payments start flowing immediately but private arrangements are not enforceable. Research has shown that if parents are not on friendly terms and are unable to communicate with each other, private arrangements are likely to break down (Gingerbread 2013).

Private maintenance arrangements are twice as common among parents with a higher household income (£10,000 annually or more in 2008) as among those in the lowest income bracket (Wikeley et al. 2008). Private arrangements are also more common for working parents as many more working resident parents who do not use the CSA had private arrangements than non-working resident parents (35% and 13% respectively, Wikeley et al. 2008).

Private arrangements are also influenced by contact and length of separation. Private arrangements tend to be in place where the non-resident parent has contact with the children at least once a week. Those who have been separated for longer were also more likely to have CSA payments in place (ibid.). In fact, the CSA can be considered a crucial fall-back option when private arrangements break down or can't even be made (Bryson et al. 2013).



In 2012, only around half of children in separated families were supported by an effective child maintenance arrangement whether through the Child Maintenance Service, court order or private arrangements (Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission 2012).

The Child Support Agency and the Child Maintenance Service

The Child Support Agency (CSA) was launched in 1993 and is a delivery arm of the Department for Work and Pensions in the UK. The CSA assesses, calculates and collects a regular payment from the non-resident parent and then distributes maintenance payments to the resident parent to cover the costs of raising a child (Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission 2012).

The CSA has been ineffective and inefficient since it was formed in 1993. It has taken the CSA as long as a year to process cases and errors in maintenance calculations were not unknown. It was also markedly unsuccessful in pursuing non-compliance, which resulted in accumulated arrears of around £3.8 billion by 2012. Half of this is owed to the CSA in levies on uncooperative non-resident partners (The Independent 2012). As a result of these failings, the CSA was seen as the option of last resort (Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission 2012). A national survey of 559 separated parents between 2006 and 2007 found respondents to be highly critical of the CSA in terms of the formula used to calculate liability, the treatment they received at the hands of the CSA, which was felt to be harsh at times, and a lack of confidence that the support when collected would be spent on the child (Peacey & Hunt 2009).

The underperformance of the CSA has resulted in its replacement with the Child Maintenance Service in 2012, although cases will still be transferred up until 2017. The replacement Child Maintenance Service places more emphasis on encouraging parents to negotiate their own arrangements and offers mediation and support to achieve private arrangements (The Independent 2012). Encouraging private arrangements accords with the policies of the Coalition Government (2010-2015) whereby child maintenance is perceived as a private obligation operating between individuals and not a “public good”. However, private arrangements are more fragile, perhaps partly as a result of parental conflict or over contact issues. In one study, the majority of parents felt that paying full maintenance implied a right to contact with children (Wikeley et al. 2008). Perhaps reciprocity does guide parents’ social and material exchanges with each other and reciprocity does explain how contact and maintenance are linked (Skinner 2013).

The Child Maintenance Service is more efficient than the CSA, and although it is similarly hampered by the inefficiencies of its IT systems, its performance has improved considerably and case backlogs are being cleared. By March 2012, it has collected maintenance in 80 percent of the cases it handles, in contrast to the 65 percent collection rate of the CSA in 2007 (Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission 2012). However, the March 2012 figures are misleading as not everyone makes the full payments. Only 60 percent make full payments and 20 percent make part of the payments (The Guardian 2013a).

Furthermore, the Child Maintenance Service offers two types of service: one that calculates liability and collects payments and one that calculates liability and leaves payment collection to be arranged between parents. The second, Maintenance Direct, is less costly but it represents only about 21 percent of all cases the CSA deals with. These direct payments tend to have less than 100 percent compliance rates (ibid.).

In the event of non-payment, the Child Maintenance Service encourages parents to communicate with each other first before pursuing the statutory Child Maintenance Service. Where a statutory child maintenance arrangement is in place, the resident parent is advised to get in contact with the Child Maintenance Service (Child Maintenance Service 2013).

Enforcement of child maintenance has become more stringent and the Child Maintenance Service takes action if the right amount is not paid at the right time without having to apply to a court first. The Service may take money directly from the non-resident parent or directly from their bank account. The next step entails going to court for a “liability order”. This will affect the parent’s credit rating, making it more difficult to get a loan or a credit card in the future. With this order, bailiffs can seize the non-compliant parent’s belongings and sell them to cover the child maintenance owed. Property sale can also be forced and so can disqualification from driving and even commitment to prison (ibid.). In 2011, there were more than 1,000 cases of suspended jail terms imposed for non-payment of child maintenance and in 30 cases individuals were jailed (The Telegraph 2012).

Single mothers who receive state benefits and maintenance

Single mothers on benefits comprise the group that is least likely to receive child maintenance. In 2012, almost two thirds of single mothers on benefits (64%) had not received any child maintenance, either because they had no arrangements in place (43%) or because their partner was not compliant or not liable to pay maintenance through the CSA (21%, Bryson et al. 2013).

Nonetheless, the number of single mothers on state benefits who receive at least some child maintenance has increased from 24 percent in 2008 to 36 percent in 2012. This increase is essentially due to two reasons. Until 2008, single parents who were claiming Income Support were required to establish maintenance arrangements through the CSA. This requirement was unpopular and was lifted in 2009 to allow families to make private arrangements or no arrangements at all. The second reason is that from 2010, child maintenance was excluded from benefit calculations, which allowed single parents on benefit to keep any maintenance they received.

Single parents who receive child maintenance are likely to have a higher income than single parents who do not receive it because child maintenance payments are not counted as income for means-tested benefits such as Income Support, Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) and Housing Benefit.



The state seems to treat child maintenance payments as an “add on” and does not compensate for non-payments by the non-resident parent. Consequently, some single parents are likely to be better off than others. This is different to the system in Germany where an ‘Advance Maintenance System’ insures that every single parent in Germany receives child maintenance as the welfare state compensates for non-payments by the non-resident partner, but only for a maximum of six years and only until the child’s 12th birthday.

As a result of the exclusion of child maintenance in benefit calculations, single parents’ maintenance more than doubled from the average of £10 a week in 2008 to £23 per week in 2012. In fact, for one in five (19%) parents on benefits who receives maintenance, this income has lifted them and their children out of poverty. However, only about a third of single parents on benefits receives child maintenance and of those, one in four does not receive the full amount agreed on a regular basis (Bryson et al. 2013).

A telephone survey of 760 single parents on benefits and 40 interviews found the CSA maintenance arrangements were almost twice as common as private maintenance arrangements: 37 percent and 20 percent respectively (ibid.). The CSA figure comprises 28 percent with a positive assessment, that is where the non-resident parent had been ordered to pay maintenance, and in nine percent the non-resident partner did not have to pay anything (ibid.). Single mothers on benefits often find private maintenance arrangements difficult to sustain and the Child Maintenance Service may need to rethink the policy of encouraging private maintenance arrangements.

Child Support Maintenance calculations

The amount of child support maintenance payments are calculated on the basis of income and living circumstances of the non-resident parent. Child maintenance is then paid up to age 16 or 20 if the child is still in full-time education (Martin 2014).

Child maintenance in England, Wales and Scotland is a regular, reliable financial support that helps towards a child’s everyday living costs. The amount depends on income, care arrangements and number of children. This also means that single parents who would be able to support themselves and their children may have to rely on state benefits if they have no child maintenance arrangement in place. The CSA has been plagued with high non-compliance and with inefficiency partly because the child maintenance calculations were very complex. The formula was simplified in 2003, and now, a fixed percentage of the non-resident parents’ net income is sought (ibid.).

There are five rates that are applied to the non-resident parent’s weekly income. If the income is less than £7 a week then no maintenance is to be paid. This is, in practical terms, only really applicable to those in full-time education or those in prison. Non-resident parents who receive benefits or earn between £7 and £100, pay a flat rate of £5 a week, no matter how many children are involved (CSA 2013).

If the non-resident parent earns up to £200 a week, then the £5 flat rate is charged up to the weekly income of £100 plus a percentage of their after tax weekly income thereafter (17% of their income for the first child, 25% for two children and 31% for three or more children). If earnings are more than £200 a week, then the reduced rate is applied until the income of £200, when the basic rate is applied (12% for the first child, 16% for two and 19% for three or more children). The Basic Plus rate is applied for earnings above £800 a week (table 2, Citizens Advice 2015).

Table 2: Child Maintenance Calculations according to weekly income before tax and number of children

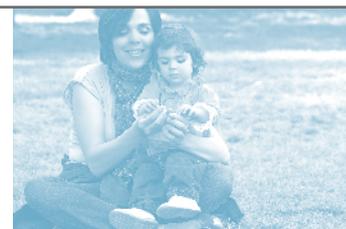
Rate	Parent's weekly income before tax	Weekly rate being paid
Basic Plus Rate	£801 to £3,000	Basic rate until £800, then 9 % for one child 12 % for two 15 % three or more
Basic Rate	£201 to £800	Reduced rate until £200, then 12 % for one child 16 % for two 19 % three or more
Reduced Rate	£101 to £200	£5 until £100, then 17 % for one child 25 % for two 31 % three or more
Flat Rate	£8 to £100	£5
Nil	Up to £7	Nil

Source: Citizens Advice 2015.

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However, the calculations become far more complicated when additional factors are included in the formula used to determine the amount of child maintenance to be paid. These factors include the number of children living with the non-resident parent, the number of children they pay child maintenance for, and whether the child resides with them or at least one night a week (CSA 2013). If the child stays with a non-resident partner for at least one night a week, for example, the amount that this non-resident parent has to pay is reduced by one-seventh for each night of the week that the child stays at the non-resident parent's home (Martin 2014).

If the non-resident partner moves in with a new partner, and the new partner has children from a previous relationship who lives with them, he/she will be able to pay less child maintenance to his/her other children if they are paying either the basic or reduced rate. This is because they also need to pay for the care of the other children. For the Basic rate payer, who earn more than £200 per week before tax, the CSA will disregard 15 percent of their net weekly income if there is one child living with them, 20 percent for two children or 25 percent, if there are three or more children living with them (Citizen Advice 2015).



In the event that the non-resident father declines to reveal information, the CSA can apply a “default maintenance decision” that applies the default rate of £30 for one child, £40 for two children and £50 for three or more children (CSA 2013). In some cases, non-resident parents might not declare all their earnings – a particular problem where people do cash-in-hand jobs such as self-employed building work.

3.3 English Divorce Law

In English law, divorce is treated differently from a cohabitation separation. This section will focus on English law that is the legal system of England and Wales. Together with Scottish law and Northern Ireland law, it is one of the three legal systems of the United Kingdom that each have developed slightly differently over the course of history of the previously independent countries. Scottish Family law places more emphasis on the fair sharing of matrimonial property acquired as a result of the efforts of the marriage. English Family Law emphasises more generally wealth created during the marriage (Cochrane 2014).

In English law, cohabiting couples that separate have fewer rights than couples divorcing or dissolving their civil partnership. Spousal maintenance, for example, is not available to people who have lived together without being married or in a civil partnership (Pannone 2014). Separating cohabiting couples have no special legal status, unless they have a legally binding cohabitation agreement: without an agreement, the only claims that may be made are on behalf of the children or in respect of jointly held assets such as ownership of property (ibid.). Where property is owned in joint names both ex-partners are entitled to an equal share, regardless of any financial contributions made. However, if property is in one ex-partner’s name, the other ex-partner may have a legal interest (ibid.).

Currently, pre-nuptial agreements are not strictly enforceable or legally binding in England and Wales but there is a strong movement that lobbies for the establishment of legally binding pre-nuptial agreements. The Law Commission has recommended it with the proviso that agreements would only be enforceable “after both partner’s financial needs, and any financial responsibilities towards children, have been met” (The Law Commission 2014).

There is also a movement among the legal profession that advocates a no fault divorce system. Unlike many other divorce jurisdictions around the world, England and Wales still operates a fault based system. There are five accepted grounds for divorce in the UK that can be used: Adultery, unreasonable behaviour, desertion/separation, having lived apart for more than five years and separation of two years, if both partners agree to the divorce. It has been argued that the cuts to legal aid may lead the government to reconsider a no fault divorce system as it would alleviate the burden on the courts as an increasing number obtain a divorce without legal representation in courts (Resolution 2012).

For more than a decade London has been considered the divorce capital of the world for the international wealthy following a string of high profile celebrity divorce cases that have led to multi-million pound payouts to wives in the courts (The Washington Post 2014). The financially weaker partner of the divorcing couples tends to be awarded large settlements and generous spousal maintenance payments. English law is perceived as particularly fair to the financially weaker spouse: for example, there is no discrimination between breadwinning and homemaking as both are perceived as equal. Furthermore, in English law a judge has considerable discretion when deciding how a couple's finances should be divided. There is no rule book which determines whether maintenance should be payable or for how long. Instead, a judge has to decide each case on its individual merits to ensure both, a fair outcome and one that meets the needs of the parties and any children (McLynn 2014).

“Fairness” is the guiding principal in deciding on spousal maintenance and asset division. It comprises the principles of needs, compensation and sharing. The Matrimonial Causes Act 1973 requires the court to consider “the financial needs, obligations and responsibilities which each of the parties to the marriage has or is likely to have in the foreseeable future” (Newbury 2012). Statute law stops there, and then the parties or the court must use their own judgement to decide what their specific needs are, in terms of income and capital requirements such as housing, and how they will be met out of the family pot and how additional capital assets are shared. Deciding how to share the rest of the assets will ultimately depend on the view taken by the parties, their advisors and if necessary the court, as to their own particular needs, given their financial position and other factors. Some Judges interpret “needs” far less generously than others (Newbury 2012).

Following a landmark decision in 2000 in the case of the farmers Mr and Mrs White, the role of the homemaker and the breadwinner are treated as equal. This means that the starting point in all cases is an equal division of the matrimonial assets. While subsequent cases have refined this and departed from this idea of equal sharing, it still holds and can be considered to promote gender equality. Nonetheless, English law also creates uncertainty as the court's outcomes are unpredictable and individual judges may come to different rulings (McLynn 2014).

3.4 Spousal maintenance

Spousal maintenance is a regular payment made by a former husband, wife or civil partner to their ex-partner and is only paid where one partner cannot support themselves financially without it. According to The Money Advice Centre, that is a free and independent service set up by government, the amount would depend on financial needs, income and income potential and, in rare cases, lost opportunities when the resident parent has given up a highly-paid career to bring up the children. The court has wide discretion in deciding length and amount of the maintenance and no data is available about the number of neither spousal maintenance support cases nor the minimum or average amount paid under English Law (The Money Advice Service 2014).



An alternative to the regular payment of spousal maintenance is the payment as a lump sum, also termed a “clean break” that frees the ex-partners from each other financially. Where possible, the courts prefer to order a “clean break” rather than continuing payments for spousal maintenance. A Clean Break Order ends all claims the parties may have against each other on all financial matters except child maintenance and aims to make the parties financially independent. For some, a pension can represent a significant part of their assets. In the past, couples would have to hand over other assets to offset a pension, but since December 2000 it has been possible to split a pension, giving each person their own allocation (The Money Advice Service 2014).

Spousal maintenance is also dependent on the length of marriage. If the marriage or civil partnership is short, at less than five years, it may not be paid at all or only for a short period. It can be paid for life where a couple has been together for a long time or where an ex-partner is not in paid employment as there is no automatic assumption that the non-working partner has to enter paid employment (The Money Advice Service 2014). Recent case law has indicated that court practice is changing and that spousal maintenance orders are harder to justify than they used to be.

Latest High Court cases show the trend is towards the expectation that both partners can work or retrain in order to obtain employment. It seems, the judge will no longer treat an unwillingness to work as a good enough reason to expect payments to continue longer than is necessary and this reflects the change of discourse from regarding women as mothers and homemakers to mothers as workers. It has been suggested that this shift in perspective is occurring as a new generation of judges is coming through to the High Court, who might find the idea of “joint lives” maintenance to be anachronistic at a time where increasingly, many families have two wage-earners (Cambridge Family Law Practice 2012). However, there are no legal rules yet that state that a parent has to look for paid employment with young children, as the High Court case *Murphy versus Murphy* indicates (*Murphy v Murphy* [2014] EWHC 2263 (Fam), see insert).

This trend towards seeing women as workers is evident in a second landmark ruling by the Court of Appeal on 24 February 2015. The ex-wife and stay-at-home parent of a millionaire racehorse surgeon who appealed against the reduction of her spousal maintenance, has been ordered by a judge to enter paid employment as she has “no right to be supported for life” at her ex-husband’s expense. The ruling states: “the world of work has innumerable possibilities these days ... vast numbers of women with children just get on with it and Mrs Wright should have done the same.” The judge continued to state that “Mrs Wright has made no effort whatsoever to seek work or to update her skills ... I am satisfied that she has worked on this basis ... that she would be supported for life” (Gravell 2015).

Spousal maintenance stops when one of the ex-partners dies or when the person receiving spousal maintenance remarries or enters another civil partnership. Remarriage or registering a civil partnership also has an effect on pension rights. The former spouse can use their ex-partner’s National Insurance record for their basic state pension if this gives them a higher pension as a

result. However, if the former spouse remarries or registers a new civil partnership before they reach State Pension age, this right is lost. Likewise, widows, widowers and surviving civil partners can also inherit some or their late partner's entire additional pension or graduated retirement benefit, but they lose this right if they remarry or register a new civil partnership before they are of State Pension age (Age UK 2014).

In English Law there is no automatic provision for termination of maintenance because of cohabitation. The legal argument is that in their former marriage they have made the decision to raise a family and thus possibly affected the wife's ability to earn her own living. The receiving partner also has no claims against her new partner as they are unmarried (Stowe 2010). However, there is a chance that spousal maintenance might stop or be reduced in the event of cohabitation. If a receiving ex-partner is found to be cohabiting in court, the discovery will not be ignored, even if they are not being funded by their new partner. The court may want to establish what the partner ought to be contributing and if they are found to be able to afford to pay, they will be expected to do so by the court (ibid.).

High Court case Murphy versus Murphy 2014

Mr and Mrs Murphy were divorcing after six years of marriage, which had resulted in twins now aged three. The wife had worked in an upmarket department store until 2009 earning approximately £30,000 per annum, and had not worked since the twins were born in 2011. The husband agreed that the wife needed spousal maintenance now, but that the court should order a date on which the spousal maintenance should reduce, and order that the payments were to stop when the children reached 18. The husband thought that the wife did have an earning capacity and knew that the court had to look at whether someone has an earning capacity and whether it is reasonable to expect his former wife to take steps to acquire earning capacity.

The judge asked the husband's representatives to identify what job Mrs Murphy could do when she had twins to take to school at 9am and pick up from school at 3pm and care for them during the school holidays and inset days for 14 weeks a year. The judge made clear his view:

"What, frankly, the arguments by the husband overlook is that the having of children changes everything. Of course this wife could never have expected a 'meal ticket for life' on the basis of six years of marriage and two years of cohabitation if there had been no children. Far from it, she would no doubt have continued to work at (name of department store), or in similar employment, and at the point of the breakdown of their marriage and divorce there would have been a fair capital division and a clean break and each would have gone their own way. But the fact of having children, and their obvious dependence in this particular case on their mother for their care, changes everything, as I have said. The economic impact on this wife is likely to endure not only until they leave school but, indeed, for the rest of her life."



For those reasons, the judge ordered no step down and no bar on the spousal maintenance on the facts of this particular case. However, the order will also contain a clear recital with regard to the wife's desire and intention to obtain the best paid work that she reasonably can (*Murphy v Murphy* [2014] EWHC 2263 (Fam)).

3.5 Effects of divorce on children's wellbeing

There is a large body of research that indicates that divorce is associated with an increased risk of psychological, behavioural and health problems for children. The seminal meta-analysis by Amato & Keith (1991) involved 92 US studies that compared children living in divorced single parent families with children living in continuously intact families on measures of wellbeing. The results showed that children of divorce scored lower than children in intact families across a variety of outcomes. However, methodologically more sophisticated studies as well as more recent studies showed a weaker effect than did earlier studies. In a later study Amato (2010) demonstrates divorce is not just one event but a process that affects children differently over time, a process that has been termed the Divorce-Stress-Adjustment Perspective.

In the UK, there have been reviews and longitudinal studies assessing the impact of divorce. The charitable Joseph Rowntree Foundation commissioned about 12 research projects and reviews. Rodgers & Pryor (1998) reviewed 200 research papers from the UK and the US and found that parental separation results in significant but short-term distress for most children, such as unhappiness, low self-esteem, behavioural difficulties, problems with friendships and loss of contact with the extended family. These effects fade over time, particularly when parents were able to communicate. However, for a minority of children the effects were far more detrimental and extended into adulthood. The outcomes varied from behavioural problems, poor educational achievement to physical and emotional health problems and were magnified by poverty and socio-economic disadvantage (*ibid.*). These findings were also reported in a comprehensive review that the Department for Education, Schools and Families commissioned and which found that there is almost a common consensus regarding the evidence on child outcomes (Mooney et al. 2009).

In addition to reviews, there have also been longitudinal cohort studies in the UK, such as the British National Child Development Study (NCDS) that followed up 12,000 children born in 1958. This study found that children of divorced parents had poorer reading and maths test scores as well as behavioural problems. In the long-term, men and women from divorced parents were more likely to experience divorce themselves and young women from divorced parents were also more likely to cohabit or marry at an earlier age, become teenage parents and have a child outside marriage. However, socio-economic disadvantage has been found to be an influencing factor that moderates outcome (Elliot et al. 2008).

One major mental health study of nearly 8,000 children found that children from single parent families were about twice as likely as the children of married couples to have a mental disorder (16% and 7% respectively). Divorce, rather than family structure, seems to have a critical impact on levels of emotional disorder as children of divorced parents were more likely to have an emotional disorder than those whose parent were always single (8% compared with 5%) (Green et al. 2005).

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is another major UK study that incorporates outcomes for children after divorce. The MCS is a nationally representative, large-scale longitudinal survey of children born in 2000/01 from about 12,000 families. Analysis of data from this study also showed that children of separated parents were doing less well in their Foundation Stage Profile, which is an assessment of children's developmental achievement over the first year of primary school. Twice as many children from the separated group, compared with the intact group, were in the lowest decile of Foundation Stage Profiles. The connection between parental separation and the children's health outcome was weaker but it was still significant (Hobcraft & Kiernan 2010).

The most frequently experienced stressful event for children and adolescents was the death of a family member or friend, which was most often the child's grandparents. The MCS found that parental separation and divorce was the second; trailing far behind these in terms of prevalence, in third and fourth place - injuries or illnesses of family members and the child in the study (Jones et al. 2013).

This research also found that the effects of divorce on children depend on the age of the child. Divorce and separation is associated with worse outcomes for children at age seven and over than younger children. A parental divorce that occurred after the child became seven years old had significant negative outcomes for teenagers, such as achievement at age 16 and emotional, behavioural and social wellbeing at age 13. This was also related to worsening behavioural wellbeing as children approach adolescence. Wellbeing remained statistically significant even after controlling for poverty (ibid.). In contrast, children who experienced parental separation/divorce in their early childhood (below age seven) were less affected by it. Perhaps older children are better able to remember their parents and siblings together and grasp the implications of the separation to a greater extent (ibid.).

Age at parental separation or divorce and socio-economic disadvantage are not the only factors that influence children's wellbeing negatively; conflict and poor relations between cohabiting and married parents can also contribute, suggesting that separation, even if traumatic at first, might lead to better child outcomes than ongoing exposure to an enduring but conflict ridden relationship between parents (Mooney et al. 2009).

Moreover, negative child outcomes after a divorce can be mitigated by parents who communicate with their children about the separation and who listen to their children's views. There also seem to be an association between the mother's mental health and child wellbeing (ibid., Bradshaw 2011).



Having a sibling can also operate as a buffer in periods of stress such as parental divorce: children from high conflict homes with high sibling support reported more positive adjustment than did only-children and individuals with low sibling support (Caya & Liem 1998).

3.6 Conclusions

This chapter about post separation parenting has sought to map out social trends and explain the terrain of policies and English law in which post separation parenting is contextualised. English law treats marriage differently from cohabitation and the effects can be seen in spousal maintenance and pension rights and, to a lesser extent, in the concept of Parental Responsibility.

This chapter has also shed light on the misconceptions and short-sighted approaches which have often characterised policies in this area. Another concern are the mediation services: on one hand the Coalition Government invested in mediation services to free up court resources, yet with the other made cuts to legal aid that effectively undermined the investment in mediation services. Mediation was advocated as minimising the delay and costs incurred by family courts and re-focus the legal system's attention on the needs of children. Initially, mediation appears as a good idea, but there is little awareness of its existence among the British public, and, in a stressful divorce process, ex-partners tend to put their trust in their individual legal representation instead, on the assumption that this will get them the best deal.

Moreover though, mediation leaves children in a difficult position. Mediation takes place outside the law, unless a consent order is sought from the court for certainty. Children are therefore without the welfare paramount protection of the Children Act 1989. MacLean and Eekelaar (*in press*) would like to see children to be dealt with under the protection of the Children Act rather than floating as third parties. A second recommendation is to support financial mediation automatically with a legal input from mediators who are trained lawyers or non-lawyer mediators with legal training. Therefore, mediation in tandem with legal representation might be the way forward.

Mediation also depends on both partners being able to communicate with each other, and this might not be possible in acrimonious separations nor through every strata of the population. Higher income couples tend to be more open to mediation than lower income couples. Recent research on existing long-term couple relationships in the UK also shows that more highly educated couples place much more emphasis on being able to communicate with their current partner than couples with fewer educational qualifications (Gabb et al. 2014).

As a result of legal aid cuts, fewer parents are being referred to mediation services and some mediation services have had to close, meaning that government investment was effectively wasted. As a consequence of the cuts, courts have become even more burdened; adding to delays and increased costs of family courts as parents represent themselves without legal representation if they cannot afford it. Many families turn their back on the legal system, some making private

arrangements that might not be stable while others are unable to make any arrangements which may mean that the non-resident parent has no contact with their child/ren. Where children are caught up in parental conflict, contact with the non-residential parent can be very damaging. The cuts to legal aid therefore certainly do not facilitate a re-focus on the needs of the child.

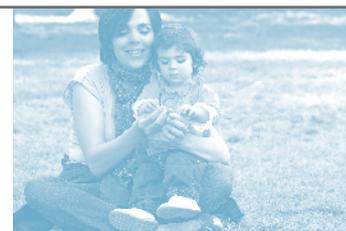
Child maintenance is another conflict ridden issue. Only around half of children in separated families are supported by an effective child maintenance arrangement, either through the Child Maintenance Service, court order or private arrangements. The Child Maintenance Service is more successful than private arrangements in collecting maintenance and it has collected in 80 percent of cases it handles. However, only 60 percent have made the full payment. Private arrangements are even less successful as six in ten tend to not receive child maintenance at all. The factors related to the success of private arrangements are higher income, a working resident parent, contact between the non-resident parents and the child and whether the parents are on friendly terms.

Single mothers on benefits are least likely to receive child maintenance, and they are almost twice as likely to have formal child maintenance as private arrangements in place. While it is proven that one in five parents on benefits who receive maintenance have been lifted out of poverty, only about a third of single parents on benefits received child maintenance and of those, one in four do not receive the full amount agreed on a regular basis.

Despite this evidence, the Coalition Government (2010-2015) discouraged parents from relying on costly government services to administer arrangements on parents' behalf; rather, it encouraged the use of private and collaborative arrangements and argued that this is better for children. A parent with care has to convince officials that a private child maintenance arrangement does not work before being permitted access to the scheme and has to choose between two types of services, a Direct Pay service or a Collect and Pay service.

Where the Child Maintenance Service manages payments, the paying parents are charged 20 percent and the receiving parents four percent on top of their regular maintenance payment for collecting and paying maintenance. According to the evidence then, this will disadvantage those single parents on a low income, not-working or those who are not on friendly terms with the non-residential parent or where the child has no contact with them.

English divorce law is undergoing change too but for now, pre-nuptial agreements are not legally binding in England and Wales and a fault based divorce system is still in place. English law is perceived as fair to the financially weaker partner because there is no discrimination between the role of the breadwinner and the homemaker. This means that the equal division of the matrimonial assets is the starting point. The individual judge has considerable discretion to ensure "fairness", the guiding objective, when deciding spousal maintenance and asset division and subsequently, individual judges come to different rulings.



Spousal maintenance may only be paid where one parent cannot otherwise support themselves financially, and where the marriage or the civil partnership has lasted longer than five years. There are no legal rules (yet) that state that a parent has to look for paid employment to support themselves. However, recent High Court cases show that the trend is towards the expectation that both partners can be expected to be in paid employment or to retrain in order to obtain employment as the children become older, whereby also enforcing the “citizen worker” role.

Divorce has at least negative short-term outcomes on the wellbeing of many children and long-term consequences for a minority of children, particularly older children. Maintaining contact with the non-resident parent has many potential benefits for children such as developing or maintaining meaningful relationships. A close relationship with both parents is also associated with children’s positive adjustment after divorce. In fact, most children in separated families want to stay in touch with their non-resident parent and find the loss of contact painful.

Negative outcomes can be limited when parents are communicating with each other and listen to the children’s wishes. High sibling support and being sufficiently well off financially also acts as a protective buffer. Certain factors that seem to exacerbate negative child outcomes are poverty, maternal mental health issues, and parental conflict post separation and negative parent-child relationships. It is debatable which of these factors act as a cause or an effect.

The implementation of initiatives such as shared parenting is firmly located in broader politicised and often highly charged agenda setting. The Coalition Government pushed shared parenting but stopped short of presuming it automatically in the Children and Families Act 2014. Clearly, children benefit from continuing and regular contact with both parents but only when they cooperate, communicate, and have low levels of conflict. Issues that are enmeshed with shared parenting “muddy the water”. Research shows that the courts are not biased against non-resident parents, yet concerns about bias against fathers persists. This could turn shared parenting into a gender debate. Concerns over shared parenting highlight gendered practices, and its exclusivity status because of the resources needed for shared parenting. Shared parenting is not an option for parents who rely on the welfare state for some or all of their income and housing needs. Research is needed into the outcomes of shared parenting and having two homes for child wellbeing.

Importantly, parents who are going through the divorce proceedings need to be made aware about how a low-conflict divorce and their ability to communicate with their ex-partner can minimise the negative effects of divorce on children.

4. Single parents in the British welfare state – from carers to workers

Single parents are almost five times more likely to receive benefits as couples with children. Successive governments have shaped the welfare state according to their political complexion. The New Labour Government (1997-2010) and the Coalition Government (2010-2015) have affected the situation of single parents with social policies, cash transfers and tax credits. The Conservative Government (2015-) is set to follow suit.

This chapter elaborates how welfare to work programmes and policies have transformed single parents from “citizen-carers” to “citizen-workers”. Since the late 1990s, the UK government has engaged in a process of welfare reform, which prioritises moving benefit recipients into paid work and the Conservative Government (2015-) is set to continue in this direction. The UK shares this “work first” approach with the US and Australian governments (Wright 2011).

The New Labour Government and its successors, the Coalition Government and then the Conservative Government identified the “work first” approach as a key approach to addressing poverty among lone parents and their children and are disinclined to listen to parents for whom paid work might not be a viable option. Successive governments have also assumed that paid work has a wider role in social integration, a way to enhance wellbeing and social inclusion (Klett-Davies 2007). Increasingly, workless single parents are perceived as exerting a significant pressure on the welfare state and a significant drain on the economy, particularly as reducing the welfare budget is being touted as the necessary response to deficit reduction following the economic recession.

Some policies have, arguably, contributed to decreasing the child poverty rate but single parents continue to be at a great disadvantage in comparison to couples with children. Single parents are more than five times as likely than couples with children to receive out-of-work benefits (7% and 37% respectively) according to the Family Resource Survey (FRS) in 2012/13 (DWP 2014g). In other words, of the nearly 2 million single parents with dependent children (1,974 single parents in 2013 according to LFS data, ONS 2015), 37 percent of single parents, or almost three quarters of a million (730,380), receive the three main income dependent out-of-work benefits (DWP 2014g).²⁸

28 The three main state benefits are Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance.



4.1 The New Labour Government (1997-2010)

The New Labour Government (1997-2010) regarded child poverty as unacceptably high and arguably one of the boldest and most important targets set was its promise to halve child poverty by 2010 and to abolish it by 2020 (DWP & DoE 2012). This target has not been met but the child poverty rate of single parent households after housing costs has decreased from 64 percent in 1997 to 41 percent in 2010, the last year of the New Labour Government (chapter 2).

Workless households were seen as a “primary cause” of child poverty and lone parents became a target for the New Labour Government’s welfare-to-work policies. A further target was set of 70 percent of all lone parents having to be in employment by 2010 (DWP 2006). This target has also been missed but the rate of single mothers in paid employment has increased from 43 percent in 1997 to 56 percent in 2010.

The level and range of support to help lone parents enter, and stay in employment has been significantly expanded. Lone parents have also benefited from the extension of various provisions and rights for all parents at work, such as the right to request flexible working and the right to free childcare for children aged three and over.

Measures that enabled the “work first” approach were introduced: increased financial rewards of employment, increased availability of childcare and increased contributions towards the cost of childcare (Bell et al. 2006). However, with the introduction of more punitive measures, namely the 2008 Lone Parent Obligations, lone parents were officially redefined in policy terms as “citizen-workers” rather than as “citizen-carers” (Haux & Whitworth 2014). This shift decreased the value associated with caring for children, particularly by poor parents, and enhanced the value connected with paid work.

The voluntary New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) programme is one of the first examples of the “work first” approach (ibid.).

The New Deal for Lone Parents

The New Labour Government (1997-2010) introduced the NDLP in 1998 and it was axed following the formation of the Conservative-led Coalition Government (2010-2015) after the General Election in 2010. The NDLP was part of the New Deal, Labours flagship policy to get people back into work, which was also introduced in 1998. It provided information, advice, some training opportunities, and help with claiming in-work financial support. Participation was voluntary and each participant was allocated a Personal Adviser, who worked to support entry into work. Some lone parents who started work were also eligible for an in-work credit of £40 per week, payable to those who had been on Income Support for at least 12 months. Income Support has been one of the main forms of support available to single parents in England, Scotland and Wales since

1988. Receipt of Income Support automatically entitles recipients and their children to free school meals, help towards the cost of school uniforms, health benefits (including free prescriptions, dental treatment and sight tests), maximum housing benefit and certain Social Fund payments that provide more short-term financial help for people in need (including the Sure Start Maternity Grant and Funeral Payments, Gingerbread 2014a).

Critics claim that the New Deal was not effective in equipping participants for work and that participants failed to see the value of the programme (BBC News 2009). The incoming Coalition Government pointed out that each work placement within the New Deal had cost over £31,000 and that only 16,238 people have been found jobs, at a cost of £508 million. However, a total of £477 million of that amount was paid to delivery organisations in up-front fees to set up the scheme. The remainder was spent on the job placements (Jordan 2010).

A cost-benefit analysis has found that the NDLP is cost effective partly because of the low unit costs of the programme. An interim analysis suggests that after taking into account the additional earnings from these jobs and the costs of running the programme, there was an economic gain to society of £4,400 per additional job and a net exchequer saving of just under £1,600 per additional job as well as substantial social benefits (Evans et al. 2003).

It is not possible to give a precise measure of take-up of the NDLP, but between 1997 and 2000 the proportion of lone parents in employment rose by seven percentage points. It has been found that the contribution of NDLP to this change is unlikely to have been as large as other policies and economic growth. Instead, the importance of the NDLP was that, for the first time, it provided access to advice and training for lone parents considering work (Walker & Wiseman 2003).

Another evaluation showed that the NDLP modestly reduced benefit receipt among participants and that it had a meaningful impact on the time participants spent on benefits. The outcomes varied both with participant characteristics and over time, with a larger impact for lone parents who participated in the scheme during a long spell of Income Support (Dolton & Smith 2011).

Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit

The New Labour Government (1997–2010) significantly changed the structure of the benefit system for lone parents with family oriented tax reforms. Changes were made to the tax credit system and both in-work and out-of-work benefits became initially more generous. In 1999, Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) was introduced. It was paid to a single parent household if the parent worked at least 16 hours a week and had an income and savings below certain thresholds.

WFTC was replaced by a combination of Child Tax Credit (CTC) and Working Tax Credit (WTC) in 2003, and there were continual increases in the generosity of CTC, a means-tested programme that



was not bound to employment status. These two policies have been commended for raising labour supply and the income of the poorest families (Brewer et al. 2012). Together they strengthened the work incentives of lone parents and they have been taken over by the Coalition Government (2010-2015) and the Conservative Government (2015-).

In practice, single mothers who do not work can receive Child Tax Credit only. Parents who work 30 hours a week could claim child tax credits and working tax credits (Which 2014). Parents can also claim up to 70 percent of the cost of approved childcare to a maximum of £175 a week or up to £300 for two or more children via Working Tax Credit (table 3).

A particular failing of the UK's Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit system is that a large number of overpayments and underpayments are generated each year due to changes in circumstances between the date of the claim and the dates awards are paid. In 2012/13 the UK government overpaid around £1.5 billion (and underpaid about £0.6 billion). While underpayments are often paid afterwards, overpayments are difficult to recover (Hood & Oakley 2014).

Table 3: Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit rates and income thresholds and withdrawal rates, 2015-2016

Working Tax Credit		£ per year
Basic element		£1,940
Couple and lone parent element		£2,010
30 hour element		£810
Childcare element of Working Tax Credit		£ per week
Maximum eligible cost for 1 child		£175 per week
Maximum eligible cost for 2 or more children		£300 per week
Percentage of eligible costs covered		70 percent
Child Tax Credit		£ per year
Child Tax Credit Family element		£545
Child element		£2,780
Disabled child element		£3,140
Severely disabled child element		£1,275
Income thresholds and withdrawal rates – £ per year		£ per year
Income threshold		£6,420
Withdrawal rate (percent)		41 percent
Threshold for those entitled to Child Tax Credit only		£16,105
Income rise disregard		£5,000
Income fall disregard		£2,500

Source: HM Revenue & Customs 2015.

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Nonetheless, partly as a result of these two policies, in addition to the NDLP, the single parent employment rate continually increased (chapter 2).

Does a Couple Penalty exist?

There has been some political and public debate on whether the benefit system discourages single parents from forming partnerships because benefits would be reduced.

Some studies suggest that financial disincentives effect lone parents entering relationships and reduce the probability that a single mother will acquire a partner (Anderberg 2008, Benson 2013, Joyce 2013). It is also possible that a never married lone mother on benefits may be less attractive to a potential new partner (Skew 2009). Research has suggested that the “couple penalty” does not exist (Hirsch 2012). For example, neither the Working Tax Credit nor Child Tax Credit changes with the number of adults in the household. However, under Working Tax Credit a couple is required to work 24 hours per week, rather than the 16 that are expected of single parents.

One study found that single mothers appreciate that they have complete autonomy over managing their individual benefits (Klett-Davies 2007). Another study found that lone mothers yearn for financial security and stability and with a partner joining the household, there are even more factors to consider that are also prone to change (Millar 2011).

In Work Credit

In Work Credit is a wage supplement that the New Labour Government (1997-2010) initially introduced as a pilot in 2004. It was rolled out as a national scheme in 2008 and the Coalition Government (2010-2015) took it over. By December 2013 there have been 407,600 In Work Credit starts (Prince 2014).

In Work Credit is targeted at everyone who received out-of-work benefits. It is a tax-free payment of £40 per week (£60 per week in London) for parents bringing up children alone and who work at least 16 hours a week. It is payable for up to 12 months and the job must be expected to last for five weeks or more.

In Work Credit has clearly made an important contribution to reducing income poverty. The In Work Credit of £60 has been particularly important in supplementing the incomes of low paid parents living in London, who experience much higher housing, transport and childcare costs than elsewhere. In Work Credit stops after a maximum of one year and an evaluation shows that the positive effects of raising household income are short lived if there has been no growth in wages or other improvement in employment prospects (Griffiths 2011).



This study also shows that when in-work benefits, such as the In Work Credit and the Working Tax Credit, are withdrawn as earnings rise, many parents are dis-incentivised from working longer hours and earning more, particularly those in receipt of housing benefit and living in private rented accommodation. High rental levels and the limited availability of social housing seemed to be as important in explaining parents' reluctance to increase earnings as weak work incentives and the high rate of benefit withdrawal. Therefore, increasing parental employment is likely to remain a challenge regardless of any increase of the income levels at which earnings are ignored (ibid.).

Transfer from Income Support to Job Seekers Allowance – Lone Parents Obligations

Despite this backdrop of increasing single parent employment rates and decreasing child poverty levels, the New Labour Government (1997–2010) took a more punitive approach to welfare and introduced the controversial policy of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO).

In 2008, most non-employed lone parents were transferred from Income Support into the “activating” Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) regime. This regime has enhanced conditionality requirements, the Lone Parents Obligations (LPO). Single parents with dependent children were no longer entitled to Income Support, solely on grounds of being a lone parent but were transferred to Job Seekers Allowance (JSA). The LPO of the JSA regime requires lone parents to actively seek employment depending on the age of their youngest child.

LPO was introduced for paternalistic, economic and electoral reasons and it has been taken over by successive governments. The New Labour Government may also have been attempting to make the high cost of intensive employment support schemes and tax credits more effective through higher job search conditionality (Haux & Whitworth 2014).

Until 2008, single parents could receive Income Support until their children were 16 years old. Income Support has been one of the main forms of support available to single parents in England, Scotland and Wales since 1988. Single parents were required to attend Work-Focused Interviews at Jobcentres, but unlike the mainstream unemployed they were not required to attend regular Jobcentre meetings with the obligation to actively seek and accept paid work.

The practical implication of this change has been the gradual transfer of economically inactive parents with a youngest child aged five or older from Income Support to JSA. Under the Labour Government in 2009, single parents with a youngest child aged 10 or over moved from Income Support to JSA, from 2010 single parents with youngest child aged seven or over moved to JSA and under the Coalition Government (2010–2015) the age threshold was lowered further and in 2012 single parents with a child aged five or over moved across (table 4).

Table 4: Transfer from Income Support to Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) timeline according to the age of the youngest child

Timeline	Move from Income Support to JSA by age of youngest child
From 2009	10 or over
From 2010	7 or over
From 2012	5 or over

Source: Table created by Martina Klett-Davies.

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JSA can be divided into contribution-based JSA and means-tested JSA. To qualify for JSA a person must be unemployed or working on average less than 16 hours a week and have income below set amounts. For those people who work part-time, the first £5, £10, or £20 of their earnings are ignored before benefits are reduced pound for pound for all earnings above this level. While the standard disregard is £5 a week for single people and £10 weekly for couples, a higher £20 disregard is available to lone parents (Casebourne & Finn 2011).

In contrast to means-tested JSA, contribution based JSA can be paid for up to six months and does not take into account savings, capital or partner's earnings. In order to claim contribution-based JSA the individual must have paid sufficient National Insurance Contributions (NICs) in the two tax years prior to the beginning of the year in which they sign on and claim benefits (Hood & Oakley 2014). Individuals who do not qualify for contribution-based JSA may be able to receive income-based JSA, providing they have sufficiently low income and a limited amount of savings (capital up to £6,000 is ignored). The JSA amount is identical to that of Income Support with similar benefits attached: free school meals, health benefits (including free prescriptions, dental treatment and sight tests), maximum housing benefit, the Sure Start Maternity Grant and Funeral Payments (ibid.).

Some lone parent flexibilities were incorporated into JSA regulations in 2008. While jobseekers have to be available for work for 40 hours a week, single parents with a child under 16 can limit the hours they can work to below 40 a week to take account of their caring responsibilities. However, they must be available for work for as many hours as their caring responsibilities allow, and it must be at least 16 hours a week.

Single parents with a child under the age of 13 can limit their availability for work to normal school hours but they may be expected to use childcare to cover travel to work time as well as work longer during school holidays, providing there is childcare available. The school day in the UK is generally from 9am to 3.30pm, Mondays to Fridays, 38 weeks a year.²⁹

²⁹ <http://www.teachingintheuk.com/go/uk-teaching-info/school-system/> (accessed December 8, 2015)



The definition of this is being kept vague and single parents are being advised to talk to their personal Jobcentre Plus adviser to record their agreed hours of work in their Jobseeker's Agreement. For example, these flexibilities exempt them from requirements to seek work if their child has been excluded from school and it is not reasonably possible for them to make alternative care arrangements (Gingerbread 2014b). Evaluations suggest that these flexibilities are often misinterpreted or poorly communicated by Jobcentre Plus advisers (One Parent Families Scotland 2014).

Lone Parent Obligations: evaluation studies

Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) had a much greater impact on moving lone parents into work than other previous programmes, mainly due to its mandatory nature and the associated conditionality.

One impact assessment found that LPO has increased the proportion of single parents in work by between eight and ten percentage points (Avram et al. 2013). Chapter 2 shows that since 2008 (the introduction of LPO) to 2013, the single mother employment rate has increased by four percentage points from 56 percent to 60 percent and this is in the context of the economic recession. However, it had already been on the increase and rose by five percentage points in the five years before the introduction of LPO in 2008 (from 51% to 56%). During this period, job availability and childcare also improved and this is suggestive of the importance of both structural factors as well as behavioural factors in explaining the increase.

On a positive side, an evaluation study found that LPO has changed behaviour. Lone parents are generally positive about work for a range of financial and non-financial reasons and that LPO has given them an extra push to move towards or into work and to be more active in their job search (Coleman & Riley 2012).

On an operational level, it seems that Jobcentres lack single parent employment advisers to cope with the increased volume of claimants. One evaluation study found that lone parents have mixed feelings about the Jobcentre Plus support and some do not feel that they receive appropriate help and advice while on JSA (ibid.). Other research has shown that the rapport between the single parent claimant and their personal adviser matters greatly to the confidence, satisfaction and wellbeing of the single parent (Klett-Davies 2007).

The impact of LPO on single mothers' employment rate also varies with age and qualifications, with potentially smaller gains for younger mothers and lone mothers with lower levels of qualifications. Lone parents who are under 25 years old appear to have been impacted less by LPO than lone parents aged 25 years and older, with fewer moving off out-of-work benefits and into work. Lone parents with qualifications below GCSE level or no qualifications have seen very slow employment growth (Tinsley 2014).

Those with a limiting long-standing illness, disability or infirmity, especially those with mental health problems were also less likely to move into work (Coleman & Riley 2012). The conclusion drawn is that the most disadvantaged lone parents have benefited least from LPO.

There are also other structural issues. Local Authority data shows systematic spatial patterning of lone parent JSA rates consistent with specific structural features such as high childcare and housing costs plus intensive competition for jobs (Whitworth 2013).

The possibility that LPO encourages lone parents to have more children to remain eligible for Income Support and so to avoid being subject to the rigours of LPO was deemed to be worth examining but could not be substantiated (Avram et al. 2013).

An earlier qualitative evaluation found that some lone parents were exempt from LPO and could continue to claim Income Support because of disability or health issues, transitional protection or having another child. For example, fifteen percent of lone parents on Income Support are recorded as being disabled. Disabled lone parents are less likely to be in employment than the disabled working age population as a whole (39% and 47% respectively), and also than disabled partnered mothers (55%, DWP 2013).

A transitional protection applies to lone parents on Income Support who are in full-time study or following a full-time course on an approved training scheme (Casebourne et al. 2010). A parent who is studying in further education – but not higher education – may be able to claim Income Support.

A further finding is that sanctions, that can create financial and emotional hardship for single parents and their families, are inconsistently understood and enforced. The application of LPO also seems to vary in practice: about four percent of lone parents are still receiving Income Support for no identifiable reason around twelve months after the date on which they should have lost their entitlement (Avram et al. 2013).

As the result of LPO there is a very small group of single parents who could have fallen through the welfare safety net. These single parents have moved off Income Support but they have not moved into work and are not receiving any out-of-work benefits or tax credits and are in an unknown situation (Avram et al. 2014).

Most lone parents show a preference for part-time work, and particularly for jobs that can accommodate their childcare responsibilities. Lone parents looking for work were often unwilling to work outside of school hours (56%) or in school holidays (31%). Those who were more family-focused in their attitudes and less concerned about the stigma of being on benefits were less likely than other lone parents to have worked at all (Coleman & Riley 2012).



Lone Parent Obligations – A critic's view

The rapid roll-out of LPO has attracted surprisingly little political attention and has been widely accepted across the political spectrum and tolerated by lobby groups and single parents themselves. There seems to be a consensus about connecting lone parent's entitlement to social benefits with their participation in the labour market, particularly during an economic recession and with a stated government aim of reducing the budget deficit through cuts (Whitworth 2013). The key objections to activation measures such as the LPO that have been analysed include insufficient recognition given to personal and structural barriers restricting lone parents' participation in paid work and the devaluation of unpaid care. Furthermore, there is a lack of evidence regarding long-term outcomes of LPO and previous sections have shown the weak financial gains associated with lone parents entering paid employment. LPO compound women's existing labour market disadvantage as it is mostly women who are single parents.

Most lone parents prefer to be in part-time work that can accommodate their childcare responsibilities. The opinions over whether part-time work under 16 hours can be a valuable means for lone parents to keep in touch with the labour market are split. The optimist view is that "mini-jobs" can act as a "stepping stone" to longer hours and part-time work is used by some lone parents as a means to gain extra skills and experience. The pessimist view is that it can also prolong dependence on state benefits especially as the employment is typically casual, unskilled and very low paid.

In 2011/12, median employment income for single parent households was £110 a week, compared with £390 for all UK households. Furthermore, 39 percent of working single parents reported their wage fell below the low pay threshold in a poll; by comparison, 21 percent of employees were low paid nationally in 2012. This reflects not only single parents' below-average qualification levels but also their weaker position in the labour market as they prefer flexible hours that tends to command lower wages (Rabindrakumar 2014). Low wages and part-time hours are also less likely to disrupt benefit payment and studies have found that lone parent respondents seek jobs that did not disrupt them (Casebourne & Finn 2011). LPO were introduced to reduce the welfare costs of single parents. Six years after the implementation of LPO there has not been a cost-benefit analysis or a cost analysis of the intervention relative to the cost of other interventions.

A main of the LPO was to alleviate poverty, but evaluation studies have shown that a move into work does not necessarily entail an elevation out of material deprivation, and that LPO has failed on this account. Since 2010 single parent's income poverty rate has remained stagnant and single parents remain at almost twice the risk of income poverty than couple families (42% for single parents compared with 23% for married couple families, chapter 2).

This section has shown that the New Labour Government (1997–2010) has pioneered the work-related conditionality regime for single parents in the UK. It started with the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) in 1999. It continued with mandatory Work-Focused Interviews in 2001 and changes to the structure of the benefit system for lone parents through family oriented tax reforms and changes to the tax credit system with the overall aim to reduce child poverty. The Labour Government regarded not just benefits but also lone parents' participation in the workforce as a critical ingredient in attempts to combat child poverty. This instigated "activation" reforms such as the NDLP on the grounds that paid work benefits lone parent families financially but also because it was thought to improve parents' physical and mental health and wellbeing outcomes. It introduced some more punitive welfare to work policies that were taken over by the incoming Conservative-Liberal Government (2010-2015).

4.2 The Conservative-Liberal Coalition Government (2010-2015)

In 2010, the incoming Conservative-Liberal Coalition Government continued with New Labour's policies such as Lone Parent Obligations and introduced new flagship policies such as Universal Credit that take a more punitive attitude towards economic inactivity, as will be discussed in the following sections. First, the new Married Tax Allowance will be discussed as it is indicative for the Conservative Party's criticism of cohabitation and single parenting.

Introduction of Married Tax Allowance

The Conservative Party strongly lobbied for the introduction of the Married Tax Allowance that has been introduced in the 2015/16 tax year. This allowance incentivises being married or in a civil partnership over being a cohabiting couple and is estimated to cost around £700 million per year and targets around 4 million couples (Joyce 2013).

The allowance is worth up to £200 annually but it will be of no benefit to many families, including some low and middle earners who may lose out on benefit payments, those who are not basic-rate tax payers or those two earners who both earn either just over or just under their personal allowance (ibid.).

In practice, married couples and civil partners where one person earns less than the personal allowance will be allowed to transfer up to £1,000 of their unused allowance to their partner, reducing their tax bill by up to £200 over the year, or £17 a month. It is unlikely that £17 a month incentivises even the lowest paid British workers to consider marriage or a civil partnership over cohabitation but it seems to be a social message by the Conservative Government. In reality, only the relatively wealthy, home owners for example, have a financial incentive to marry because of the inheritance and capital gains tax systems (ibid.).



Despite the introduction of the Married Tax Allowance, the UK can still be perceived to have an individual taxation system in comparison to Germany, which is based on joint taxation. Research that compared effective average income tax rates for singles, one-earner couples, and two-earner couples in Germany and the UK has found that income tax liabilities are significantly lower for the majority of tax units in Germany compared to the UK. This is particularly the case for married couples as the German tax system is based on the joint taxation of married couples with full income splitting (Ehegattensplitting). The benefits of joint taxation are particularly important for one-earner couples and this might partly explain married women's relatively low labour force participation in Germany (Bach et al. 2013).

Cuts to Child Benefit

UK family allowances were introduced in 1945 for the second and subsequent child as part of the Beveridge plan for social security. Family allowances, in the late 1970s, became channelled into the universal Child Benefit which was paid for all children and designed to help parents bring up their child/ren. The monthly allowance in 2015/16, is £89.70 for the eldest or only child and £59.37 for each additional child (£20.70 and £13.70 a week respectively).³⁰

Part of the Coalition Government's response to the financial crisis since 2008 and deficit reduction strategy, has been to freeze Child Benefit in 2010. From 2013/14 the amount has been increasing by only one percent – which can be seen as a cut in real terms as the rate of inflation is higher. Other benefits, such as Jobseeker's Allowance and maternity pay, have been subject to a similar cap (Bradshaw & Tokoro 2014, BBC 2014).

From 2013, Child Benefit has been no longer universal. Families where one parent is earning more than £50,000 a year are no longer entitled to claim the total amount of Child Benefit and entitlement to Child Benefit is completely lost at £60,000. This means that the entitlement of about 1.2 million families is reduced or lost, accounting for about 15 percent of receiving families. Although it will still be payable to all families with children, households who have higher incomes will have to pay it back in form of an additional tax, if they do not opt out of receiving it.

Changes to the State Pension

Britain's current basic state pension is low in comparison with other countries but many pensioners top up their pension with a personal pension. However, research shows though that one in seven people will retire with no pension other than the basic state pension (14%). Women are three times more likely than men to have no savings for retirement because of their history of career breaks and part-time jobs (20% and 7% respectively). This leaves single mothers in poverty as according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a single pensioner needs at least £8,600 a year

³⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/child-benefit-rates> (accessed December 8, 2015)

to reach a minimum socially acceptable standard of living but the basic state pension is equal to just £5,881.20 for an individual (Prudential 2014).

In 2015/16 the full basic state pension is £115.95 a week and in order to access it the claimant has to reach the state retirement age of 65 for men and 62 for women and needs to have paid National Insurance (NI) for 30 years. The claimant will get a pro-rata pension if the contributions fall short of 30 years (DWP 2014j).

Single parents working part-time or on a low wage may lose out on paying NI contributions. In the tax year 2014/15 the minimum income has to be £5,772 for employees or £5,885 for the self-employed. Single parents who reach pension age and are unable to claim the full state pension are unable to claim Income Support, but might be able to claim Pension Credit instead, which will top up their weekly income.³¹

In 2014, the Coalition Government introduced the Pensions Act 2014. The act simplifies the previous complex pension rules and will replace the basic and additional pensions for people reaching State Pension age from 2016 onwards with a simpler New State pension that also increases the State Pension age from 66 to 67 between April 2026 and April 2028.

The New State pension will be at least £155.65 per week and this pension will also eventually remove the need for the means-tested Pension Credit.³² Women, carers and lower earners are set to benefit the most as the years spent raising a family will be counted towards the now 35 years of NI contributions needed for a full state pension.

The Housing Market and Housing Benefit changes

Every home in the UK is liable to pay council tax. Lone parents qualify for a 25 percent discount if they are the sole adults in the home and can apply to get help with the rest of the bill through a local council tax reduction scheme (Gingerbread 2014a).

Housing is a pivotal factor in deciding the economic situation of single parents in Britain as it makes up a large part of their income. Rental prices are high and increasing as a result of house price inflation, the lack of rent control and the shortage of social rented housing (Hodkinson & Robbins 2013).

In 2012/13, almost two thirds of UK households own their property either outright or with a mortgage (64%). Of the remaining third (36%), half rent in the social sector and the other half in the private sector (DWP 2014g). No figures are available on single parents' distribution but it

31 <https://www.gov.uk/national-insurance-credits/eligibility> (accessed December 8, 2015)

32 <https://www.gov.uk/new-state-pension> (accessed December 8, 2015)



can be assumed that they are renters rather than property owners and more than half of single parents with children receive Housing Benefit (54%).

Housing Benefit is help towards rent for people on a low income, unemployed or working. It can pay for part or all of the rent, depending on income and circumstances, and it is available to people in private rented, local authority or housing association accommodation.³³ Government can, under specific conditions, provide financial help with a mortgage, which can be added to Income Support to help pay the interest (Gingerbread 2014a).

The divide between home ownership and renting is exacerbating social inequality between not only lone parents and coupled parents, but also between younger and older people. Older people are also more likely to be owner occupiers, and for those aged 25 to 34, the percentage of owner occupiers declined from 58 percent in 2001 to 40 percent in 2011 as house prices increased and first time buyers were priced out of the market or have difficulties raising a mortgage in the economic downturn (ONS 2013d).

Benefit Cap

Housing benefit expenditure has increased by about 50 percent in the decade to 2010. The Coalition Government's (2010–2015) response to the increased cost of Housing Benefit is the issue of a cap to the maximum amount of benefits that can be paid to a claimant. To justify the cap, the government has been using rhetoric of “unfairness”:

“The state can no longer afford to pay people disproportionate amounts in benefit each week in welfare payments – sometimes in excess of the average weekly wage earned by working families. So, from 2013 the Government will introduce a cap on the total amount of benefit that working-age people can receive so that workless households will no longer receive more in benefit than working households receive in average wages.” (DWP 2011)

In April 2013 a limit to income from benefits has been set at £500 a week for couples and lone parents. Should the household income from benefits breach the cap, then their housing benefit entitlement is reduced until the cap is met (ibid.).

The Coalition Government is intent in encouraging claimants to move into work or increase the hours they work. Therefore, those households on benefits which include a member who is entitled to Working Tax Credit will be exempt from the cap (ibid.).

³³ [https://www.turn2us.org.uk/Benefit-guides/Housing-Benefit-\(England-Scotland-and-Wales\)/What-is-Housing-Benefit](https://www.turn2us.org.uk/Benefit-guides/Housing-Benefit-(England-Scotland-and-Wales)/What-is-Housing-Benefit) (accessed June 27, 2015)

Those effected by the cap are large families who are out of work, with three or more children, or households in high rent areas, such as London, where Housing Benefit payments are larger than elsewhere. As a result of this policy, a “mass displacement” of such claimants from the inner to the outer London boroughs is expected (Fenton 2011). Low income and poor households might find that the only rented housing they can afford will fall below basic common standards of decent housing, and large families will experience overcrowded housing conditions. The benefits will, it is argued, inevitably lead to increased arrears, homelessness, and threatened evictions (Hodkinson & Robbins 2013).

Jobcentre Plus has already identified 56,000 or so families that are affected by the benefit cap. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has made additional funding available to help mitigate the impact of the cap on these families. Around £190 million was available for discretionary payments (Work and Pensions Committee 2012). In other words, these families cannot rely on being supported by the welfare state, but have to request discretionary funding.

Bedroom Tax

Under the Coalition Government (2010–2015) a bedroom tax was introduced in 2013 for tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit who have more bedrooms than deemed “necessary”. The Bedroom Tax has also been designed to reduce expenditure on Housing Benefit and making more public housing available by reducing under-occupation within the social sector housing stock and so releasing dwellings for people who are homeless or living in overcrowded conditions (Wilcox 2014).

The Bedroom Tax applies to tenants in social housing and of working age: for each spare bedroom over the allowance, Housing Benefit may be reduced by 14 percent for one and by 25 percent for two or more spare bedrooms.

A single parent is allowed one bedroom, and children under 10 are expected to share a bedroom, while two children of the same sex under 16 also have to share. Children of lone parents in receipt of Housing Benefit could potentially keep bedrooms at both their parents’ homes. Tribunals have found that bedrooms are required for children who are part residents with a divorced or separated parent (Wilcox 2014).

An evaluation study of the Bedroom Tax conducted over the first year of its implementation found that public cost savings are substantially lower than expected (£330 million as opposed to £425 million) and there is a regional inconsistency in its application. The rules for the Bedroom Tax policy lack precision, as no definition of a bedroom or minimum size is specified. Consequently, appeals that go to tribunals tend to use statutory overcrowding legislation to reach decisions (ibid.).



Lone parents and the Work Programme

In June 2011, the Work Programme was introduced that replaced all previous employment support programmes and was a clear change from previous models on two levels. Employment support is now sub-contracted to private providers and this new model follows a payment-by-results model (DWP 2012). It is estimated that the value of the Work Programme contracts will be about £3 billion (McGuinnies & Dar 2015).

One provider, *Serco*, delivers the two-year Work Programme in the West Midlands and in South Yorkshire. It has developed a three step programme that starts with a personal employment adviser, advice on job searches, skill and confidence improvement workshops and organisation of work placements and group workshops.³⁴

The larger provider *Ingeus* also offers one-to-one support from an employment adviser, but also computers as well as phones to apply for jobs and health and wellbeing support. In addition, it offers apprenticeships and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in areas such as Business Administration, Customer Service, IT and Telecoms Professional, Management, Retail Operations, Sales and Telesales and in the Children and Young People's Workforce (Childcare), Cleaning and Environmental Services and Warehousing and Storage. Apprenticeships consist of an NVQ, complemented by relevant on-the-job training and a technical certificate.³⁵

Most single parents enter these work programmes after having received Job Seeker Allowance for one year. Research shows that within the Work Programme, single parents are largely invisible within the system. The programmes do not cater for single parents and fail to recognise their need for affordable childcare and flexible working. Official job outcome statistics show that a year into the work programme, single parents were a third less likely to get a sustainable job, compared with other participant groups. The results are already low for all groups. The first year of job outcome statistics from the Work Programme in November 2012 showed a job outcomes figure of only 3.5 percent (Whitworth 2013b).

Single parents also felt pressured by their Job Centre Plus advisers to return to work rapidly, largely irrespective of the type of job and how this fitted in with their experience, work aims and caring responsibilities. It seems that high targets and low budgets mean that advisers have neither the time nor resources to deliver tailored support to single parents (ibid.).

³⁴ <http://www.yourworkprogramme.com/index.php/en/about-the-work-programme> (accessed December 8, 2015)

³⁵ NVQs are nationally recognised vocational qualifications that are measured against standards set by industry experts (Ingeus 2015). <http://www.ingeus.co.uk/training/range-of-apprenticeships-and-nvqs,626> (accessed December 8, 2015)

An earlier study identified elements crucial for the success of work programmes that have obviously not been incorporated into the 2011 Work Programme under the Coalition Government. The authors identified four factors: personalised support and early intervention, adequate staff/client ratios to provide individualised support, specific or specialised support to assist the most disadvantaged, work placements and in-work training (Daguerre & Etherington 2009).

Universal Credit

The UK has a large tax credit system that is now set to undergo its most significant revision as a part of a package of measures in the Welfare Reform Act 2012. The reform act is the result of a Coalition Government (2010–2015) agreement that aims to simplify the benefit system, encourage movement into work, and to make sure that those able to work show a willingness to work as a condition of receiving benefits (DWP 2014b). Universal Credit has been described as one of the flagship social policies of the Coalition Government’s welfare reform package, billed as the most radical social security reform for 60 years (Sainsbury 2014).

The overarching aim of Universal Credit is to remove financial barriers for people wanting to start work, and to make work financially worthwhile. With Universal Credit there will no longer be the distinction between those who are out of work and those who are in work, and the system will be responsive to people on low incomes that move in and out of work. The term “universal” could be considered misleading, given that it is subject to income levels and specifies conditions around work availability.

It has been progressively rolled out nationally from 2013 and the transition is expected to be completed by the end of 2017 but there have been delays already. The main characteristic is that six means-tested working age benefits will be channelled into one. Income Support, Job Seekers Allowance, Income-Related Employment Support Allowance, Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit and Housing Benefit are being pooled into a single payment, the Universal Credit. The idea of bringing together a range of benefits into a single payment is to help or encourage claimants and their families to achieve greater levels of independence (DWP 2014b).

From 2016 it will no longer be possible to make a new claim for Income Support and during 2016 and 2017, existing Income Support claims will be transferred to Universal Credit (Hood & Oakley 2014). In May 2014, lone parents represented 56 percent of the Income Support caseload (475,000, DWP 2014e).

During 2016 and 2017, means-tested Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) claims will be transferred to Universal Credit and from 2016 it will no longer be possible to make a new claim for income-based JSA (Hood & Oakley 2014). In September 2014, nearly one million people in Britain claimed Job Seekers Allowance (869,930) of which 11 percent were lone parents (96,875, DWP 2014d).



A further unique characteristic is that claimants will receive a monthly, rather than weekly or fortnightly, payment, paid into a bank account in the same manner as a monthly salary. Support with housing costs will go direct to the claimant as part of their monthly payment rather than directly to any landlord. It is envisaged that local support services will help with budgeting (DWP 2014b). A third characteristic is the aim to simplify or rationalise the benefit system by initiating and promoting an online claim process.

An early evaluation of Universal Credit, based on a telephone survey of 901 unemployed childless Universal Credit claimants, found that three quarters were confident of their ability to budget the monthly payment, but a few respondents reported falling behind on their rent. The rate for rent arrears for claimants on Universal Credit has been found to be higher than for claimants on Job Seekers Allowance: at 12 percent compared to seven percent respectively (DWP 2014c). Related research on lone parents suggests that monthly payments will, in terms of family budgeting, prove to be challenging for many lone parents, as it is a departure from the weekly or bi-weekly benefit payments. With many financial demands on them, lone parents on a low income find it difficult to postpone or meet some expenditure, including in some cases childcare, over longer time periods (Millar & Ridge 2010).

Universal Credit is clearly designed to give people an even greater incentive to work, and for any period of time. Claimants have to show evidence that they are looking for work for 35 hours a week: nearly twice as many hours as required under the rules for Job Seekers Allowance. This revised rule might have had some impact; an early evaluation found that 69 percent of childless Universal Credit claimants found a job by their third survey interview, compared to 65 percent of Job Seekers Allowance claimants (DWP 2014c).

Of those who failed to find a job, just under a third said they were finding it difficult to complete 35 hours job search, mainly because a perceived lack of suitable jobs in the area, a lack of access to the internet at home, or because applying for jobs online reduced the time needed to spend on job search (ibid.). Lone parents have not yet been included in evaluation studies.

Universal credit will have a simplified earning disregard. Earning disregards will allow claimants to earn some money before it has any impact on the amount of benefit received under Universal Credit. This might be an improvement over the range of different taper rates that currently exist in tax credits and the different working-age benefits.

Universal Credit and lone parents

Universal Credit has cemented the shift of the discourse from single mothers as carers to single mothers as workers. Universal Credit makes being in employment a citizen's responsibility that depends on individual behaviour, motivation and time spend on applying for jobs.

In a qualitative study, Millar and Ridge (2010) and Millar (2011) have shown that employment is not just an individual behavioural issue. The lone mothers in their study are very much representative of the “hard-working families” that the Universal Credit is intended to support. The women made the commitment to work in order to create better lives for themselves and their families. However, economic and structural issues such as low wages and insecure jobs can make it very difficult to stay in work and, even after four to five years, many of these women were still struggling to achieve an adequate and secure standard of living from work. The mothers in the study were only able to enter, or sustain work, with the financial support they received from the tax credit system.

Lone parent claimants for the basic part of Universal Credit will be grouped depending on the age of their children. Single parents with a child under the age of five don't have to be available for work and parents with a child under 13 can limit their availability for work to normal school hours; but if parents work for fewer hours than their circumstances allow, they will be encouraged to try to increase their hours. It can be argued that this extension of conditionality to working benefit recipients could also extend any possible stigma of receiving Universal Credit. Furthermore, lone parents will lose out on rules and certainty, as it will probably be left to the digression of the Job Centre Advisor to evaluate individual circumstances.

Even lone parents with a child over one but below age five have to attend periodic interviews to discuss their plans for returning to the labour market (Dwyer & Wright 2014) (table 5). Regardless of lone parent's high intensity caring obligations, a parent's benefit can be reduced by 20 percent if they don't have a “good” reason for not attending the interview or a “work related activity” such as courses or training to improve the chances of moving into work (Gingerbread 2014b).

The Universal Credit system is meant to be highly responsive to changes in circumstances, but this will also have the effect of single parent recipients' payments becoming volatile, putting families at risk of debt. Policy makers tend to underestimate the frequency with which lone parents' circumstances change, such as moving into work, change in earnings, losing a job, having a child or becoming sick. Children may move between living with their mothers to living with their fathers, and back again, in short periods of time and partners, may move in and out of households, also over short periods of time. Childcare arrangements also vary over the course of a year (Millar & Ridge 2010).

Lone parents may not always report changes in circumstances immediately as they happen for a range of reasons, including lack of knowledge of the rules and because they are short-lived or unstable, such as children moving between living with their mother to living with their father, and back again, in relatively short periods of time (ibid.). As with tax credits, there will inevitably be underpayments and overpayments of Universal Credit, and these will have to be reconciled in some way.



Table 5: Universal Credit regulations for single parents

Age of child	Conditions
Under 1 year old	None
Between 1 and 4 years old	Work-focused interviews only
Between 5 and 12 years old	Work hours limited to school hours
Between 13 and 16 years old	Work hours depend on individual circumstances

Source: Table created by Martina Klett-Davies.

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Single parents looking to enter work part-time, in particular 20 hours or less per week, will see an increased financial return from work compared to the current system, mainly because of the removal of the minimum limit on hours worked per week, as well as a slower benefit withdrawal. As their hours of work increase towards full-time, however, these gains will decrease significantly (De Agostini & Brewer 2013). Working single parents will still face some of the weakest incentives to work at all and to progress in work compared to other household types, especially when working 20 or more hours per week.

To increase work incentives and financial gains from working longer hours or an increase in wages for lone parents, De Agostini and Brewer (*ibid.*) suggest decreasing of the rate at which benefits would be tapered away from 65 percent to 55 percent.

Currently, single parents are set to lose a higher proportion of their weekly income under Universal Credit than any other household type. It is estimated that only around a third (32%) of single parent households will gain from Universal Credit; two-fifths (41%) will lose out; and the remainder (27%) will face no change compared to the current system (*ibid.*).

Another calculation shows that a single parent working on the minimum wage with two children will be £2,384 a year worse off than under the current system, even after taking into account the rise of the national minimum wage (Mirror 2015).

The proposed changes would also see the child element of universal credit limited to two children with families who have a third or any additional child not being eligible for an additional child element. Moreover, new claims made after April 2017 will not include the first child premium.

There have been many delays in implementing Universal Credit and further criticisms focus on concerns over ‘poor value for money’ and issues with inadequate information technology systems that make it difficult for claimants to make complex and frequently changing claims (Lakhani 2012). It is questionable whether Universal Credit manages to transform the social security system in positive and constructive ways (Sainsbury 2014).

Lone parents and Universal Credit – A critic's view

Universal Credit cements the transformation of lone parents from the “citizen-carer” to the “citizen-worker”; it renders full-time motherhood the preserve of the more affluent members of society and diminishes the value associated with caring for children. It might not be long before children's age limit of five years old will be lowered to three to get even more lone parents into employment.

Universal Credit is an instance of “instrumental behaviourism” characteristic of neo-liberalism, in which the welfare benefit system is converted into a lever for changing behaviour; it is also founded on the view that unemployment is an outcome of individual choices/behaviour rather than the result of broader economic and structural factors (Dwyer & Wright 2014).

The conditionality and the regime of sanctions attached to Universal Credit is the toughest and most extensive yet seen in the British welfare system affecting not only out-of-work claimants but also people in work (ibid.).

There has been little opposition to the implementation of Universal Credit. The UK's mainstream political parties are still prioritising cost-cutting, and there seems to be a general acceptance of personalised and behavioural conditionality as a means of addressing unemployment levels and workless households, as opposed to regulating the precarious labour market. However, in September 2015 it came to a “backlash”, when the left-wing and anti-austerity oriented Jeremy Corbyn was elected the new leader of the Labour Party with an overwhelming majority.

4.3 The Conservative Government (2015–)

The Conservative Government is set to attempt to cut the current deficit, with £12 billion worth of cuts to the welfare budget; this is in addition to the £21 billion cut during the Coalition Government (2010–2015).

The Conservative Government is also set to reduce the current benefit cap – the total amount any household can receive in a financial year – from £26,000 to £23,000 and it plans to freeze working age benefits for four years from April 2016 (BBC 2015). It planned to cut child tax credit entitlements for about 3.7 million low-income families by about £1,400 a year, with the intention to reduce the deficit and to increase incentives to work (BBC 2015a). However, in November 2015 the Conservative Government withdrew the proposals for the tax credit cuts due to public and political opposition (The Telegraph 2015).

The Conservative Government has also pledged to ensure that all people who work 30 hours per week on the minimum wage will pay no income tax, which translates into increasing the personal tax allowance to £12,500 (ibid.).



Plus, the Conservative Government plans to double free childcare allowance for three- and four-year-olds to 30 hours to working parents only (chapter 5). The so-called bedroom tax will be retained and Universal Credit will continue to be rolled out at length (Land 2015). The Government plans to increase the minimum wage from £6.70 to £7.20 per hour from 2016 but this increase will be offset by the benefit cuts and freezes.

Financial support available to single parents under the Conservative Government in 2015

Table 6 shows the entitlement to financial support for a range of hypothetical family situations in the tax year 2015/16. The table describes the various benefits and allowances that are available to a single parent. It presents comparisons between the support available to a single parent who is not working with those who are working part-time and full-time on the 2015 minimum wage of £6.70.

The three scenarios of single parents' entitlement to financial support presented in table 6 are based on the assumption that they have two children aged five years and 14 years. The calculations are also based on the premise that no one in the family has a disability or long-term health problem, or is caring for somebody who does. The single parents are over 18, have no other income and neither childcare costs, child maintenance payments nor pension contributions have been entered into the calculations. The families are local authority tenants with a rent of £100 per week and a Council Tax bill of £18 per week.

The relative income poverty line of 60 percent of median income is applied. The latest figure for income poverty line after housing costs is from 2012/13 and was £269 per week for a lone parent with two children aged five and 14 years (table 2.4ts in DWP 2014j).

Table 6 shows that non-working single parents receive slightly more money from the government than part-time working single parents, mainly because of Housing Benefit (£346.87 and £317.35 respectively). Even full-time working single parents on the minimum wage receive government support worth £211 a week.

However, despite the benefits and tax credits, the calculation shows that a non-working single parent in this scenario lives below the poverty line. A single parent working part-time or full-time in this scenario can combine earnings with tax credits and benefits to cross the poverty line. Full-time working single parents are only slightly financially better off than their part-timer counterparts; and this is perhaps evidence for the fact that the Coalition Government (2010-2015) and now the current Conservative Government position single parents as part-time workers and not as full-time workers.

Table 6: Levels of weekly Government support available to non-working, part-time and full-time working single parent families, excluding childcare costs, April 2015–April 2016³⁷

Age of child	Not working	Working part-time (16 hours)	Working full-time (38 hours)
Take home pay at national minimum wage	N/A	£107.20	£244.45 after tax
Working Tax Credit	N/A	£76.53	£38.36
Jobseeker's Allowance (or Income Support)	£73.10	N/A	N/A
Child Benefit	£34.40	£34.40	£34.40
Child Tax Credit	£117.52	£117.52	£117.52
Housing Benefit	£100.00	£77.39	£20.75
Council Tax Support	£12.35	£11.51	£0
Free school meals	£9.50	£0	£0
Total	£346.87	£424.55	£455.48
Total after housing costs (rent and Council Tax)	£228.87	£306.55	£337.48
Poverty line for family with children aged 5 and 14 (after housing costs)	£269.00	£269.00	£269.00
Difference between income and poverty line	-£40.13	+ £37.55	+ £68.48

Source: Turn2us benefit calculator 2015.

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Case Study 2

Ruby is 33 years old and lives with her three children in a two-bedroom flat in a recently built small block in an inner city area of London. The three children are sharing a bedroom and Ruby hopes that the bedroom tax encourages tenants with a spare bedroom in a three-bedroom property to swap their flat with her flat.

Ruby had her first two children, a girl (13) and a boy (11) with her partner with whom she cohabited until the relationship broke down when the boy was two years old. The children visit the father about twice a year for a couple of days and also talk to their father over the phone. After a period of being a single mother, Ruby married her new partner and had a daughter (5) with him. Ruby separated from him three years ago and the divorce was legalised two years ago. She receives no maintenance payments from her daughter's father and there is no contact. Ruby has mental health issues and a one year therapy helped her to put strategies in place.



Following the Lone Parent Obligation policy, Ruby started to look for work when her youngest child turned five and her personal Jobcentre adviser asked her to attend a couple of job interviews with no more than a one hour notice for weekend jobs. Luckily, Ruby managed to find a job herself through an employment agency nine months ago. She is employed as an unqualified teaching assistant at a school for children with profound multiple learning difficulties, where she works from 9am to 4pm every day. It takes her about one hour each way to travel to and from work by public transport. This agency only pays her for the 30 hours a week that she is working at the school, and not for the 12 weeks a year that are her school holidays. After less than a year, a permanent position was advertised by the school. Although there was stiff competition, Ruby just heard that she has been offered the permanent post that comes attached with training opportunities for the level of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) that are a requirement for working in schools.

Dealing with finances

Ruby finds it difficult to make ends meet on benefits and on her irregular and low income. While on benefits, in 2011, she declared herself “insolvent” as she had accumulated about £6,000 in debts that she could not repay. Ruby is in arrears with every single utility bill and estimates her current debts to be in the region of £2,500. When she is not being paid in her school holidays she cancels direct debits as she cannot afford the outgoings. The reminders and warning letters get ignored and remain unopened. However, as soon as she gets paid again she negotiates monthly payment plans over the phone. Therefore, her electricity, gas, landline and water bill are higher than average as they include the debt repayment. The fluctuations in income result in variations in child tax credit too, and she finds it difficult to rely on this income. The housing association that owns Ruby’s flat threatened her with eviction and homelessness because she was in arrears with her rent. Ruby had to attend a court hearing where the judge, the housing association and her managed to negotiate a repayment plan.

Before she started work at the school she went to the gym on a regular basis, but once she started the job she could no longer find the time to go. The gym did not let her terminate her one year contract early. Instead, Ruby negotiated to pay £25 a month suspension fee until the contract runs out. Ruby also maintains four mobile phone contracts that accumulate bills worth £97 a month and include repayments on the handsets. It is customary in the UK for secondary school aged school children to have a mobile phone and Ruby also maintains her mothers’ phone. Her mother helps with looking after the children, although not regularly, but as and when it is needed. Her eldest daughter also helps with looking after her siblings, but she is also the one who suffers most from her parents’ separation emotionally.

In the school holidays, when income is low, Ruby doesn’t apply for Job Seekers Allowance, because of the hassle involved, and makes do with a reduced income. Generally, Ruby buys cheap food on a daily basis in a discount supermarket, and seldom buys fresh food. When income is very low, she sometimes

takes the children to eat at her mother's or at a neighbour's house, alternatively her mother might give her money to buy something to eat. Sometimes, Ruby purposefully eats less than her children.

Even when she is working her months are split into two halves. In the first two weeks, Ruby feels "well off"; she might take the children to see a movie and treat them to a take out. The second half of the month she lives like a "pauper". Luckily, Ruby doesn't get billed for her youngest daughter's childcare in primary school one hour before and one hour after school, a saving of £120 a month. It's that schools policy not to charge anyone who has been on benefits in the last five years.

Table 7: Case Study 2 – monthly net income and outgoings

	Income after tax	Outgoings
Income after tax	£802	
Working Tax Credit	£300	
Child Tax Credit	£652	
Child Benefit	£190	
Housing Benefit	£0	
Council Tax Benefit	£0	
Children's father's maintenance for eldest two children	£100	
Children's father's gifts (informal arrangements)	£17	
Total income	£2,061	
Rent		£650
Council Tax		£143
Gas and Electricity		£130
Water		£103
Netflix movies		£6
Telephone landline and broadband		£34
Four mobile phones on contract		£97
Travel to and from work		£31
Gym membership		£25
School lunch money for two children		£80
Total fixed outgoings		£1,299
Total Income	£2,061	
To spend on food/clothes/extras etc. after outgoings	£762	

Source: Data compiled by Martina Klett-Davies

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The poverty line for single parent family with two children aged five and 14 (after housing costs) in 2012/13 is £269.00 a week (DWP 2014i). Ruby's disposable income after housing costs and Council Tax is £1,268 (£293 a week). This means that she lives above the poverty line by about £24 a week (table 7). There is no poverty line for single parent families with three children but their poverty line has to be higher due to additional expenses. Therefore, it can be assumed that Ruby lives on the relative poverty line.

Ruby, like many of her peers, applied for the five state benefits and tax credits online in separate applications apart from Council Tax Benefit that forms part of the Housing Benefit application process. Sometimes a friend helps Ruby to fill out applications online and she might call the telephone helpline. Ruby only steps into a welfare office when she hands in original documents to support her applications, because she doesn't want them to get lost in the post.

4.4 Conclusion – Welfare conditionality

Successive governments made changes to the welfare state to position single parents from carers to workers. The New Labour Government (1997-2010) engaged in a process of welfare reform which prioritises moving benefit recipients into paid work, and the Coalition Government (2010-2015) has continued with this approach and made it more punitive. The Conservative Government (2015-) is set to increase the incentives to work through punitive measures and by cutting state benefits unrelated to paid work.

Under the New Labour Government, decreasing child poverty was the main concern for the “work first” approach, while under the Coalition Government the discourse centred on reducing the welfare state budget and fairness to other taxpayers who are in paid employment.

Welfare to work programmes and policies such as the New Deal for Lone Parents, Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit and Lone Parent Obligations transformed single parents from “citizen-carers” to “citizen-workers”. The work activation policies devalue unpaid care by single parents on benefits and fail to view caregiving responsibilities as a citizenship obligation. The paternalistic view proposes that paid work is good for physical and mental health and wellbeing and contributes to the reduction of child poverty. The contractual argument justifies conditionality with a “social contract” between the state and lone parents. It is based on the offer of increased help that is balanced with the responsibility of individuals to make the best use of that support. From this “social contract” approach it follows that if lone parents do not make the best use of that support, or do not comply with their contractual obligations, they incur benefit sanctions.

36 <https://www.turn2us.org.uk/Find-Benefits-Grants> (accessed June 23, 2015)

Child poverty decreased under the tax and benefits framework initiated by the Labour Government. However, the rate has remained stagnant under the Coalition Government since 2010. Single parents remain almost twice as likely to be in income poverty than couple families (chapter 2). It has been argued that it is a symptom of a liberalist capitalist economy in which policy makers rely on policies such as LPO to change behaviour rather than tackling fundamental structural problems such as the nature of the UK labour market (quantity, quality and flexibility of jobs available) and the cost and availability of childcare (chapter 5). Furthermore, personal factors such as health, social housing, poor skill set and educational qualifications are also insufficiently taken into account.

The welfare state costs of single parents' households remain high despite the welfare to work programmes. The average lone parent household receives more than double the benefit income of the average two parent households (Tinsley 2014). Single parents are more than five times more likely than couples with children to receive out-of-work benefits (7% and 37% respectively).

Paid work has to some extent become dissociated from material security. Single parents tend to work in low paid occupations and sectors while housing and childcare costs are high. Lone parents' increasing participation in paid work has not had the desired effect of alleviating their income poverty without substantial financial support from the welfare state. In fact, despite an increasing number of single parents in paid employment, their risk of being in poverty remained the same or actually increased in the UK, possibly because of declining market wages and reductions in social transfers (chapter 2).

There are only weak financial gains associated with paid employment entry and the costs may outweigh its benefits. It could be argued that paid work is only, at best, a partial solution to the problem of income poverty in the UK. The Conservative Government does not tackle the root of the problem of social inequality and is not part of a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy that should improve the nature of jobs at the bottom end of the labour market and the opportunities for low paid workers to move into better jobs.

Benefit receipt of single and couple families

Single parents are more than five times more likely than couples with children to receive out of work benefits. While seven percent of couples with children receive out-of-work benefits, the figure is 37 percent for single parents with children according to the Family Resource Survey (FRS) in 2012/13. In other words, of the nearly 2 million single parents with dependent children (1,974 in 2013 according to LFS data, ONS 2015), 37 percent of single parents, or almost three quarters of a million (730,380), receive the three main benefits Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance (DWP 2014g).

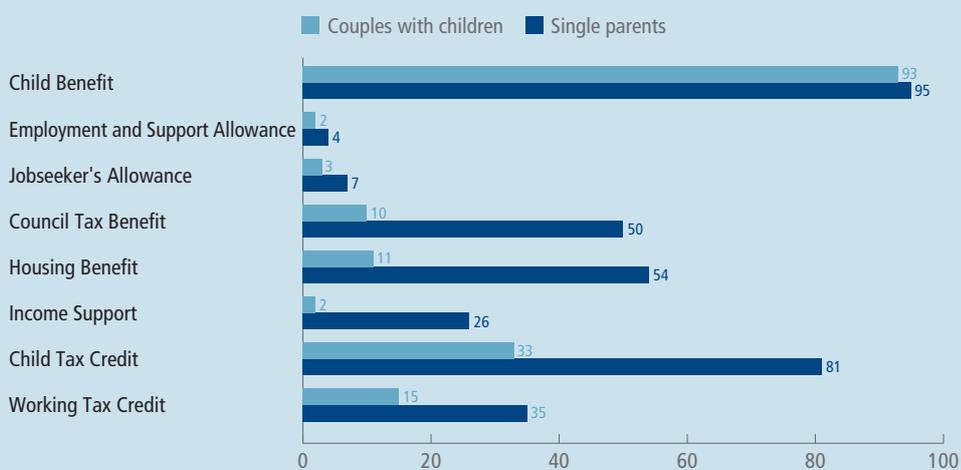


The FRS is considered to be the best survey source for benefit and tax credit receipt in the UK, but it is known to under-report benefit receipt. Therefore, the actual percentage of single parents in receipt of these benefits is likely to be higher, perhaps up to six percent higher (DWP 2014g).³⁷ However, benefit receipt is liable to misreporting and FRS is careful not to imply a spurious level of accuracy.

Figure 15 shows that single parents are much more likely to receive income based (or means-tested) benefits that are not based on National Insurance contributions accumulated through paid work. Single parents are also about five times more likely than coupled parents to receive the income based benefits Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. A quarter of single parents receive Income Support (26%) compared to couples with children (2%), but that can partly be explained by the fact that only parents with a child under five can claim it.

Figure 15: Benefit units by state support receipt in percent and family type with dependent children³⁹

in percent



Source: DWP 2014g.

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³⁷ Compared to the administration data available, the undercount is 11 percent for Income Support, 15 percent for Job Seeker Allowance, and 44 percent for ESA. This would mean that the rate of single parents receiving Income Support is 29 percent, Job Seeker Allowance 8 percent and ESA 6 percent – making 43 percent of single parents receiving state benefits (DWP 2014g).

³⁸ Benefit unit is a standard DWP term defined as 'a single adult or couple living as married and any dependent children' regardless of whether they receive state benefits. The figures for JSA and ESA include both the income-related and contribution based components. (DWP 2014g).

5. Childcare, early education and parenting support

In the UK, childcare and early education has been widely discussed within a discourse involving child poverty, female labour force participation and children's development and it is widely accepted that the quality and availability of early education increases social capital.³⁹ This chapter discusses the development of childcare, early education and parenting support to show how the British welfare state positions single parents and their children.

5.1 Childcare and the New Labour Government (1997-2010)

There was a significant investment in childcare services with the accession of the New Labour Government in 1997; since then considerable progress has been made in expanding access to early education and childcare (Huskinson et al. 2014).

The New Labour Government (1997-2010) launched the flagship programme, the National Childcare Strategy, in 1998, following its election pledge to address the "childcare gap" or the lack of affordable and high quality provision. It abolished the complicated Nursery Education Voucher scheme and set out its own new early years policy. The National Childcare Strategy sought to develop, expand and implement early years and childcare services in the UK with targets set for the provision of high quality and affordable childcare for 0-14 year olds (ibid.). A further ten-year childcare strategy was published in 2004 that subsequently led to the Childcare Act 2006 which obliges all local authorities in England and Wales to ensure sufficient childcare for working parents and for those who are intending to return to work (HM Treasury 2004).

The New Labour Government commitment is evidenced by total spending on early education, childcare and Sure Start in England: spending on these areas grew almost fourfold in real terms from £2.1 billion in 1997/98 to £8 billion in 2009/10: an increase from 0.18 percent to 0.55 percent of Gross Domestic Product (Stewart 2014). The Coalition Government (2010-2015) has cut spending and is spending £6 billion supporting childcare and early education each year (Rutter & Stocker 2014). The spending translated directly into childcare places. While there was one childcare place for every nine children under the age of eight years and 25 percent of children aged 0-2 received formal care in 1997, in 2010, 39 percent of 0-2 year-olds attended formal or paid care (Stewart 2013).

Early Years Entitlement

The 1998 National Childcare Strategy made provision to entitle all four-year-olds in England to free early education; since 2004 this has been extended to all three-year-olds. The entitlement to free

³⁹ In the UK, the term 'childcare and early education' is commonly used as well as just 'childcare' that tends to refer to include early education. Examples for this are the terms 'National Childcare Strategy', 'Childcare Act' and the proposed 'Childcare Bill' for working parents. Unlike in Germany and other countries, the term 'Early Childhood Education and Care System' (ECEC-system) is not commonly used.



early education tends to be 15 hours each week for 38 weeks of the year. This 15 hours allowance was extended to cover the poorest 20 percent of two-year-olds in 2013, and this increased to cover 40 percent of the poorest in 2014 (National Audit Office 2012). However, it was found that 30,000, or 26 percent, of the poorest two-year-olds are missing out on free nursery education. There are marked regional differences in access to free provision for two-year olds: in London, only half of eligible children had been placed by the end of 2013 (Rutter & Stocker 2014). Furthermore, 28 percent of two year-olds in free childcare are in settings that have not been rated good or outstanding by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). These settings tend to be in areas of deprivation (Daily Hansard 2015).

The entitlement to free early education was estimated as costing £1.9 billion in 2011/12 (National Audit Office 2012). By 2010, 98 percent of all four-year-olds and 92 percent of eligible three-year-olds received at least some free early education. The high take-up rates suggest that this universal policy was more successful than targeted childcare subsidies in drawing children from disadvantaged backgrounds into early education. In 2010, it was estimated that 76 percent of three-year-olds from the most disadvantaged households and 95 percent of four-year-olds were making use of the free places provided (Stewart 2013).

A large parent survey found that children in working single parent families and children in couple families in which both parents were working were most likely to receive formal childcare. However, single parent families are less likely to receive formal childcare than those in couple families: 48 percent compared with 54 percent; but are more likely to receive informal childcare: 38 percent compared with 29 percent in couple families (Huskinson et al. 2014). This greater take-up of informal childcare might be accounted for by care from non-resident parents and because single parents are less likely to be in paid work. 25 percent of children in non-working lone parent families received informal childcare, compared with 18 percent of children in couple families with one working parent (ibid.).

The uptake of formal childcare is also dependent on household income. Children in non-working families and children in families with lower incomes tend to be less likely to use formal childcare than children in working families. While the uptake of government funded early education is 83 percent for non-working lone parents, it is 90 percent for working lone parents (ibid.).

Grandparents were used more commonly than any other informal provider across all family types. Children in working lone parent families were most likely to be cared for by their grandparents (27%) and by an ex-partner (20%); while among children in non-working lone parent families, ten percent were cared for by their grandparents and 12 percent by the ex-partner of their parent (ibid.).

The uptake of formal and informal childcare also varies by children's ethnic background, with the children from White British and mixed White and Asian backgrounds being most likely to receive

both formal and informal childcare. Children from Black backgrounds are more likely to receive formal childcare, while children from Asian Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds are least likely to (ibid.).

Sure Start Programme

The Sure Start programme was the New Labour Government (1997-2010) flagship initiative for promoting child development in the most deprived areas with the goal to reduce child poverty. In 1998, it started with 250 Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) in the most deprived 20 percent of wards and by 2003 this was expanded to 524 SSLPs.

It was rolled out across England to create 3,500 Sure Start Children's Centres. Children's centres first opened in the more deprived areas, and many offer a range of support services directed at those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, such as single or teenage parents. Early education and childcare provision was given most emphasis, but programmes included outreach and home visiting, parenting support, play and learning, healthcare, and advice and support for parents and children with special needs (Stewart 2013).

A national evaluation found that three-year-olds living in Sure Start areas generally experienced better physical health, displayed better social behaviour, greater independence and self-regulation than peers in comparison neighbourhoods. The evaluation found that parents were less negative in their parenting and made less use of harsh discipline. Mothers described a more stimulating and less chaotic home environment and greater life satisfaction - although they also reported more depressive symptoms. Life satisfaction was also higher among lone parents in Sure Start areas (NESS 2010a, NESS 2010b).

The New Labour Government initially pledged to fund Sure Start for 10 years, but by 2005 Sure Start was transferred to the control of local government and some local authorities applied cuts to services while other retreated from the cuts to Sure Start services due to political protest and made cuts to other services instead. For example, Stoke-on-Trent City Council received a petition against the proposed cuts to their 16 Children Centres and as a response closed a home that catered for those suffering from dementia instead (Metro 2012).

The provision of childcare and early education at schools

The UK has five stages of education: Early Years, Primary, Secondary and Further Education and Higher Education. Education is compulsory for all children between the ages of five (four in Northern Ireland) and 18. Further Education covers non-advanced education which can be taken at Further (including tertiary) Education colleges and Higher Education institutions. For most students, the fifth stage, Higher Education, takes place in universities and other Higher



Education institutions and colleges.⁴⁰ As a result of the National Childcare strategy, there has been an expansion of school-based care provision for older children to cater for the increased demand.

Schools in the UK cater for all children for a full school day (about 9am to 3.30pm) from the September after they turn four. Compared to other countries where reception starts when children are six and school days are shorter, this system effectively reduces the number of years for which parents face high childcare costs. The average cost of after-school care is £48 per week in Britain for around two to three hours provision after school (Rutter & Stocker 2014). Some schools also offer a nursery school for children aged three and where available, these settings have a disproportionately large number of disadvantaged children. Most of the provision is part-time and only around ten percent of children in school nurseries attend for a full school day (Stewart & Gambaro 2014). Those who work in schools that provide nursery education tend to be better qualified graduates (Penn & Lloyd 2014). Some schools and some local authorities subsidise their breakfast and after school clubs although these vary from region to region (Rutter & Stocker 2014).

The South East and South West of England have a low level of school-based nursery provision compared to other regions, although London is well served in terms of this provision. This is, incidentally, also the area with the highest proportion of single parents in the country. This advantage might not last long though as the changes to the benefit system, such as the benefit cap are predicted to push lower-income families out of cities (Fenton 2011).

Demand led system

It is a particular feature of the UK that it relies so heavily on the for-profit private sector to deliver childcare and children's early education (Stewart & Gambaro 2014). This contrasts with countries, such as Germany, where places are concentrated in the voluntary sector and not for-profit providers.

When the entitlement to free early education for three- and four-year-olds was introduced by the New Labour Government (1997-2010), the expansion of places occurred mostly in the private and voluntary sectors. In 2011, 39 percent of three-year-olds accessing the free part-time hours were doing so in a private setting, 17 percent in the voluntary sector, and 38 percent in schools, with fewer than two percent in a local authority setting other than a school, such as a Children's Centre. A very small number of children (1%) took up the free entitlement with a childminder or other providers (3%) (Penn & Lloyd 2013).

Another study found that 91 percent of all nursery care, 94 percent of pre-school education and 67 percent of after school clubs are delivered by the private and voluntary (the not for profit) sectors in England. Private businesses are not only profit oriented, they also have higher costs as they

40 <http://www.theeducationwebsite.co.uk/index.php?page=schools> (accessed January 28, 2015)

have to pay business rates and may well have to pay a market rent for their premises. Hence, there are price differences between public and private sector provision (Rutter & Stocker 2014).

The use of a demand led system where parents choose to purchase childcare and early education, has resulted in providers setting fees in order to maximise profits. Their charges are on average 13 percent more than non-profit providers: in contrast, in a supply led system there is more reliance on voluntary, cooperative and state provision (Penn & Lloyd 2013).

Research has shown that there is a significant variation in the availability and quality of care across the UK, particularly for care during school holidays (about 14 weeks a year) and for care that covers atypical work hours. International comparative studies of childcare with quality measured in terms of ratios, place of work, and the levels of qualifications of workers, suggest that UK workers in childcare appear to be less qualified than workers in other countries, possibly a consequence of private provision (Stewart & Gambaro 2014).

5.2 Childcare and early education under the Coalition Government (2010-2015)

The Coalition Government continued with the free early education offer for all three- and four-year-olds but the focus of Children Centres has shifted from universal provision to services targeting the most disadvantaged. The 15 hours free childcare and early education a week has been expanded, but only to include the most disadvantaged two-year-olds.

A census of Children Centres demonstrates that the overall budget for Children's Centres and Early Years over the three years from 2011-2014 has been reduced by 20 percent as a result of the Coalition Government's austerity measures following the economic recession (4children 2014). The number of childcare places has decreased by 40,000 between 2009 and 2014, although it has been argued that there has been an increased provision in the maintained schools sector (Daily Hansard 2015). While the spending cuts might have reduced labour costs, they have also detrimentally affected the quality of provision in Children's Centres in England as higher qualified staff has been made redundant (Stewart & Gambaro 2014).

The cuts in funding for Children's Centres have been made in spite of the evidence that high quality pre-school provision by highly qualified graduate staff is related to higher outcomes for children five years later. These children score better in reading, mathematics and social behaviour than those who have not attended an early childhood centre at all, or one which had been rated as being of lower quality. This is a finding by the much cited British longitudinal research study into Effective Pre-school and Primary Education (EPPE 3-11); the first large scale longitudinal study to investigate both pre-school and primary school influences on the same children's attainment and progress (Sammons et al. 2007).



Child ratios

English nurseries are subject to a mandatory system of “child ratios” that stipulates the number of children a nursery can look after. Ratios in England are tighter than in comparable European countries. While English nurseries can look after up to four two-year-olds for every member of staff, in the Netherlands and Ireland the ratio is six two-year-olds per member of staff, and eight two-year-olds in France. Germany has no set national mandatory ratios for children of any age (DfE 2013b).

It has been argued that England’s relatively tight staffing rules result in higher costs for parents and lower pay for staff; settings in other countries take on more children to reduce fees for parents and can afford to pay staff more. This might partly explain the lower skill level and the lack of highly qualified professionals in the early years settings in England (DfE 2013b).

Under the Coalition Government, the Department for Education (DfE) proposed greater child ratios in cases where there are more highly qualified staff as this is meant to provide higher quality provision (ibid., table 8). However, critics feel that the change in ratios would actually compromise safety and quality of care, and fail to reduce the overall costs of childcare (BBC 2013). Furthermore, introducing young children to quasi-formal academic learning too young might have lifelong negative consequences (BBC 2013).

Table 8: National mandatory ratios in nurseries in England

Age of child	Under 1	1	2	3+
England (existing)	1:3	1:3	1:4	1:8 (or 1:13 if teacher led)
England (proposed where there are high quality staff)	1:4	1:4	1:6	1:8 (or 1:13 if teacher led)

Source: DfE 2013.

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In a consultation on the proposal to relax ratios, 66 percent of respondents disagreed with the planned changes to ratios; the proposal also led to a rift in the Coalition Government. Faced with the strength of opposition from nurseries and childminders, backed by parents, the Coalition Government (2010–2015) ditched the proposals (Nursery World 2014). However, the Conservative Government (2015–) may well rekindle the plans.

Help with childcare costs

The Coalition Government has carried on with initiatives that are intended to make childcare more affordable for working families. Working families on low incomes can obtain the childcare element of Working Tax Credit that reimburses up to 70 percent of childcare costs, up to a value of £175 per week for one child and £300 per week for two or more children. To be eligible, lone parents need to work at least 16 hours per week. This allowance is then reduced along with Working Tax Credit as income rises. A single parent on half the average wage will be expected to pay only two percent of the net income for two children in full-time care and to receive childcare support worth 37 percent of his/her net income. A middle income single parent pays about 11 percent of his/her net income in childcare costs and receives around 27 percent of net income in support (Alakeson & Hurrell 2012). However, a high income single parent is particularly hard hit by the loss of tax credits support and would not receive any support other than the Early Years Entitlement and pay out a third of their income after tax (33%). It has been said that the high costs of childcare can create significant barriers to employment even for higher income single parents because they cannot share childcare responsibilities with a partner as couple parents can.

Administration of childcare costs can be an issue as parents must pay costs up-front and then claim reimbursement through quite a complicated process. A single mothers' paid employment can be insecure or sporadic so if hours drop or a parent is between jobs, childcare is disrupted as the subsidy is conditional on working 16 hours a week.

The Coalition Government (2010-2015) has initiated the Universal Credit system that is estimated to be in operation in 2017 or later. Then, childcare subsidy will become more generous with 85 percent rather than 70 percent support available and the 16 hour work requirement will also be removed, meaning families will be able to claim support for childcare from the first hour they work. There is concern, however, that the steep withdrawal rates will act as a disincentive to pursue more precarious employment opportunities (Alakeson & Hurrell 2012).

Apart from the free 15 hours early education, the only support available for better off parents are employer supported childcare vouchers, either as an additional benefit on top of their salary or as a salary sacrifice before paying tax. Here, parents working for participating employers can reduce their tax and National Insurance payments by up to £933 a year per employee (Stewart & Gambaro 2014). These employer vouchers have been replaced by a tax-free "voucher" of £1,200 per year in 2015. This support is only available to working parents whose household income is less than £300,000 a year and this scheme will benefit more parents than previously, but it will be less generous (ibid.).

Initially, the nearly one million families on the lowest income who do not pay income tax, were not meant to qualify for the increased 85 percent available Universal Credit support (Alakeson & Gory 2014). However, following a consultation, the Coalition Government has committed an additional



£350 million to offer the increased rate of support for childcare costs to all working families on Universal Credit. In other words, support with childcare costs will be available to claimants who work less than 16 hours per week for the first time (DWP 2014h).

A parent survey conducted through 2012/13, found that almost half of all non-working lone parents found it difficult to pay for formal childcare (48%) and even a large proportion of working lone parents found it difficult (37%). This compares to 23 percent of couples where one or both parents were employed. Furthermore, a quarter of working lone parents found arranging care during the school holidays difficult (Huskinson et al. 2014).

5.3 Childcare under the Conservative Government (2015–)

The Conservative Government (2015–) plans to continue with austerity measures but it also plans to double the number of hours of free childcare for working parents from 2017. A proposed Childcare Bill would double the amount of free childcare available for working parents of three- and four-year-olds to 30 hours a week, although during term time only and only for parents working more than 16 hours a week with an annual household income of less than £100,000.

The Conservative Government has also pledged to increase the average childcare funding rates paid to providers by £300 million (gov.uk 2015). However, government has not released a funding formula. There are concerns around the cost of the policy and it has been argued that doubling the childcare risks undermining the sustainability of the sector. The existing 15 hour is already underfunded by the government and parents, local authorities and providers make up the shortfall already. Many childcare facilities would not be able to offer more hours to children as they either have no cooking or sleeping facilities. Some operate already at full capacity as they offer the 15 free childcare hours to parents either in morning or afternoon sessions (Daily Hansard 2015). There are already shortages of childcare. Only 43 percent of local authorities in England and 18 percent in Wales report that they have enough childcare for working parents (Butler & Rutter 2015).

It is also unclear how the government will ensure the childcare provided is of a high quality. There is a concern that the Childcare Bill has moved too far from child development and is now solely concerned with getting parents back to work. For example, the Conservative government has proposed the “Childcare Bill” and not a “Childcare and Early Education Bill”. Low quality childcare will also not close the attainment gap of disadvantaged children (Daily Hansard 2015).

5.4 The cost of childcare

The cost of childcare in the UK varies according to the age of the child, the hours and type of childcare, the region the parents live in and their household income.

Government subsidies for 15 hours per week, 38 weeks a year, are available for children in the term after their third birthday. The local providers who are part of the scheme apply to the council for funding on behalf of parents. The nursery funding is then deducted from the provider's bill to parents for childcare. This could be in a nursery school, children's centre, early years centre, community or private nursery, most independent schools or in a playgroup (table 9).

Table 9: Childcare options for children aged 0-5-years-old

Types	Age provision	Opening times	Opening weeks a year	Subsidies beyond government's 15 hours
Children's Centre Nursery	0-5	8am to 6pm	49-51	Sometimes subsidised by a local authority
Day nurseries (private, community, council, workplace)	0-5	Varies	Up to 52 weeks	Sometimes subsidised by a local authority or employer
Playgroups/pre-schools	2-5	2-3 hours a day	Varies	Sometimes subsidised by a local authority
Primary state school based nursery classes	3-4 or 4	9.30 to 3.30 or part-time	38	Free of charge
Childminders	Varies (0-11)	Varies	Varies	None
Nannies	Varies	Varies	Varies	None

Source: Family and Childcare Trust 2014.

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Most nursery classes in primary schools are free though and most four-year-olds are offered a full-time place (9.30am-3.30pm, term time only), free of charge, in maintained nursery and reception classes attached to primary schools, and in the local council's children's centres. Charges are only made for additional day care outside these hours and during school holidays. All sessions, in nurseries and early years centres, in addition to the free part-time education place are charged as day care.

The national nongovernmental organisation Family and Childcare Trust has been collecting information about childcare costs and availability for 14 years and found that prices in the five years of the Coalition Government (2010-2015), have gone up by 27 percent. In its 14th annual childcare costs survey, the same nursery place has for the first time broken through the £6,000-a-year barrier, averaging at £115.45 a week across Britain. This represents a rise of 5.1 percent in just one year. Wages have remained stagnant, which suggests that most parents contribute about 20 to 30 percent of their income before tax on childcare. It is thought that this may well negatively influence maternal employment levels particularly for those with children under the age of five (Rutter & Stocker 2014). Some of the very lowest income parents who claim help with childcare costs through Working Tax Credit will find the maximum amount they can claim will not cover even their part-time childcare costs (Rutter 2015).



Table 10 demonstrates the large regional differences in childcare costs. Childcare providers in London, the city with the highest proportion of single parents, charge the highest fees. The childcare rate for an under two year old for 25 hours at a London nursery is 28 percent more than the national average.

Table 10: Average weekly childcare costs by selected regions and nation, 2014

Region/ Nation	Nursery 25 hours (under 2)	Nursery 25 hours (2 and over)	Childminder 25 hours (under 2)	Childminder 25 hours (2 and over)	After- school club 15 hours	Childminder after-school pick up 15 hours
East of England	£111.90	£105.02	£121.28	£120.45	£51.13	£58.37
London	£140.12	£136.93	£136.40	£138.77	£49.04	£93.83
North West	£98.00	£97.58	£84.81	£89.27	£49.27	£60.59
Britain average	£109.89	£105.52	£99.77	£100.52	£48.19	£65.08

Source: Family and Childcare Trust 13th Annual Childcare Costs Survey. Rutter & Stocker 2014.

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OECD data confirms that the financial cost of childcare is greater in the UK than in other comparable countries. In continental Europe, on average, a family pays 13 percent of its income on childcare while in the UK, it can rise to 27 percent compared to 11 percent in Germany and 10 percent in France. International comparisons have to be treated with caution as research in different countries may have employed different measurements and methodologies. For example, some countries might have included additional fees for meals and other additional parental contributions while others have not. However, the wide gap between Britain and Germany and France points towards a much greater economic burden for parents in Britain.

The high UK figure can partly be explained as the result of many other countries' focus on the supply side and the use of direct provider subsidies as a means of keeping fees low. In contrast, the UK focuses on the demand side by providing financial resources to the parents through the tax and benefit system rather than through childcare providers (Penn & Lloyd 2013). The UK then has a similar level of social spending on children under five but this has not impacted significantly on the cost of childcare parents pay. The evidence suggests that retrospective reimbursement through the tax and benefit system has been deterrent for many families (Penn & Lloyd 2013, Alakeson & Hurrell 2012).⁴¹

⁴¹ The OECD data has other limitations, too. While the data is compiled on a national level, there are great variations within countries and some of the data used is over 10 years old. The UK, for example, has revised their policies considerably since the data was initially collected. It is also not clear how the data was compiled (Penn & Lloyd 2013).

Childcare costs and single parent families

Dual earner families who are earning almost twice the average wage may pay up to 43 percent of their income on childcare fees in comparison to those single parent families who receive tax credits and benefits and might be able to have their childcare costs reduced to 14 percent of household income. The following case studies are inspired by and adapted from the case studies in Penn & Lloyd (2013):

- A single parent working for 37 hours a week who needs to buy 42 hours of childcare a week would have to earn more than £49,400 to be paying less than 20 percent of her income on childcare. The average salary in 2014 was £23,348 (ONS 2014d). Another parent, who earns £36,000, would not receive any help with childcare costs and would have to pay all of the £9,880.
- A single parent who is a nurse in Britain earns about £31,000 a year. He or she would only receive £994 help with her childcare costs through Working Tax Credit, which means that she would still contribute 28.7 percent or £8,886 of her income before tax to pay for the childcare.
- A single parent who earns £24,500 per year as a retail manager – slightly more than the average salary – with a four-year-old child receives 15 hours free nursery care. She buys 30 hours of additional childcare for £135 a week and has to pay £84 of it, as she qualifies for help with her childcare costs through Working Tax Credit of £51 a week. Luckily, she does not need formal childcare during the school holidays – when family members provide informal care. In total, she spends £3,192 a year on childcare, or 13 percent of her annual salary.

Cost of childcare – The London borough of Islington

A large London borough, such as Islington in North London, shows that charges can vary a great deal by region. Islington is a Labour Party led council, one of 32 in the United Kingdom's capital London. In Islington, weekly charges for Local Authority or community nurseries and playgroups range from £170 to £300 per child for a full-time place. Childminders' fees range from £250 to £300 weekly and private nurseries set their own fees and cost in Islington, about £350 a week per child.

Places in non-school based Children's Centres in Islington are government subsidised for three- and four-year-olds. In addition, the term after their 4th birthday, children are entitled to 30 hours per week. The Government funds 15 hours for three- to four-year-olds, and this is topped up by Islington council subsidising an additional 15 hours for the children of parents who are residents in the borough. Islington is one of only three Local Authorities in England that match government funding. The others, the London boroughs of Camden and Newham, both match the 15 government



hours with 10 hours per week each, but only in their own children's centres and in primary school nurseries.⁴²

Islington, together with Camden and Newham, could be considered the inspiration for the Conservative Government's (2015-) Childcare Bill that would legislate for 30 hours of government funded childcare for three- and four-year-olds from 2017.

The weekly rate for a four-year-old Islington resident for a full-time place during the 38 weeks of a school term varies from £67 for those on the lowest annual income band (below £25,000) to £199 for those on the highest income band (£80,000 and more a year). Three-year-olds are only entitled to these subsidies and prices if they visit a school based Children's Centre. In a non-school based Children's Centre, the parents of three-year-olds pay the same throughout the year, between £117 and £199 a week for a full-time place. This amount is similar to what the parents of four-year-olds can expect to pay in the 14 weeks of annual school holiday weeks, as childcare places are subsidised in the 38 school weeks a year.

Full-time childcare for the under twos are most costly, and ranges from £171 to £312 a week for a full-time place in Islington's Children's Centres that tend to take children from the age of six months. Another national study found that the cost of sending a child under two to nursery part-time (25 hours) is £110 per week. The costs can be explained by the staff-child ratio as regulations stipulate that for children under two in nurseries there must be one member of staff to three children (Rutter & Stocker 2014).

42 Family and Childcare Trust (2015) information obtained from the Head of Policy and Research at the Trust.

Case Study 3

Lily (28) and her son Gabriel (one year) live in Islington, the diverse North London borough close to the centre of London. She counts herself lucky that she was able to purchase a 2 bedroom flat on a shared ownership scheme. Under this First Step London scheme Lily pays part rent and part mortgage (£490 rent and £440 mortgage). Her mortgage is for 35 years, which means that after that time she owns a 45 percent share in her flat although she has the opportunity to increase her mortgage payments in line with potential wage increases to obtain 100 percent ownership in many years to come.

First Step helped Lily as a first time buyer to buy a property because she fulfilled their criteria. She would not have been able to buy anything on the open market in London as she is earning under £60,000 a year. She was lucky that she could put down a deposit of £40,000, the most part of an inheritance. Family structure – being a single mother – was not a consideration.

Lily was with her partner, who lives in France, for one year and when she became pregnant they separated because he didn't want her to have the baby nor to have anything to do with it. She herself was unsure about what to do but felt supported by her family either way. After a few months her ex-partner changed his mind and resumed contact with Lily. They are currently on friendly terms, and he is planning to move to London to be closer to his son. They came to an informal private arrangement and he pays monthly child maintenance, which amounts to about 15 percent of his salary. She is somewhat ambivalent about the future when he might get another girlfriend as she's thinking that this might affect contact and maintenance. However, she's glad that she's got a good relationship with his mother and sister, who have influence over him.

Lily has a degree in fashion and has been working continuously for seven years. She works as a buyer for a large supermarket chain and earns about £30,000 a year working full-time and including child maintenance. Her office is out of London and she has to commute for three hours a day by train, which means that she is out of the house from 7.30am to 6.30pm five days a week. She took seven months maternity leave and her son Gabriel is now in formal as well as informal childcare. He goes to a community nursery three days a week, and his great-grandmother looks after him two days a week. She doesn't live in London and it takes her about four hours to commute into London once a week to look after Gabriel, and Lily only pays for her £100 train fare. Lily spends more than a quarter of her net income on childcare; that is twice as much than she spends on food and on themselves after bills (table 11). During the two days the great-grandmother stays in Lily's spare room. The great-grandmother might be 77 years old, but she is still fit and loves looking after children and Gabriel loves her. Lily's commute means that pick up and drop offs at nursery are a balancing act. The nursery opens at 8am, but Lily needs to leave the house at 7.30am to get to work on time. The nursery closes at 6pm, but on two evening it's her sister and Gabriel's great-grandmother who she relies on in the mornings and evenings, and her mother in emergency situations. She spends about two and a half hours a day during the week with Gabriel who can be quite clingy. He goes to bed at 7.30pm and gets up 6am.



The commuting makes the childcare situation difficult though and Lily is applying for other full-time jobs as a buyer in London. She does not mind who she works for, as long as the wage is the same and the office is closer to home. She no longer cares whether she likes the brand or not, as long as she can make the drop offs and pickups at nursery personally.

Work at her firm is tough, too. She loved her job and was more ambitious before she had her son, and did not mind working long hours in the evenings and over the weekend. Child or no child, she is still expected to work long hours, but she is either too exhausted or too busy to do that. Her priorities have changed too and her son comes first.

Lily doesn't consider her current place of work as family friendly and she thinks that her employer wouldn't even consider a request to let her work from home for one or two days a week. She is also sure that she won't be considered for promotion if she were to ask for a four day week and thinks that she would probably still be expected to work long hours.

Lily doesn't have a network of other mothers. She didn't make friends with other pregnant women and didn't feel like going to antenatal classes as pregnancy was a stressful time for her. None of her friends have children yet and most are only just considering marriage.

Lily sees herself as a full-time worker and does not feel guilty about leaving her son in good quality childcare since he was 7 months old. Her own mother worked full-time when she was very young and she never felt resentful towards her. She can imagine herself working four days a week one day, but even if she had a partner she wouldn't give up work. She might not earn very much now and she has large childcare and travel costs, but she knows that only with continuous employment can she build up a career.

Lily's annual income plus maintenance, Child Benefit and childcare vouchers is above the threshold for tax credits. Her greatest expenses are housing and childcare and she has very little to live on after bills have been paid, much less than Ruby in Case Study 1. However, Lily perceives a continuous full-time employment record as an investment into her career. She would not consider working part-time or not at all.

Lily has a small financial safety net: about £7,000 in savings from her inheritance, which is for emergencies. Although she lives quite frugally – she rarely eats meat and tends to eat lentil stew or vegetable stir-fry – she goes through her wages (table 11).

Table 11: Case Study 3 – Monthly net income and outgoings

	Income after tax	Outgoings
Income after tax	£1,517	
Working Tax Credit	-	
Child Tax Credit	-	
Child Benefit	£82	
Childcare vouchers	£40	
Council Tax Benefit	-	
Children's father's maintenance	£500	
Children's grandmother's gifts (clothes)	£30	
Rent/mortgage		£925
Council Tax		£50
Gas and electricity		£35
Water		£15
Telephone landline and broadband		£25
Mobile phone		£35
Travel to and from work		£250
Childcare		£460
Great-grandmothers train fare to provide childcare		£100
Total income	£2,169	
Total fixed outgoings		£1,895
To spend on food/clothes/extras etc. after outgoings	£274 = 13 percent of income	

Source: Data compiled by Martina Klett-Davies.

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5.5 Parenting Support

Single parents are supported in the UK, by both informal and formal networks. There is research that shows that single parent's social networks can be supportive, and there are UK organisations that are dedicated to support single parents (table 12). This section shows that the UK has well-developed services that engage with parents through standardised parenting programmes; and interventions to (re-)skill or (re-)train parents.



Single parent's social networks

There is little research in the field of single parents and their social networks, but the little that there is supports the view that a developed social network is associated with enhanced wellbeing and that it serves to combat social exclusion. One US study found positive links between single parents having a social network of family and friends and the parent's mental health (Samuelson 1994).

This is supported by another US study of 2,818 low-income single mothers that found that social networks, such as family and friends that provide material or emotional support if needed, are linked with mental health issues. A lack of social network could be linked with capital deficits, depressive symptoms, and low self-worth. The author concludes that social network disadvantages compound individual-level disadvantages. Mothers with strong social networks worked more, earned more, and were less reliant on welfare compared with mothers with less developed social networks (Harknett 2006).

A more recent ethnographic US study proposes that community-based social networks have the potential to help low-income mothers manage responsibilities of work and family. The analysis of 73 interviews with low income single mothers indicates that they helped one another with practical support, emotional support, modelling and mentoring and even supporting each other in actively pursuing a path out of poverty (Freeman & Dodson 2014).

There is one study into single mothers and their support networks. Hoff (2006) interviewed 116 lone mothers with a pre-school age child in Berlin and in Greater London. In Greater London, 60 percent were not in paid employment at the time of the interview and had achieved above-average educational attainments. Hoff (ibid.) found that informal support networks mattered more than formal support. The person most important in the single mother's support network was her own mother, in both Berlin and in Greater London. Most mothers drew mainly on their mother for support, but friends were also important, particularly when the mother was not living locally and in fact, every mother in the sample tended to have five supporters. Those lone mothers who did not have friendship support tended to mobilize sufficient formal support alternative such as a counsellor or a doctor (ibid.).

Single parents' support organisations

A number of organisations provide legal and financial advice and information for single parents in the UK (table 12). *Gingerbread* is the principal organisation that provides advice for lone parents in England and Wales and it encourages single mothers to form social networks as part of their support. There are currently 60 groups across England and Wales that are run by single parents for single parents in their local area. *Gingerbread* groups are not only a chance to get together and to benefit from the mutual support that members can provide, but these groups can also access *Gingerbread's* extensive advice and information service as well as their lively online forums.

Gingerbread also provides practical support, campaigns for single parents in parliament and offers training courses for practitioners. *Gingerbread* offers tax, benefit and legal information on their website as well as a telephone helpline that offers information on child maintenance, contact, employment, education, welfare benefits and tax credits, housing and debt. *Gingerbread* is funded by the Department of Education as well as 20 charitable trusts and foundations, statutory funders such as the *Big Lottery Fund*, local councils and Jobcentre Plus.

Gingerbread also runs benefit information and money management courses to help single parent families. In Wales, *Gingerbread* offers assertiveness courses to help parents express themselves with confidence without having to resort to passive, aggressive or manipulative behaviour, which will lead to a recognised Level 1 qualification, accredited by Open Award. It also offers training on a variety of work-relevant skills, from CV production and interview techniques to first aid and customer care.

One Parent Families Scotland is funded by the Scottish Government and local councils, the *Big Lottery Fund* and charitable organisations as well as corporations. It mainly offers information, advice and support but also co-ordinates local offices, some of which offer flexible childcare services or family support workers.

Additionally, there are online services including *Netmums* and *Mumsnet*. The latter is the UK's biggest network for parents, generating over 60 million page views and over 10 million visits per month. Their aim is to pool knowledge and advice and offer support to their users. *Netmums* is similar but partly funded by the Department for Education; it's also more localised and offers information to mothers on a diverse range of subjects, from where to find playgroups and how to eat healthily to where to meet other mothers.

Single parents might face extra challenges rearing their children alone. The provision of parenting support specifically for single parents varies by Local Authorities. In the London Borough of Camden, for example, the council provides funding to the children's charity *Coram* that offers parenting sessions for single parents specifically focussed on strategies for family communication and listening to young children (Coram 2014).⁴³

43 <http://www.coram.org.uk/camden-canparenting-vouchers/how-book-parenting-session-your-canparent-voucher> (accessed December 12, 2015)



Table 12: List of organizations that provide legal and financial advice and information for single parents

Organisation	Details	URL
Child Benefit Helpline	Provides information and advice in connection with Child Benefit claims	https://www.gov.uk/browse/benefits/child
Child Maintenance Options	Information about making arrangements for child maintenance	http://www.cmoptions.org
Citizen's Advice	Information and advice on a wide range of issues including benefits and tax credits	http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk
Civil Legal Advice	Information about eligibility for legal aid and signposting to local sources of help	http://www.gov.uk
Directgov	Information on a wide range of subjects including benefits	https://www.gov.uk
Gingerbread Single Parent Helpline	Information on maintenance, benefits, tax credits, debt, employment, education, legal rights and holidays	http://www.gingerbread.org.uk
Jobcentre Plus	Processes welfare benefit claims	http://www.gov.uk
One Parent Families Scotland Lone Parent Helpline	Helpline provides confidential advice and information for single parents in Scotland	http://www.opfs.org.uk
Refugee Council	Advice for refugees and asylum seekers	http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk
Tax Credit Helpline	Information and advice concerning applications/ renewals for Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit	https://www.gov.uk/claim-tax-credits
Working Families	Advice on benefits and employment law	http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk

Source: Table created by Martina Klett-Davies.

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5.6 Parenting Programmes

Throughout Europe, family support is moving in the direction of greater state engagement with parenting, yet the UK is distinct. France, Germany and Italy have support in place that is serving more general family purposes, and not just parenting. In comparison, the UK has well-developed services to engage with parents where “support” means intervention to (re-)skill or (re-)train parents through standardised parenting programmes (Daly 2013).

The New Labour Government (1997-2010) replaced a policy preoccupation with families with one concerned with parenting. The parent-child relationship became a legitimate source of intervention in a quest to eradicate child poverty and realise improved outcomes for children.

In 2007, the New Labour Government established the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners (NAPP) to offer training schemes to practitioners so that, through their local authority, they could

offer parenting programmes. NAPP did not have their funding renewed and closed at the end of their three year funding cycle in 2010, when the Coalition Government (2010–2015) came into power (Klett-Davies 2010).

During the three years of its existence, NAPP trained 3,162 practitioners from 147 local authorities in one of ten evidence based parenting programmes. However, only about 42 percent of the practitioners were able to deliver a parenting intervention within six months of their training, mainly due to funding and time constraints (Asmussen et al. 2012).

NAPP was also able to operate on evidence that a parenting programme might not only help families in need, but also provide significant population wide benefits, such as reductions in school failure, youth crime and drug misuse. It is estimated that over 6,000 parents may have attended an evidence-based parenting intervention offered as a result of the NAPP training, although this figure cannot be verified (ibid.). There has been no evaluation regarding improved child outcomes.

The term “poor parenting” has become a commonly used term, indicating that parenting has come to be regarded as a “skill” that can be taught and learned. This belief is the basis for a new parenting culture in Britain, where “good” parenting is identified with middle class values and practices. Parenting policies then tend to work on the basis of a “deficit model” of parenting. Crucially, in a deficit model, parents are held responsible for the social mobility outcomes of their children rather than this being the consequence of parents’ socioeconomic circumstances, labour market policies and employment opportunities, childcare and schools (Klett-Davies 2010).

Parenting programmes are usually offered to parents free of charge through their local Sure Start Children’s Centres, their children’s school or their Doctor. Parents can either be referred to or can get in touch directly with the programme providers. The Department of Education tends to endorse the programmes that are evidence-based, meaning that they have been scientifically tested whether the information they provide, consistently improves matters for parents and children. The delivery of any parenting programme varies by region as the programmes are funded at local authority level (DfE 2013a).

A study of parenting programmes found that Local Authorities are most likely to fund four particular programmes: *Incredible Years*, *Triple P*, the *Strengthening Families Programme* (SFP) and the *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities* (SFSC) programme. However, three quarters of Local Authorities mentioned other programmes in addition, and a total of 118 other programmes were listed that met diverse needs. Some local authorities found the government and their endorsed programmes too prescriptive and the provision of parenting programmes varies greatly by each local authority (Klett-Davies et al. 2008).

Another study of parenting programmes in the UK found that attendance and engagement by the neediest or most disadvantaged parents remains poor. Parents mentioned certain barriers, such



as their own beliefs, lifestyles and limited resources as well as programme-specific factors, such as its delivery, content and support arrangements. The authors conclude that attendance and engagement are low because the programmes stand alone and do not form part of a comprehensive framework of family support (Whittaker & Cowley 2012). It could also be argued that the deficit model of parenting that informs these programmes, where “good” parenting is identified with middle class values and practices, does not appeal to all parents (Klett-Davies 2012).

Research conducted as part of the longitudinal Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) shows that both, parenting and poverty matter for children’s outcomes. There is little evidence that any positive parental behaviour has more impact in disadvantaged families and parenting programmes are therefore unable to close the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children (Jones et al. 2013). Therefore, improving children’s outcome by just tackling parenting without tackling poverty is likely to prove futile.

Another analysis of the MCS data interrogates the relationship between social class and attainment in the early years of schooling. This study comes to the conclusion that social class remains divisive, and the link between structural inequalities and inequalities in children’s cognitive scores cannot be readily accounted for in terms of individual parenting behaviours (Sullivan et al. 2013).

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has shown the support that is available to parents such as early education, childcare and parenting programmes and described research into the importance of social networks for single parent’s wellbeing. It also listed a number of organisations that offer support to single parents in the UK.

It analysed the early years policy that gave universal entitlements to part-time free childcare to four-year-olds at first, then to three-year-olds and then in later again to the most disadvantaged two-year-olds. While local authorities in England and Wales are obliged to ensure sufficient childcare and the free childcare take-up rate for the three- and four-year-olds is near universal, targeted childcare subsidies for disadvantaged two-year-olds are less successful and provision varies regionally.

This free entitlement for three- and four-year-olds could not have been specifically focused on boosting maternal employment as it is not particularly work-friendly. It is fairly inflexible and available term time only. This fact together with the number of hours means that it would not adequately cover part-time employment.

In the UK, childcare is expensive and this chapter has shown that this can partly be explained by the characteristics of the demand led system; the reliance and expansion of the for-profit private

sector and the provision of financial resources to parents through the tax and benefit system rather than through childcare providers. While it is meant to enable parents to have a free choice over the childcare being used, the evidence suggests that retrospective reimbursement through the tax and benefit system has been a deterrent for many families, and private sector childcare is expensive. The cost of childcare has increased by 27 percent since 2009 and parents consider the cost to be a deterrent. Single parents in particular are less likely than couple parents to use formal childcare.

The new, yet to be implemented Universal Credit System will increase childcare subsidies from 70 to 85 percent. However, the steep withdrawal rates may act as a disincentive to parents in more precarious employment.

Since 2010, the Coalition Government has moved away from the principle of universality to targeted support which means that there is less of a chance of accessing services unless assessed as “at risk of poor outcomes”. While the Coalition Government has given more access to early education from age two if from disadvantaged households, it has reduced funding for services and cut child benefit for higher earners. There are also now fewer staff and nursery places in Sure Start Centres due to budget cuts. However, there are still children who are losing out on early education such as 30,000 under two-year-olds who are entitled to a free childcare place but fail to find one due to a lack of availability.

The new Conservative Government (2015-) plans to double the number of hours of free childcare for working parents from 2017 but there are concerns about the feasibility of this policy and with getting parents back to work. The proposed Childcare Bill is moving too far from child development and from the quality of childcare.

The lack of research into single parents and their social networks is surprising but one single study has shown that the person most important in the single mother’s support network is her own mother and then friends who become only more important where the mother is not living locally.

The UK has well-developed services in place to support parents and their parenting. In England, the parent-child relationship became a legitimate source of intervention but it has to be noted that “support” means intervention to (re-)skill or (re-)train parents through standardised parenting programmes. In comparison, France, Germany and Italy have support in place that is serving more general family purposes.



6. Reform options

Single parents in the UK are clearly under pressure, but the degree of pressure varies from single parent to single parent as they are not a homogenous group. This report has highlighted the main arguments concerning the situation of single parents and their child/ren and how they are positioned in the British welfare state, as citizens and as workers with state benefits and tax credits, childcare and parenting support. The report looked at the legal aspects of being a single parent going through a divorce or a separation such as mediation and shared parenting. It also discussed the financial side of child maintenance arrangements and spousal maintenance as well as the negative effects of the cuts to legal aid and the effects of divorce on children's wellbeing.

These discussions and evaluations lead to the social policy recommendations and reform options that are at the heart of this chapter. Many of the suggestions can be considered sensible but it is questionable whether a policy focus on vocational education and support programmes will even come close to fixing the problem of increasing social inequality. Picketty (2014) demonstrated in his seminal work "Capital in the Twenty First Century" that increasing inequality in the UK is a feature of capitalism that can only be reversed through state intervention and economic redistribution such as higher wealth and income taxes and the abolishment of tax havens. While the New Labour Government managed to reduce child poverty rates through state benefits and tax credits; these cash transfers could be considered "window dressing" as they did not greatly increase recipient's social capital.

The bottom line is that without economic and educational reforms there are limits to what social policies can achieve in the context of persistent and high socio-economic inequalities. Consequently, inequality needs to move to the top of the UK's political agenda.

In the meantime, government can improve the situation of lone parents in several respects: contact and maintenance arrangements, mediation, paid employment, childcare, education and training and benefits.

Post separation parenting

The children featured in the qualitative element of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Omnibus Survey between 2006 and 2007 were, generally, satisfied with their current contact arrangements, although a few would prefer a little more contact. It seems that the quality rather than the quantity of contact was the issue for children who expressed dissatisfaction. Contact arrangements only lead to better outcomes when families have chosen it and when partners can parent cooperatively and in a child-responsive way. The hostility that adults portray in the separation process distresses their children more than almost anything else when the children's welfare should be the primary concern. The bullet points below indicate issues that the children raised and that can be considered as specific suggestions for reform options.

- Children want to be consulted about the arrangements, and for their parents to be both reliable and take accounts of other demands on their time.
- Children want to spend time with their non-resident parent alone; some children felt unable to talk about their emotions to their non-resident parent.
- The children in the study advised parents to cooperate and communicate with each other and not to argue in front of them.
- Shared parenting does not automatically lead to better outcomes for children and research is needed to examine the outcome of shared parenting on children, such as the effects of children constantly switching homes over children living with one single primary carer - with generous access for the other party.

Maintenance arrangements

The report has shown that both private and statutory arrangements have a role to play in increasing the UK's relatively low rate of payment of child maintenance.

- More needs to be done to target the families with no child maintenance arrangement in place to support them in making the most effective arrangements, whether private or statutory, ensuring that both parents contribute to the cost of raising their children.
- Child maintenance in England, Wales and Scotland is a regular, reliable financial support that helps towards a child's everyday living costs. The amount depended on income, care arrangements and number of children and it is therefore not depended on the needs of the child/ren. This approach is different to the way of thinking in Germany, where child maintenance focusses on the needs of the child/ren as well as income. This enables the state to step in in cases of under- or non-payments and allows it to make advance maintenance payments to cover the needs of the child/ren (Klett-Davies 2007). In theory, this could contribute to reducing the number of children in poverty, providing the maximum length of child maintenance is not limited to six years or to until the child is 12 years old, as in Germany.
- Single mothers on benefits find private maintenance arrangements particularly difficult to maintain and therefore, the Child Maintenance Service may need to rethink the policy of encouraging private maintenance arrangements.
- Research is needed into why so many single parents receive no or very little maintenance.



Post separation parenting support

The Coalition Government (2010–2015) has been short sighted and inconsistent; on the one hand it promoted and invested in mediation services to free up capacities in court, and on the other it made cuts to legal aid that undermined the investment in mediation services. Mediation was advocated to minimise delay and costs of family courts and to re-focus the legal system on the needs of children. Initial research shows that mediation is a good idea, but there is little awareness among the British public and in a stressful divorce process, ex-partners put their trust into their individual legal representation and/or the family court instead, assuming this will get them the best deal.

- Legal aid cuts have been virtually destroyed in most areas as a result of legislation introduced in 2012. Family Courts now struggle with bitter disputes involving access to children conducted by warring parents without legal representation. These cuts need to be rethought and refocussed on the needs of the child. Pre-court services with mediators could advise parents about what to expect when going to family court.
- Mediation leaves children in a difficult position as it takes place outside the law, unless a consent order is sought from the court for certainty. Children are therefore without the welfare paramount protection of the Children Act 1989 and are viewed floating as third parties when they should be dealt with under the protection of the Children Act.
- Mediation expects both partners to be able to communicate with each other and this is not possible in an acrimonious separation or when ex-partners are not confident about their ability to communicate effectively. Therefore, mediation in tandem with legal representation might be the way forward. Especially financial mediation should be lawyer supported and include comprehensive financial disclosure. This might be a more attractive option for those who feel they might lose out in mediation.
- Reviews show that the family type may be less influential than family functioning in explaining child outcomes following parental separation. Mediation could play a role in family support services. They could offer support to parents in all conflict situations, regardless of whether they want to separate or stay together.

Benefit system reforms

- Social policy should break away from the rigid work first approach. The report shows that in-work benefits are an effective way of targeting the low paid and reducing financial barriers to work. However, these in-work benefits also render working at low pay a viable option, and are therefore likely to increase inequality between single parents and other family types. This is compounded by the fact that a new labour market is emerging in the UK, characterised

by income insecurity and a continued squeeze on real earnings. While the UK's rigid work first approach has been relatively successful in getting significant numbers of claimants into work, it has been less effective in helping many retain jobs and/or achieve wage or career progression, where skills development has an important role to play.

- Universal Credit will replace a wide range of government services and possibly lead to a simplified system of application procedures. Universal Credit will supposedly enable the beneficiaries to retain more of their income than before. The Conservative Government might consider a progressive reduction in the taper rate from 65 to 55 percent which would mean that 45p in every pound earned could be kept. A more serious reduction in tapers under Universal Credit could kick start a more redistributive system and reduce child poverty rates. In addition, greater sanctions should be withdrawn and assistance offered instead.

Education and training over work first

The UK might be able to learn from a wide ranging approach undertaken in Canada. Canada has combined the two approaches of welfare conditionality with support systems and childcare, the “tough love” approach and the “soft love” approach. The “tough love” initiatives made benefits conditional on employment and the “soft love” initiatives provided support to working parents. More investments in childcare and the national child benefit system provided low-income families with income above welfare thresholds and earnings were supplemented for up to three years; seemingly intractable problems such as low education levels and mental illness were also tackled. As a result, Canada's single parent poverty rate was halved in eleven years - from nearly 50 percent to just over 20 percent (1996 to 2007, Richards et al. 2010). In the UK, where 42 percent of children of single parents live in poverty, what is needed is a greater investment in childcare, education and skills.

A low level of educational attainment has been found to be the strongest predictor of income poverty: it is an even more powerful predictor than growing up in a workless household in the UK. Therefore, rather than pushing single parents into low paid and unstable work where the welfare state has to top up income to avert poverty, investments could be made to increase the level of educational and vocational qualifications instead. The effect of training on job advancement and wage progression is positive and may be a way into financial independence.

- The rigid adherence to the conditions of Job Seekers Allowance inhibits, rather than enables single parents to find better paid employment. Ensuring that single parents can take further educational courses is a worthwhile investment. This requires a culture change on the part of the government requiring a modicum of patience and a little bit of well-placed faith in the determination of single parents to raise themselves and their children out of poverty.



- The principal training issues for many single parents entering work are basic skills development (such as numeracy, literacy and basic IT), employability skills and “work-readiness” as well as vocational and technical skills. Research shows that training enhances not just skills and qualifications but also self-confidence.
- The most frequently cited barrier to training take-up was the cost of childcare, suggesting that training providers have to recognise parents’ needs around childcare.

Employment support programmes

The two year Work Programme offers support for the long-term unemployed, yet single parents are largely invisible within the system and are a third less likely to get a sustainable job compared with other participant groups. Government funded employment support programmes should place a renewed emphasis on single parents and their specific needs to deliver a significant benefit for single parents who would like to (re-)enter employment. Single mothers’ employment rate increases with the age of the children and it is inextricably linked to the perceived needs of the child, childcare facilities and work opportunities.

This report has shown that single parents are perceived within a “social problem” discourse and that they feel underappreciated for their ability to manage to balance raising children and unpaid work at home together with paid employment. It is argued that an increased appreciation of single parents in public and in support organisations could increase the effects of social policies, such as a work programme.

There are four elements that have been identified as key to a work programme (Daguerre & Etherington 2009):

- Personalised support that is structured around the particular needs of single parents, including flexibility to allow for balance between work and care.
- Adequate staff/client ratios are needed to provide individualised advice and support of consistently high quality which allows relationships of trust to develop with the single parent.
- A holistic approach is very important, taking into account the need for additional support, such as financial advice or help finding childcare, as well as back-to-work support.
- Work placements, in-work training and other measures are needed to support sustainable employment. Providers should put more emphasis on sustainability when job matching or assessing whether to support a single parent to skill up and so improve their chances of securing a particular job.

Family friendly employment

There are a range of options for employers to consider; the points below draw mainly from the findings of a research study with more than a 1,000 UK single mothers that offers both, suggestions for shifting attitudes and changing workplace culture, along with small and practical steps for small and medium sized businesses as well as large organisations (Gingerbread 2012).

- Single parents like to be in paid work that fits in with their caring obligations but flexible work hours and an adequate income are rare. The government could take a more active role in working with employers to tackle barriers to adequate incomes by extending flexible working. At least the public sector and its contracted jobs could be advertised with a flexible working option. This would complement employees' existing "legal right to request flexible working".
- Flexibility can only be successful when it is embedded at the heart of the business and available to all staff, to new as well as existing staff and modelled by senior staff. Examples of flexible working options include working part-time, job sharing, annualised hours, "glide time" (where employees can adjust the start and the end of their working days), shift swaps, additional holidays purchase, unpaid leave, career breaks and homeworking. For example, annualised contracts may mean that parents are able to work more during term time. A flexible approach to "glide time" can also mean that parents can drop off children at school.
- Single parents have to be able to take time off when a child is ill. Single parents could encourage employers to meet parents' needs for emergency time off, possibly by introducing a set number of paid "family emergency" days (similar to paid sick leave) and/or by permitting parents to work from home during this time. This would increase parents' ability to cope with family emergencies. Currently, employees are allowed time off to deal with an emergency involving a dependant, but there is no set amount of time, and the argument is that it depends on the situation. A single parent may well be asked to take annual leave or parental leave when they want to look after their sick child.
- Individuals in the organisations, such as managers and colleagues, play a significant role in supporting or thwarting even marginal flexibilities.

Childcare

There are many reform options available, yet the focus of childcare has to remain on improving its accessibility and affordability as well as on the developmental needs of the child and the development of the childcare workforce. Childcare is key to facilitating single parents' move into the labour force, remaining there and progressing at work. The availability of accessible and affordable childcare is still a key barrier for single parents who want to enter paid employment. Increasing the provision and quality of childcare depends on the political inclination of the



government. The options below offer more practical suggestions, but each one means increased government spending.

- The free childcare places for three- and four-year-olds are only available for 15 hours a week for 38 weeks of the year. The Conservative Government (2015-) is set to double free childcare allowance for three- and four-year-olds to 30 hours but only for working parents and only during term time. This should be rethought to target all parents for 48 weeks of the year. Government investments are also needed to counteract the risks of undermining the sustainability of the sector and to ensure that the childcare provided is of a high quality.
- An increased provision could be extended to nursery and school age children to include wrap around care and school holiday provision.
- Government could also concentrate on funding providers directly without limiting parental choice over the type of childcare used, as the funding could continue to follow parental choice. Direct government funding is more likely to sustain childcare in more disadvantaged areas and to drive up quality of early education childcare.
- Government could work on improving the quality of childcare by improving staff qualifications and increasing the number of teacher-led settings. This could be made a condition for public funding. The evidence shows that high quality pre-school provision by highly qualified graduate staff is related to higher cognitive and behavioural outcomes for children long-term.
- The legal obligations of the Childcare Act 2006 obliges English and Welsh local authorities to ensure that there is sufficient childcare for working parents and those undertaking training with the intention of returning to work. However, there are many gaps in the provision. The Family and Childcare Trusts advocates making early education and childcare a legal entitlement for parents, bringing it in line with the right to a school place.

Conclusion

The British welfare state can be lauded for having reduced child poverty rates in single parent families through state benefits and tax credits and it contributed to a decrease in teenage pregnancy rates. It also achieved a near universal uptake of free part-time childcare for three- and four-year-olds as well as an increase in the single parents' paid employment rate.

However, child poverty rates and teenage pregnancy rates are still high in the UK despite the policy attention they have received since the late 1990s and in comparison to any other family type, single parent families continue to be most affected by poverty. This report has shown that paid work might not be the answer to reduce child poverty as paid work is increasingly precarious.

Successive British governments have adopted the “work first” approach in recent decades. No significant attempts have been made to improve single parents’ skill levels substantially, so that they tend to remain in precarious jobs characterised by low income and insecurity. Many single parent families do not receive child maintenance at all or not a sufficient amount. These are all reasons why the child poverty rate in single parent families remains at a high level. Child poverty jeopardises the life chances of almost half the children of single parents in the UK. These children will face worse health, wellbeing and educational achievement and will not be able to achieve their full potential.

The British welfare state has so far no sustainable solutions for the difficulties faced by single mothers and fathers. Not only remains their care work undervalued; in comparison to other household types single parents are also set to out even more in future. The introduction of Universal Credit in 2017 or later will affect single parents in particular. Despite some improvements in the framework of Universal Credit, such as the increased financial assistance with childcare and the simplified application process, the financial situation and quality of life of many single parent families is set to deteriorate further as they are set to lose a higher proportion of their weekly income under Universal Credit than any other household type.

Single parents are a prime example of the increasing social inequality apparent in Britain. Effective social policies designed to support this family form are urgently required to address these inequalities in the short and medium term (see reform proposals).

In the long term, the problem of low wages and deregulation of work contracts needs to be addressed. The increase in state benefits and tax credits cannot prevent a life-time of precarious employment. The socioeconomic inequalities that single parent families face will not be eliminated without economic redistribution. Consequently, further deep seated social reforms are required.

Piketty’s book “Capital in the twenty first century” (2014) provides evidence of the growing inequality between income from wealth and income from work and Piketty calls for a greater redistribution by the state, for example, by taxing wealth. This report about the situation of single parents shows that the fight against social inequality must be given priority within the political agenda in the UK - especially in the interest of the children.



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