

# Helping more parents move into work: an evaluation of the extension of New Deal Plus for Lone Parents and In Work Credit: Phase 1

By Rita Griffiths

## Introduction

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) introduced and extended a range of policy measures targeted on lone and couple parents under the banner of New Deal Plus for Lone Parents (ND+fLP), including In Work Credit (IWC). This was in response to the Harker review conducted for the Department in 2006 and aimed to increase parental employment as well as reduce child poverty.

The aim of the evaluation overall was to explore whether the measures offered an adequate package of support to parents and if the measures, either collectively or singly, encouraged them to enter and sustain work.

This summary covers the first phase of the two part qualitative evaluation, including early implementation, delivery and operational issues, together with awareness and use of ND+fLP and IWC by Jobcentre Plus staff and couple parents, including 'main claimant' parents and 'partner' parents.

## Key findings

- On the evidence from the two case studies in this research, the extension of ND+fLP did not appear to succeed in its aim of offering couple parents support on a par with, or comparable to, the help available to lone parents.
- Awareness and take-up of the ND+fLP measures amongst couple parents, including IWC, was found to be limited in both case study areas. The extension of the measures appeared to have no demonstrable effect in encouraging couple parents to take up or sustain work.
- A combination of delivery, operational and policy design issues may help to explain why many couple parents were missing out on receiving appropriate support and not receiving help which explicitly took their parenting role and responsibilities into account.
- The economic downturn and rapid change within Jobcentre Plus at the time of the research may have stretched the capacity of staff to deliver a consistent level of service to couple parents.
- How advisers engaged their customers, and the support they were able to offer, is primarily determined by the conditionality regime attendant on the benefit claimed and, therefore, had implications for both staff and customers.
- Lone Parent Advisers (LPAs) tended to have on-going contact and a more supportive relationship with their customers compared to mainstream advisers. However, not all of the LPAs felt they had the right knowledge and skills; some believed partners faced a different set of barriers to lone parents, requiring a different approach and expertise.
- Mainstream advisers struggled to engage with their customers as parents, particularly in the context of mandatory jobseeking regimes. They tended to assume that the partner (usually female) was the main carer, and the main claimant (usually male) the jobseeker, and treat them accordingly, even though, in reality, this was not always the case.

## Background

### *ND+fLP and IWC*

The ND+fLP pilot was initially launched in five English Jobcentre Plus areas in April 2005 and expanded to Wales and Scotland in September 2006. In April 2008, ND+fLP was extended to include lone and couple parents across all London districts and to couple parents in ND+fLP pilot areas outside London. The ND+fLP package comprised of Discovery Events, More Voluntary Contact (MVC), Childcare Assist, access to flexible training provision, In Work Emergency Discretion Fund (IWEDF), In Work Advisory Support (IWAS) and IWC.

### *Research methods*

This first phase of fieldwork involved case studies in two pilot areas, one in London and one outside of London, between May and August 2009, approximately one year after the last of the measures were introduced. The fieldwork comprised individual, face-to-face interviews with 61 couple parents, of whom 31 were main claimant parents and 30 partner parents.

Face-to-face and telephone interviews were also conducted with 14 Jobcentre Plus staff including the pilot manager and Childcare Partnership Manager, together with staff involved in the wider delivery of the measures. In addition, three focus group discussions were held with a total of 22 advisory staff, including LPAs and mainstream advisers.

## Findings

### *Implementation of the pilot extension*

Supporting parents through the back to work journey originally concentrated on lone parents and was carried out by LPAs operating in specialist teams. In extending the support and eligibility for the measures to main claimant parents and their partners, parental issues also became the responsibility of mainstream advisers operating in

the context of mandatory jobseeking regimes and programmes.

The evidence from this research suggested that this much wider customer reach, involving mainstream as well as LPAs, resulted in a diminution in the profile of the pilot. In the London pilot, the different ND+fLP elements were found to have been subsumed under the umbrella of the 'London Parent Offer', the pilot team was disbanded and the additional operational resources provided for the extension were distributed to local Jobcentre Plus offices as part of the wider lone parent offer. LPAs were not, however, involved in supporting main claimant and partner parents; rather, mainstream advisers were. These advisers typically had no expertise in, or experience of, parental matters and support.

In the pilot outside London, the additional resource was ring fenced, enabling the retention of the original pilot team. Here, LPAs were given responsibility for supporting partners. However, as in London, mainstream advisers with limited experience of supporting parents were given the task of supporting main claimant parents.

In both case study areas, team leaders working in local Jobcentre Plus offices were responsible for cascading information about the new couple parent measures down to relevant staff according to local priorities and delivery arrangements. Staff formerly involved in the pilot had limited control over how the measures were being delivered and there was no co-ordination or consistency in the approaches adopted. There was a belief among pilot staff that key messages about the extension may not have been communicated to all relevant advisers, nor to all couple parents who might have been eligible for the measures.

A further issue was the timing of the extension, introduced in parallel with a series of other important policies and measures affecting lone and couple parents and at a time of unprecedented demand for mainstream Jobcentre Plus services. Particularly in the London case study pilot, this research found that couple parent policies and measures had taken a 'back seat'.

## **Engagement and response of main claimant parents**

Mainstream advisers interviewed in this research, who were responsible for supporting main claimant parents, had low levels of awareness and understanding of the extension of ND+fLP and IWC to couple parents. Low awareness was especially marked in London. Parental issues were seen as frequently peripheral to the main task of moving their customers swiftly into work, against which their performance was measured.

Short and routine meetings in which parental matters rarely figured strongly featured in the testimonies of main claimants, particularly those living in London. Also absent was a couple or family perspective to the help provided. Advisers seemed to focus exclusively on the individual claimant, seemingly unaware or unsure of how to relate to the presence of a non-working partner and children in the household.

## **Engagement and response of partner parents**

In the non-London pilot, LPAs were mostly responsible for supporting partners, giving them equal priority to, and using the same techniques as with their lone parent customers. However, not all of the LPAs felt they had the right knowledge and skills; some believed partners faced a different set of barriers to lone parents, requiring a different approach and expertise.

In the London pilot, where partners support was given by mainstream advisers, partners were found to be viewed as a group set apart from their mandatory customers and Work Focused Interview for Partners (WFIPs) as a distraction from their main role of helping unemployed customers into work.

Partners interviewed in London generally reported short, perfunctory meetings with advisers. Many felt the advice was rushed and cursory and the support on offer unconnected with their role as parents. Some had been told that, as partners, they were not

eligible for help. Longer meetings were reported by partners outside London but none of them had taken up any of the pilot measures.

In both areas main claimant parents were dealt with by mainstream advisers. Mainstream advisers tended to assume that the main claimant (usually the male) was the jobseeker and the partner (usually female) was the main carer, and, to treat them accordingly. However, the reverse was often the case and it was not uncommon for both parents in the couple to be interested in work.

Couple parents, therefore, appeared to be neither benefiting from specialist adviser support, not receiving help which explicitly took their parenting role and responsibilities into account.

## **Awareness and take-up of ND+fLP measures**

In general, awareness and take-up of the ND+fLP measures was found to be limited in both case study areas. Even in the case of IWC, take-up among couple parents was reported to be extremely low. A few partners were believed to have taken up IWC, but none of the staff interviewed had any experience of using IWC with main claimant parents. The strict eligibility criteria, affecting both main claimants and their partners, were thought by staff to be a key reason for low take up of IWC, although some eligibility rules were subsequently relaxed. Believing some couple parents may be little better off in work also made advisers reluctant to promote IWC for fear of overselling the benefits.

None of the couple parents interviewed had taken up IWC and very few had heard of it. Simply being no worse off or only a little better off in work, was not a persuasive message for many couple parents interviewed. Before risking leaving benefits, they needed reassurance that jobs would sustain and earnings, whether singly or jointly, would be sufficient to cover the family's housing costs and basic living expenses.

## Interim policy implications

The better off in work message appeared to have been a less persuasive tool when used with couple parents, possibly due to the operation of the tax and benefits system when there are two parents rather than one present in the household. A concern to avoid becoming trapped in low paid work certainly appeared to resonate strongly for many couple parents interviewed.

The greater tendency for couple parents to have larger families and to be homeowners may also have been significant due to the differential impact these factors can have on household income and expenditure when one or both parents move from benefits into work. These issues are explored more fully during the second phase of fieldwork.

A policy of supporting couple parents separately, rather than together, may also be unhelpful, given that work related decisions are generally made jointly in couples. Help to assist both parents in a couple find suitable work in tandem or in close succession, if that is what they want, may be more effective but would require changes to current policy and adviser working practices.

The evidence from the research suggested that it may be mistaken to assume that the circumstances of couple parents, the barriers they can face and the kind of support they might need in moving from benefits to work, will automatically be the same as those of lone parents simply because they have children. As such, the research raised some important issues about how best to support out of work and low income couples with children. These are explored further during the next phase of the evaluation and covered in the final report.

© Crown copyright 2011.

You may re-use this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/> or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk).

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 955 0. Research Report 731. May 2011).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

Other report summaries in the research series are also available from the website above.

If you would like to subscribe to our email list to receive future summaries and alerts as reports are published please contact:

Kate Callow, Commercial Support and Knowledge Management Team, Upper Ground Floor, Steel City House, West Street, Sheffield S1 2GQ. Email: [Kate.Callow1@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Kate.Callow1@dwp.gsi.gov.uk).