

Empowering lone parents to progress towards employability

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EMPOWERING LONE PARENTS TO PROGRESS TOWARDS EMPLOYABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Policymakers in liberal welfare states like the UK have prioritised extending the reach of compulsory activation to target vulnerable jobseeker groups, such as lone parents. However, such interventions – especially when combined with intensified welfare conditionality – appear to have had limited positive effects on lone parents’ employability, while often negatively impacting wellbeing. This article argues that the problem is a disconnect between the complex barriers to employability faced by lone parents (including their need to balance work and caring) and the content of ‘work-first’ activation favoured by successive UK Governments. We report positive findings from in-depth interviews with lone parents and key stakeholders involved in more person-centred, non-compulsory local employability services. Multi-agency service delivery, collaborative governance and a clear role for user voice in programme design were important facilitators of positive experiences. Our analysis points to the need for services that empower lone parents to make choices to progress towards employment while supporting family life.

INTRODUCTION

Policymakers in the UK, as in other liberal welfare states, have prioritised expanding the reach of activation and employability programmes to target groups of welfare claimants further from the labour market, with lone parents one such group subject to increasing attention. However, despite a raft of changes to the benefits system in the past decade that has meant that lone parents are now subject to roughly similar levels of welfare conditionality as other jobseekers (Johnsen and Blenkinsopp, 2018), the results achieved by mainstream welfare-to-work, and lone parents' views on its effectiveness, have been far from positive.

This article argues that a key problem lies in a disconnect between a (mis-)representation of the barriers to employability faced by lone parents that underlies welfare conditionality and activation, and the reality of the complex combination of challenges faced by many members of this vulnerable jobseeker group. More specifically, we suggest that current UK policy remains wedded to behavioural explanations of why lone parents are at greater risk of labour market exclusion, with the perceived generosity of welfare benefits and the motivational deficiencies of individuals seen as the root of the problem (Whitworth, 2013). We know different. As part of research on third sector-led services supporting lone parents – the Making It Work (MIW) programme – we conducted 102 interviews and gathered baseline survey data from more than 1,300 participants. We also conducted 117 interviews with street-level workers and key stakeholders involved in the co-production and delivery of these innovative employability services. In this article, we report on the range of individual, personal, external and labour market factors that threw up barriers to employability for lone parents. In order to structure our findings, we draw on frameworks for understanding the concept of employability (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Green et al., 2013). We also report,

briefly, on the innovative third sector-led services that provided the context for our research, which have sought to respond more effectively to (some of) the range of barriers faced by lone parents, thus emerging as an important ‘enabling factor’ supporting employability (Green et al., 2013). We suggest that combining lone parents’ perspectives on their own challenges around employability with their views on ‘what works’ in enabling them to meet those challenges is helpful in identifying priorities for policy in post-Covid-19 labour markets.

Following this introduction, we describe key employability frameworks and review the literature on individual, personal, external/labour market and enabling factors have the potential to impact lone parents’ employability. We then discuss welfare and activation policies in the UK, noting that these policies fail to engage with evidence on the complex barriers faced by lone parents. Next, we describe our methods and present findings from our research with lone parents, street-level workers and key stakeholders. We conclude by considering implications for conceptualising the barriers to employability faced by lone parents and the need for a radical, evidence-based redesign of activation policies.

EMPLOYABILITY AND THE EXPERIENCES OF LONE PARENTS

Framing employability

A relatively obscure concept thirty years ago, ‘employability’ re-emerged as a central theme for activation and welfare policies from the mid-1990s (Green et al., 2013). Policy literature in the 1990s and 2000s was influenced by strategies from the OECD (1994) and European Union (CEC, 1999) that advocated a decisively supply-side approach, based on the idea that the individual failings of the low-skilled and long-term unemployed explained their exclusion

from the labour market. In the UK, these narratives were regurgitated and reinforced by successive Conservative, Labour and coalition governments (Crisp and Powell, 2017).

However, researchers soon pointed to the relatively poor performance of what came to be known as ‘work-first’ activation (compulsory programmes that use a combination of ‘motivational’ interventions and welfare conditionality to force the unemployed back to work as quickly as possible). A number of studies sought to inform better policies through a more complete discussion of factors limiting the employability of excluded groups (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). Thus, while some authors then and since have maintained that the concept of employability cannot be de-toxified or separated from supply-side fundamentalism of work-first activation (Crisp and Powell, 2017), others have continued to argue that policymakers can benefit from working towards a fuller understanding of what makes people more employable and what might work in terms of policy interventions.

Among those frameworks for understanding employability often cited in the literature, McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) define employability as reflecting individual factors and personal circumstances, but also a variety of external issues, with a particular focus on the labour market and workplace. For McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), employability is defined by: **individual factors**, such as basic and transferable skills and qualifications of value in the workplace, experience in the labour market (Duell et al., 2016), health and disability-related barriers (Campbell et al., 2016) and self-efficacy, defined as a belief in one’s own capacity to find employment (James, 2007); **personal circumstances** such as support with caring responsibilities, access to financial resources through the benefits system or other means, and therefore a capacity to mitigate the risk of poverty (Guilbert et al., 2015), and access to social networks, as a means of facilitating jobseeking and to protect against isolation; and **external**

factors, which for McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) mainly means the quality, quantity and location of labour demand, and employers' recruitment behaviours (Orton et al., 2019).

Green et al.'s (2013) evidence review largely supported the McQuaid-Lindsay framework but argued that McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) underplay the role of public policy and national and local public services – **enabling factors** that can support (or if poorly designed, hinder) transitions to employment. Clearly, unemployed people's risk of experiencing poverty (and associated negative impacts on wellbeing) is often affected significantly by the extent to which the welfare state is 'enabling', while the combination of welfare conditionality and compulsory activation (and the quality and content of services) may positively or negatively shape different groups' progression towards employability.

Employability and lone parents

Many of the factors described by these employability frameworks connect with evidence on the challenges faced by unemployed lone parents, but the literature suggests that activation policies would need to target a range of specific barriers in order to respond to this group's needs. For example, in terms of individual factors, many lone parents have spent prolonged and repeated periods out of the workplace due to caring. Partly linked to these barriers, unemployed lone parents also tend to report relatively low levels of self-efficacy – the belief that they have the capacity to progress into employment (Harkness, 2016). However, lone parents' views of the balance between work and caring also need to be understood by those designing policy interventions. As Haux et al. (2012: 338) note, many lone parents are 'keen to work but also keen to be able to combine paid work and looking after their children'. Managing the 'family-work project' is a challenge for lone parents, and not one that current policy does much to help them to meet (Millar and Ridge, 2009, 2020). Individuals' 'attitudes

towards parenting as a job, perceptions of personal and family constraints and intentions to work' (Towaszewski et al., 2010: 29) need to be respected and factored into to support that empowers them to make choices that benefit themselves and their families. Other individual-level barriers may include health problems, often exacerbated by repeated experiences of insecurity and the impact of poverty (Feldman and Schram, 2019). There is consistent evidence that poverty as a direct result of welfare retrenchment feeds into lone parents' health problems, while health improvements have been identified among those transitioning from welfare-to-work (Harkness, 2016).

As noted above, jobseekers' personal circumstances around caring roles (for children and/or adult relatives) are likely to impact their employability, and this may be a particular challenge for lone parents (Harkness, 2016). A lack of informal family support with caring alongside gaps in formal childcare are among the barriers most consistently cited by lone parents (Millar and Ridge, 2020). While this article does not focus explicitly on the gendered nature of employability debates and policies, the devaluing of care carried out by lone and partnered parents, in the vast majority of cases women, has led to activation and welfare reforms that are blind to female carers' needs and priorities. Additionally, all of these personal circumstances reported by many lone parents (health problems, the experience of poverty, and challenges associated with caring responsibilities) can contribute to social isolation (Haux et al., 2012).

The external factors discussed above are again likely to affect lone parents in specific ways. First, there is evidence that labour demand deficiency in weaker regions and localities is a key predictor on longer spells of unemployment among lone parents (Whitworth, 2013). The impacts of the economic cycle on jobs and types of work also matters – intensified

competition for, and declining job quality in, part-time service positions since the 2008-9 crisis has impacted negatively on lone parents (Haux et al., 2012). In labour markets where the quantity of overall demand is weak, the quality and types of jobs available may also throw up challenges for lone parents, in terms of first finding work and then ensuring that that work is compatible with family life and offers a route out of poverty. The behaviour of individual employers may also negatively impact lone parents' employability. Some employers remain reluctant to recruit from vulnerable jobseeker groups (Orton et al., 2019), while in parts of the service sector the flexibility (in working hours and shift patterns) demanded by employers can create barriers for lone parents.

Finally, the evidence supports Green et al.'s (2013) argument that enabling factors matter. First, there is consistent evidence that the UK Government's approach to engaging with lone parents – through the public employment service Jobcentre Plus and welfare-to-work programmes – is 'perceived to be relatively unhelpful' (Haux et al., 2012: 339) and 'not child friendly' (Lindsay et al., 2019: 648). This is partly because of a broader drive to standardise services. Jobcentre Plus staff have acknowledged that its jobseeking regime does not reflect the specific experiences and needs of lone parents (Casebourne et al., 2010), while evaluations of the Work Programme (the main UK Government activation programme at the time of the research) note that it provided little 'substantive personalisation', instead offering largely standardised services (Meager et al., 2014: 129). Standardised work-first activation would appear to be a poor fit for needs and aspirations of many lone parents and has been associated with lower self-efficacy and negative health impacts for some of those required to participate (Campbell et al., 2016). On the other hand, where services such as specialist personal adviser support have been tailored to the needs of lone parents, participants have reported more positive experiences (Evans et al., 2003).

The welfare system has the potential to enable or inhibit progression towards employability. Welfare reforms targeting lone parents introduced under successive governments in the 2000s saw many transferred onto Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA, then the UK's main unemployment benefit) (Haux et al., 2012), and a combination of intensified conditionality and welfare retrenchment since, which has been reinforced with the introduction of Universal Credit, has increased poverty risks (Johnsen and Blenkinsopp, 2018).

Other elements of the public service infrastructure are likely to act as enabling factors or contribute to the challenges faced by lone parents. There is a clear relationship between childcare availability and accessibility (in terms of hours and place) and higher levels of lone parent employment (Millar and Ridge, 2009), while increasing welfare conditionality obligations on lone parents makes more demands of them in terms of identifying and paying for childcare (Casebourne et al., 2010). And just as health problems are a barrier for many lone parents, so gaps in health provision may hamper progress towards employability.

Despite the contested nature of the concept in some circles, established frameworks for understanding employability apparently remain helpful in framing a discussion of the challenges faced by many lone parents, as well as 'what might work' in terms of interventions. Our research is framed using Green et al.'s (2013) four-theme employability framework, and captures lone parents' experiences of barriers to employability (which are complex and inter-connected), and, crucially, how co-produced local services sought to respond to and/or acknowledge these barriers, in sharp contrast to the punitive, work-first approach that dominates UK Government services. We also add to the evidence that effective employability services co-produced with lone parents need to understand progression into

appropriate employment as a ‘family-work project’ that is taken forward through and driven by family relationships (Millar and Ridge, 2009).

CONTEXT FOR THE RESEARCH AND METHODS

Policy and research context

Our discussion of the policy context will be brief, given that there is extensive commentary in the extant literature on welfare and employability interventions directed towards lone parents. Initial moves in the 1990s and 2000s to activate lone parents were gradualist and focused mainly on incentives through the Tax Credits system, alongside voluntary welfare-to-work programmes. Until the early 2000s there was little by way of welfare conditionality directed specifically towards lone parents, but there followed increasing demands to attend regular work-focused interviews and from 2008 benefit claimants with children over 12 were directed towards JSA and required to seek employment. During the past decade this age limit has been reduced to now take in all lone parents with children aged 3, and with the continuing roll-out of Universal Credit, welfare conditionality will be extended to require lone parents working part-time to seek increased hours (Millar and Ridge, 2020). In terms of lone parents’ engagement with activation, the Jobcentre Plus conditionality regime polices jobseeking and has seen many compelled to participate in welfare-to-work, first under the New Deal and then The Work Programme (in place at the time of our research). Finally, broader welfare reforms have affected lone parents. Punitive and restrictive changes such as the freeze on the uprating of means-tested benefits and a limit placed on tax credits (the ‘two-child limit’) have limited lone parents’ access to financial support (Millar and Ridge, 2020).

However, the increasingly toxic policy environment at national level in the UK has not precluded the emergence of more person-centred local initiatives. In many cases, such initiatives have been supported and led by local government and/or the third sector as an explicit alternative/corrective to the UK Government's work-first activation. One such programme provided the context for our research. MIW was a programme of intensive support targeting lone parents facing significant barriers to employability (for example, those with disabilities, or caring for someone with disabilities; with a large family, i.e. three or more children; residing in depressed labour markets; reporting little or no previous work experience; or unemployed for at least two years). It sought to improve lone parents' employability and wellbeing, and (if appropriate) help people into sustainable employment. Participation was entirely voluntary. Some participants were referred by Jobcentre Plus (but both participants and keyworkers stressed a shared understanding that there was no compulsion associated with MIW); many were recruited through engagement with childcare or community wellbeing providers, or lone parents' organisations. Engagement with MIW was not time-limited.

MIW was delivered through partnerships in each of Scotland's five largest local government areas: (1) Glasgow; (2) Edinburgh; (3) Fife; (4) North Lanarkshire; (5) South Lanarkshire. There are some differences between these areas. Glasgow and Edinburgh are the largest cities in Scotland (with populations of around 599,000 and 482,000 respectively). Fife, and North and South Lanarkshire all contain at least one town with a population between 50,000 and 75,000 and also include large rural areas containing multiple smaller (and geographically dispersed) communities. Thus, there are differences in labour market opportunities, and in the infrastructure available to support jobseekers, that affected both the implementation and impact of the programme locally.

Table 1 presents a labour market profile for all areas. It demonstrates that compared to Scotland, Glasgow overall has high levels of unemployment and economic inactivity. It has a job density higher than the national average, indicating a good supply of jobs (although this figure tells us nothing about the quality and/or precarity of those jobs). North Lanarkshire also has high levels of unemployment but has a low supply of jobs compared to Scotland as a whole, a feature shared with the other semi-rural areas of Fife and South Lanarkshire. Edinburgh, by contrast, has a lower than Scotland average level of unemployment and economic inactivity and a higher job density, indicating a stronger local economy. Only Fife has a lower than Scotland average median earnings.

TABLE 1

Within local authority areas, MIW targeted its resources on those communities where lone parents were at the highest risks of poverty. For example, in Glasgow, MIW was focused in nine areas which included those that according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 2020 had consistently been in the 5 per cent most deprived areas since 2004.

MIW services were planned collaboratively following pre-launch consultation with local stakeholders and lone parents' groups. Services typically involved a mix of employability and personal development support, vocational training, debt/money advice, mental health and wellbeing provision, and funding for and signposting to childcare. Each participant was supported by a keyworker. Extensive local community outreach work was undertaken to engage lone parents and, once engaged, there was a strong emphasis on facilitating peer support networks.

MIW was resourced by the Big Lottery Fund, a non-departmental public body responsible for distributing monies raised by the UK National Lottery. The Fund has a strong track record supporting local, third sector-led initiatives to combat poverty, and was instrumental in ensuring that MIW was delivered through local partnerships, with a co-leadership role for third sector organisations (usually co-leading with a local government-supported employability provider). This meant that grassroots organisations run by and for lone parents, as well as specialist third sector stakeholders such as Citizens Advice Bureaux and community health organisations, were included. The funder also resourced the programme through up-front grant funding, rather than the ‘payment-by-results’ models that dominate contracted-out activation. Grant funding meant that local partners were able to work collaboratively to reach a consensus on sharing out roles and resources, rather than competing against each other, and were able to invest in programme development and local engagement work prior to MIW going ‘live’.

Our research was conducted over four years of the programme’s activity from 2014, during which time MIW supported 3,115 people. Job entry rates, averaging 30 per cent, surpassed expected performance and were similar to those achieved by other activation programmes (although comparison is problematic given the specific user group engaged by MIW). We have published extensive evaluation research elsewhere, including cost-benefit analysis, concluding that MIW was broadly successful in achieving its aims (Batty et al., 2017).

Research methods

Our research involved four blocks of fieldwork, undertaken annually. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with keyworkers, MIW partner representatives and other

stakeholders. A purposive approach to sampling was adopted, consulting with the funder and local partnerships and reviewing programme plans to identify interviewees. Interviews focused on the design and content of the programme; evidence that MIW was responsive to the needs of lone parents (and any gaps/weaknesses in provision); the role of lone parents and communities in contributing their assets and insights; and outcomes achieved by participants. In total, 117 stakeholder interviews were completed (34 in 2014; 35 in 2015; 35 in 2016; 13 in 2017).

Semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with MIW participants. A purposive sampling approach was again adopted, so that interviews engaged with participants at various points of the MIW programme, including those still facing substantial barriers, as well as those who had entered employment. These interviews explored a number of themes relevant to the barriers to employability faced by lone parents; their experiences of existing activation and welfare services; and their views of MIW. Ages ranged from twenty to forty-seven. Interviewees reported caring responsibilities for between one and four children. All but one of our interviewees were women. One hundred and two interviews with lone parents were undertaken (36 in 2014; 34 in 2015; 20 in 2016; 12 in 2017). Research was conducted in accordance with the ethics regulations of the research partners and funder. Aliases/generic job titles are used to protect the anonymity of interviewees.

We acknowledge potential problems of sample bias in our research with lone parents – by definition, we interviewed those who were willing to share their time and reflections on their own employability and experiences of services. However, as noted below, we think that the robustness of our research is evidenced by the manner in which many of those who agreed to

participate often reported continuing, substantial barriers to progression (while some also told positive stories of entering employment).

Members of the research team transcribed and analysed the interviews thematically. The analytical process involved research team deriving recurring themes from a preliminary review of raw data and drawing on the concepts discussed above; this led to the identification and refinement of codes and the systematic assembling of relevant data under each code, along with the harvesting of illustrative verbatim quotations. From this process, we arrived at our discussion below, which focuses on: (a) the challenges faced by lone parents, discussed using Green et al.'s (2013) four-theme employability framework; (b) lone parents' and key stakeholders' reflections on MIW (and the factors underlying the programme's successes and limitations); and (c) experiences of the broader employability and welfare policy landscape.

FINDINGS

Individual factors

Our research with lone parents and stakeholders touched on many of the individual factors discussed above, but here we highlight recurring themes around: gaps in skills and qualifications; negative perceptions of self-efficacy; and health-related barriers. First, while our interviews rarely focused on basic and/or vocational skills gaps, parallel survey research found that most MIW participants held relatively low levels of qualification (one-fifth held no qualifications; a further 50 per cent held only Scottish 'Standard' Grades, the equivalent of Level 3 of the European Qualifications Framework – a lower level of qualification that found among the general labour force). Many interviewees viewed their lack of recent work experience as a barrier, although most had worked in various service jobs.

In terms of interventions that had or could address gaps in skills and experience, while most of our interviewees has engaged previously with Jobcentre Plus and/or welfare-to-work programmes, few could identify benefits in terms of skills development, instead recalling that programmes focused almost entirely on enforcing increased job search effort. Some interviewees noted that the focus of Jobcentre Plus staff on achieving job entries meant that requests for help to access training were rejected.

You walk in [to Jobcentre Plus] and you sign on and they're like, "Okay. Right, we've got some jobs. We've got some of this"... I was wanting to do college... They weren't up for that because it's not taking you off the dole... It wasn't about your needs. Your needs were working and that's it. "Get off the dole. Get back to work"...

Danielle, Area 2, Wave 2

In contrast, interviewees suggested that there was more emphasis on considering learning and development opportunities under MIW. Relatively few of our interviewees had taken up long-term college-based programmes (despite encouragement to consider this route), mainly due to a preference and/or need to return to employment or because of Jobcentre Plus job search/availability conditions. But most MIW participants had engaged in some form of accredited training/learning under the programme, and some described a gradual process of progression from participation in learning and development activities, into volunteering and then eventually paid employment. The opportunity to progress gradually, building confidence and experience, was seen as important.

They helped me to get a placement within a school, voluntary. I was working Monday to Friday voluntary in the school as a pupil support assistant. Then there were three positions that I applied for, two pupil support assistant jobs and one was with social work... I think just being involved and actually being able to go out and put my skills to use for people to see, that was a humongous help... I think definitely being involved definitely got my foot in the door.

Karen, Area 3, Wave 4

Most MIW participants reported negative views in terms of what has been termed 'job search self-efficacy' (James, 2007) – i.e. they doubted their ability to form a convincing CV or succeed in job interviews. Our interviewees acknowledged how long periods out of work and the experience of isolation fed into these negative thoughts. Many pointed to how keyworker and peer support had led them to re-appraise their employability and grow in confidence.

It makes you feel like you're not just a mum and it opens up avenues for you to think about what sort of work you might like to do, because I didn't really have many ideas, and you get to meet people in a similar situation to you ... I suppose it opens your eyes... they [MIW keyworkers] say, you're a mum, which means you can do this... you may not have the qualifications but you've got the life experience. It opens your eyes to that you're not just a mum; you've got different options, you think, "well maybe I could try this or that".

Rachel, Area 4, Wave 2

It is important that findings highlighting such personal challenges are not used as justification for punitive work-first activation, but there is evidence that self-efficacy can feed into to both

wellbeing and employment outcomes (Zenger et al., 2013), so MIW's emphasis on delivering individually-focused support of this sort would appear justified.

Whereas work-first activation has tended to offer limited wellbeing-related provision, even for those acknowledged to have health problems (Harkness, 2016), MIW managers and keyworkers prioritised developing referral routes to National Health Service (NHS) and community health providers. This was welcomed by many of our interviewees reporting health and disability-related barriers. Specifically, a range of issues were described as contributing to mental health problems, including prior experiences of domestic violence, feelings of isolation, and experiences of poverty, sometimes exacerbated by the benefits system. Interviewees valued the support offered by MIW and NHS partners in taking the first steps towards improved mental wellbeing.

My mental health wasn't great. I didn't really interact with the kids too much... I didn't really want to go out. I didn't want to do anything. I didn't want to see him [interviewee's child], I just felt really low... But this is me starting to feel normal again... whatever normal is.

Jo, Area 4, Wave 3

Opportunities to access peer support, as well as tailored counselling and signposting to NHS community health services, were seen an important by some lone parents for their own mental health and their relationships with their children. However, programme managers and keyworkers expressed frustration with the fragmented nature of local health referral options (and especially community mental health services), which meant that MIW participants often faced delays in accessing help. Even with these shortcomings, it appears that MIW's analysis

of lone parents' barriers as complex and multi-faceted (an analysis informed by pre-programme consultation with potential participants), and governance and funding structures that allowed for a range of providers to work in partnership, resulted in a programme that sought to respond to many of the individual challenges faced by its target group.

Personal circumstances

Our research also touched upon personal-circumstantial barriers, and below we focus on: the need to balance work and caring; experiences of social isolation; and the disempowering impacts of poverty. First, MIW participants saw limited access to affordable childcare as a significant barrier – this was a concern for the majority of interviewees, but was most often raised by lone parents who had two or more children and/or younger children. Local programme managers and keyworkers confirmed that the fragmented nature of public (or even for-profit) childcare provision meant that lone parents often struggled to piece together care for their children. MIW sought to address these problems by researching and signposting local services and providing access to discretionary budgets to assist lone parents to manage the cost of childcare while undertaking learning or during the initial days following a return to work. More than three-quarters of MIW participants accessed these budgets. But even those who had moved into employment described relying on family and personal contacts for care to a lesser or greater degree. For many of those who continued to struggle to make progress, the absence of this sort of support network raised practical barriers to work and contributed to feelings of isolation. MIW facilitated group interactions (taking trouble to include unemployed lone parents alongside those who had transitioned to employment) and encouraged peer support networks (for example, through 'WhatsApp') that provided both moral support and practical help with childcare and other issues. The positive impact of such activities was another consistent theme in interviews.

As a mum, you sometimes feel like you're the only person going through stuff, but sitting down there talking to all them, it helps you realise there's maybe other people in the same position as you or worse. You can sit and talk everything out and you walk away feeling a wee bit better, definitely.

Eleanor, Area 3, Wave 2

A final but crucial challenge faced by many of our lone parent interviewees related to experiences and consequences of poverty. We were struck by how many of these women (all but one of our interviewees were female) had substantial work experience prior to taking up full-time caring, but as a result of low pay had rarely found financial security, and had been pushed into poverty by unemployment and the privations of the welfare system. While most, and especially those who were still unemployed, continued to struggle, many told of how joining MIW had been helpful in accessing benefits and/or paid employment. For some the transition to work had begun to alleviate – albeit partially – long-standing practical struggles and stigmas associated with poverty.

I've been able to save a bit. Not a huge amount, but I'm not struggling to do things. I've redecorated my living room, which was great. That's made a bit difference. So yes, it does feel more positive... I'm not worrying. I think before, I was getting panicky about, especially as my son gets older, school trips and if there's anything, you know, or emergency money. So yes, I'm not as worried about that now because I feel like I'm headed in the right direction.

Heidi, Area 2, Wave 3

In line with the literature discussed above, lone parents and MIW stakeholders acknowledged that moving into work too often failed to provide income security. The risk and/or experience of poverty remained real. However, for some a return to work, carefully planned to ensure a fit with family responsibilities, could offer financial and wellbeing benefits. Our evidence also reaffirms the need for integrated services that see employability as a ‘family-work project’, where progress towards paid employment enriches and supports family life.

External and labour market factors

Our discussions also connected with external factors noted in the literature, focusing on labour demand factors and the attitudes and behaviours of employers. For MIW participants, finding work that provided sufficient pay while fitting with care responsibilities was a key challenge and the availability of jobs shaped outcomes. While it is difficult to isolate labour market effects, there was significant variation in job entry rates, with the local authority with the highest unemployment rate also reporting fewest MIW job entries. Additionally, both lone parents and keyworkers highlighted negative attitudes among some employers. Keyworkers who had engaged with employers reported that some feared that lone parents were more likely to be absent from work or had outdated skills.

For our parents really it is more about a lack of experience and time away from the workplace because they have been having children... lone parents in particular but any woman that has taken time out for a career break; it is changing that perception that you haven't lost your skills and still have something you can offer.

Project Leader, Area 5, Wave 3

MIW adopted a range of strategies to ensure that participants were matched to appropriate jobs, from collaborating with specialist job matching services, to facilitated discussions involving keyworkers, employers and lone parents. In-work support provided by keyworkers was valuable in facilitating a continuing positive relationship with employers. Partnerships also constructed practical packages of support to help lone parents to manage transitional costs, for example through discretionary funding to cover childcare, food, clothing and travel costs. Lone parents also welcomed support to navigate tax credits claims. A distinguishing feature of MIW was that – unlike under work-first activation programmes – lone parents did not feel pressurised, instead working together with keyworkers to consider the financial and family implications of choosing to return to work.

She [keyworker] always says, “Look for a job that best suits you. Don’t do it for anybody else. Do it for yourself.”

Lisa, Area 2, Wave 2

As well as encouraging lone parents to make choices around returning to work, there were examples of MIW providing the forum for campaigns (and/or one-to-one engagement with employers) to demand hours, pay rates and shift patterns that reflected MIW participants’ needs. We were therefore struck by the ethos of an MIW programme that, rather than seeking to compel people to accept any job on offer, supported lone parents to pursue opportunities that they thought appropriate, and encouraged them to challenge employers who sought to alter terms and conditions in ways that might undermine work-family balance.

I do twenty hours a week. I do Monday to Thursday, like, five hours a day. Which is a blessing but [keyworker] said to me like at the interview, I need to state what hours I

want to do. She's like, "Get that down before like they give you a contract and they try to mess with your contract."... They're trying to give me extra hours or they're trying to change the days on me, which I point blank refuse to let them do... "This is what I'm doing; these are the hours I'm doing; you can't touch my hours; you can't touch anything".

Heidi, Area 2, Wave 3

Programmes like MIW operate on the supply-side of the labour market, and so have limited impact on the demand-side challenges faced by many jobseekers (i.e. not enough local job opportunities that fit with caring roles and offer a living wage). These barriers remained real for our interviewees, but at least MIW was careful to ensure that it encouraged lone parents to pursue a return to work only where there was clear potential benefit, and to challenge their employers to provide workable hours and shifts.

Enabling factors

Our research with lone parents and MIW stakeholders supports Green et al.'s (2013) argument that enabling factors play an important, and perhaps under-reported, role in shaping employability trajectories. Prominent in our interviews were problems identifying accessible and affordable childcare; and unhelpful pressures from Jobcentre Plus and activation providers (which participants contrasted with positive experiences of MIW).

One positive enabling factor appeared to be MIW itself: lone parent interviewees valued what they saw as tailored support and a child-friendly environment. We have described above how, rather than imposing a standardised work-first programme, MIW involved a partnership of providers offering training and employability-development, mental health and wellbeing

support, and money and welfare advice. Most MIW participants took up a combination of these services. If the range of services offered by MIW was welcome, so was the supportive approach taken by keyworkers.

It's not someone saying, "You have to do this." It's like, "Do you want to do this? Is this what you want? Do you feel happy about doing this? Do you have any concerns about wanting to do this? If you don't want to do this, is there anything else we can look at?"

Jackie, Area 5, Wave 4

Positive experiences of choice and empowerment under MIW contrasted with lone parents' negative views of Jobcentre services and compulsory welfare-to-work. Keyworkers and MIW stakeholders sometimes defined UK Government-funded welfare-to-work in terms of its nuisance value; keyworkers described having to help lone parents to navigate the compulsory (but often unfocused and unhelpful) job search activities demanded by Jobcentre and Work Programme staff, before moving on to the real work of helping them to realise their aspirations in terms of employment and learning.

[Participants] will come back to me and say, "The Work Programme's making me do this", and, "The Work Programme's making me do that." I'm like, "There's absolutely nothing I can do with that one."

Keyworker, Area 3, Wave 2

Similarly, important enabling work was undertaken by keyworkers and benefits/money advice specialists helping with 'income maximisation' (ensuring that all welfare benefits

were claimed to the fullest). Many lone parents spoke of how MIW workers' advice and advocacy had helped to increase benefits income or challenge sanctions threatened by Jobcentre Plus. We were again struck by the distinctive ethos of MIW compared with mainstream Jobcentre and welfare-to-work programmes that have an explicit remit to reduce the welfare bill. MIW keyworkers and stakeholders again noted how such punitive approaches hindered progress towards work and threatened to push lone parents into poverty. Mitigating or reversing the negative effects of sanctions was an important part of the work of MIW's frontline staff.

Since the increase in the number of sanctions the number of benefit enquiries coming through... where people have been sanctioned, we've had to challenge the sanctions, we've had to put emergency funding in place, applying for crisis grants, food parcels, discretionary funding to top up their gas and electricity because there is no access to money at three o'clock on a Friday afternoon.

Money advice worker, Area 3, Wave 2

Our analysis highlights how service infrastructures can act as enabling factors or hinder progress towards employability. Positive reflections on the enabling effects of MIW appear to be explained by an inclusive approach to programme development and delivery that ensured that: (a) lone parents' views shaped programme content; (b) multiple stakeholders (including grassroots lone parents' groups) were involved; (c) the focus was on assisting lone parents to ensure family-work balance and utilise all possible routes out of poverty and isolation; and (d) as a result, MIW participants felt empowered and in control of their own journeys towards employability. We also found that the combination of welfare conditionality and work-first activation that has come to define UK Government-funded services does not

reflect the complex barriers to work faced by lone parents, and (in line with previous research) may harm the most vulnerable.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our research demonstrates that established employability frameworks remain valuable in understanding and responding to the barriers faced by vulnerable groups such as lone parents. But our research also adds to the evidence of a substantial disconnect between the reality of the complex challenges faced by the most vulnerable lone parents and the simplistic analysis informing welfare conditionality and work-first activation agendas pursued by successive UK Governments. We agree with previous analyses that ‘structural factors are of continuing importance to lone parent employment outcomes – in particular job availability and childcare costs – and that behavioural and attitudinal issues are at most a negligible part of the story’ (Whitworth, 2013: 841).

Applying employability frameworks by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) and Green et al. (2013), we instead identified individual-level barriers faced by lone parents, associated with low levels of qualification, long periods of unemployment and health problems. We also identified challenges associated with lone parents’ personal circumstances – how their commitment to caring for their children was not always matched by employers’ willingness to provide hours and shifts that were manageable (a crucial external factor limiting their employability, especially for parents with younger children); and how poverty imposed by low benefits and poor pay negatively impacted their wellbeing. Whereas little assistance was offered by government agencies to address these barriers, we found that a local, co-produced

programme was better able to respond, having adopted a multi-agency approach to service design and delivery, facilitated by collaborative governance and funding mechanisms.

Indeed, enabling factors were important in shaping lone parents' perspectives of their own barriers and employability. We have added to existing evidence that Jobcentre and compulsory welfare-to-work services too often offered only nuisance value (with keyworkers and lone parents required to 'tick off' jobseeking tasks and/or work together to navigate a punitive benefits and sanctions system). In the worst cases, lone parents reported negative experiences of humiliation and frustration at a lack of care or understanding from mainstream activation providers. In contrast, engaging with local MIW services encouraged people to make choices as to the most appropriate and financially viable jobs to pursue; and supported individual and collective advocacy directed towards employers, demanding adequate pay and decent shifts and hours. Furthermore, MIW was focused on supporting what Millar and Ridge (2020) call the 'family-work project' – services were built around caring roles, with providers investing in creche provision and discretionary childcare budgets to help manage transitions to employment or learning; mitigating poverty risks for families was as important as promoting job entry; and a range of outcomes valued by lone parents and their families was supported. There was no magic bullet, given the substantial individual, personal and external barriers to employability faced by MIW participants, but this approach provided an empowering experience for many and mitigated some of the harm done by the combination of unemployment, isolation, poverty and welfare conditionality.

Given the substantial rise in lone parent unemployment that is likely to follow the Covid-19 crisis, it is timely to consider the barriers faced by these jobseekers. Our analysis points to the need for multi-agency, flexible enabling services in response. These services should be

defined by an ethos of empowerment and co-production, and should value balancing work and family life. They should be part of a co-ordinated response that resources wellbeing, employability, learning and childcare provision, and includes employers and local economic development stakeholders as active partners. It is clear that the current employability policy agenda in liberal welfare states such as the UK is not equal to this challenge.

Table 1 Labour market profiles of MIW areas

	Glasgow	Edinburgh	Fife	North Lanarkshire	South Lanarkshire	Scotland
Population aged 16-64 (%) ¹	70.7	69.8	62.1	64.3	63.1	64
Unemployed (%) ²	4.5	2.7	3.9	4.6	3.0	3.4
Economically Inactive (%) ³	31.1	22.8	23.7	23.5	21.3	23.2
Claimant Count (%) ⁴	8.2	5.0	6.3	6.6	6.2	6.0
Job density (%) ⁵	1.03	1.07	0.66	0.69	0.65	0.82
Gross weekly pay (F/T - £) ⁶	626.4	641.1	559.0	606.4	621.8	592.7

¹ 2019. Source: ONS Population estimates - local authority based by five-year age band. % is proportion of total population

² July 2019–June 2020. Source: ONS annual population survey. Numbers and % are for aged 16 and over. % is a proportion of economically active.

³ July 2019–June 2020. Source: ONS annual population survey. % is proportion of those aged 16-64.

⁴ November 2020. Source: ONS Claimant count (not seasonally adjusted). % is the number of claimants as a proportion of resident population of area aged 16-64 and gender

⁵ 2018. Source: ONS jobs density (ratio of total jobs to population aged 16-64). Total jobs include employees, self-employed, government-supported trainees and HM Forces.

⁶ 2020. Source: ONS annual survey of hours and earnings - resident analysis. Median earnings in pounds for employees living in the area.

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