

Department for Work and Pensions

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Lone Parent Obligations: early findings of implementation as well as experiences of the Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance regimes

**Rosie Gloster, Jo Casebourne, Sarah Culshaw, Lidija Mavra,
Amy O'Donnell and Ann Purvis**

A report of research carried out by the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion and Centre for Public Policy, Northumbria University on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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The Authors

This stage of the qualitative evaluation was undertaken by the **Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion** (Inclusion) in partnership with the **Centre for Public Policy** at Northumbria University.

Jo Casebourne is Director of Research at Inclusion. She has been conducting research on lone parents on benefits in the UK since 1998. Jo has previously done research for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on lone parents with health problems as well as evaluations of Action Teams for Jobs and the Working Neighbourhoods Pilot, and research on Barriers to work for Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in Britain. Jo's main areas of specialism are welfare-to-work, lone parents and ethnic minority groups.

Sarah Culshaw has been employed as a Senior Researcher at Inclusion since January 2010 and prior to this was a Research Associate at the Centre for Public Policy. Sarah was a key member of the Lone Parent Evaluation research team at the Centre for Public Policy and continues this involvement now at Inclusion. Sarah has worked on a number of DWP-commissioned evaluations and has a particular interest in Jobcentre Plus performance management and business delivery. Prior to her research career Sarah worked as a local government manager carrying out strategy, research and workforce development work across a wide range of service areas.

Rosie Gloster was a Senior Researcher at Inclusion and has since moved to the position of Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Employment Studies. She has worked on a wide range of research and evaluation projects including attitudes to work and family among Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, the Evaluation of Skills Coaching Pilots and the evaluation of the Advancement Network Prototypes. Her research interests include labour market disadvantage, adult careers services, and the integration of employment and skills.

Lidija Mavra is a Researcher at Inclusion. She has conducted and reported on qualitative research for a variety of projects, including the Development of Working Neighbourhood Teams, the Evaluation of In Work Credit and Financial Inclusion of New Migrants. Her research interests include reform of the welfare landscape, migrant and refugee settlement, and homelessness.

Amy O'Donnell is an Associate Researcher at Inclusion. Formerly a Research Associate at the Centre for Public Policy, Amy has wide experience of conducting applied policy research to encourage the participation of under-represented groups in the labour market and in public and political life, with particular expertise in qualitative research tools.

Ann Purvis is Associate Director – Research at Inclusion. She commenced work on the evaluation of Lone Parent Obligations while a Senior Research Consultant at the Centre for Public Policy and has continued her role with the project since moving to Inclusion. Her specialist areas include public sector organisational performance and employment programme evaluations. She has led a number of DWP research projects in these areas and before this worked in a range of management and research posts, most recently as a Director in a National Health Service Trust.

Abbreviations

ASM	Adviser Service Manager
BDC	Benefit Delivery Centre
BDO	Benefit Delivery Officer
BDTL	Benefit Delivery Team Leader
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
BOCs	Better Off Calculations
ChB	Child Benefit
CAB	Citizen's Advice Bureau
CC	Childcare Champion
CCJ	County Court Judgement
CETL	Customer Engagement Team Leader
CPM	Childcare Partnership Manager
CTB	Council Tax Benefit
CTC	Child Tax Credit
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DASO	Diary Administrative Support Officer
DLA	Disability Living Allowance
DMA	Decision Making and Appeals
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance

EZ	Employment Zone
FACS	Families and Children's Study
FJR	Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviewer
FND	Flexible New Deal
FTA	Failure to Attend
HA	Housing Association
HB	Housing Benefit
HMRC	Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs
IB	Incapacity Benefit
IDT	Interventions Delivery Target
IEST	Integrated Employment and Skills Trials
Inclusion	Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion
IS	Income Support
IWC	In-Work Credit
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
JSAg	Jobseeker's Agreement
LEP	Local Employment Partnership
LMDM	Labour Market Decision Maker
LPA	Lone Parent Adviser
LPO	Lone Parent Obligations
LPTL	Lone parent transition loan
LPWFI	Lone Parent Work Focused Interview
ND+fLP	New Deal Plus for Lone Parents
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
NHS	National Health Service
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

ONS	Office for National Statistics
PA	Personal Adviser
POCA	Post Office Card Account
QLPWFI	Quarterly Lone Parent Work Focused Interview
QWFI	Quarterly Work Focused Interview
UK	United Kingdom
WFI	Work Focused Interview
WTC	Working Tax Credit

Glossary of terms

Adviser Discretion Fund	This is available to all lone parents claiming Income Support (IS) continuously for 26 weeks and any lone parent participating in the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). A maximum of £100 can be awarded in any 12 month period for non-childcare related costs. Adviser Discretion Fund can be used towards up-front childcare costs for the first two weeks in work. This may be available to other customer groups including eligible main claimants and dependent partners.
Anticipation effect	These include any impacts a policy has on individuals' actions (in particular, likelihood to claim benefits) prior to the policy directly affecting them.
Child (for IS eligibility)	A person aged under 16 for whom an adult claims Child Benefit (ChB).
Child (for ChB payments)	A person aged up to 16, or up to 20 and in full-time non-advanced education or certain forms of training for whom ChB can be claimed.
Child Benefit	A universal benefit available to all families with children under the age of 16 or up to 20 if in full-time non-advanced education or certain types of training. The level of payment depends only on the number of children in the family, with a higher payment for the eldest child. It is not income-based.

Child Dependency Increases

These additions for children are paid with the short-term higher and long-term rate of Incapacity Benefit (IB). Following the introduction of Child Tax Credit in April 2003, no new child dependency increases were awarded, but all existing increases were transitionally protected. These increases are not paid with Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) which replaced IB for new claims from October 2008.

Child poverty

There is no single, universally accepted definition of poverty. In the United Kingdom, three measures of poverty are used:

- absolute low income – this indicator measures whether the poorest families are seeing their income rise in real terms;
- relative low income – this measures whether the poorest families are keeping pace with the growth of incomes in the economy as a whole. The indicator measures the number of children living in households below 60 per cent of contemporary median equivalised household income; and
- material deprivation and low income combined – this indicator provides a wider measure of people's living standards.

The government monitors child poverty against all three measures, with a target attached to the relative low-income measure.

Child Tax Credit

A payment made by the Government for bringing up children. Families with children will normally be eligible if their household income is no greater than £58,000.

Children's Centre

By 2010 every local community in England will have a Children's Centre that provides easy access to a range of services including integrated early learning and childcare, family support, health services and advice and information for parents including signposting to employment and training opportunities.

Economically active	People aged 16 or over who are either in employment or unemployed.
Economically inactive	People who are neither in employment nor unemployed. These include those who want a job but have not been seeking work in the last four weeks, those who want a job and are seeking work but not available to start, and those who do not want a job.
Employees	People who are in employment and paid a wage by an employer for the work that they do.
Employment	The number of people with jobs: people aged 16 or over who do paid work (as employees or the self-employed), those who had a job they were temporarily away from, those on government-supported training and employment and those doing unpaid family work (working in a family business).
Employment part time – mini-job	A job of less than 16 hours of work a week.
Employment part time	A job of 16-29 hours of work a week.
Employment full time	A job of 30 hours or more of work a week.
Employment and Support Allowance	From 27 October 2008, ESA replaced IB and IS paid on incapacity grounds for new customers. ESA provides financial assistance as well as personalised support for people with an illness or disability to help them move into suitable work.
Financial hardship	An individual experiences financial hardship if they struggle to meet their commitments each month. This can then be further compounded by the banks adding interest and charges for late or missed payments.

Flexible Provision	This is available to eligible customer groups including lone parents, main claimants and dependent partners. This allows District Managers the flexibility to purchase training courses or provision which is currently unavailable but can make a difference to customers' employment opportunities. This allows advisers greater scope to address specific needs.
Formal childcare	Ofsted registered childcare. This includes day nurseries, out-of-school clubs, pre-school play groups and childminders.
Housing Benefit Run On	Lone parents who were eligible for Housing Benefit (HB) and/or Council Tax Benefit (CTB) before they started work may be entitled to an extended payment of HB/CTB. This is known as Housing Benefit Run On and is paid for the first four weeks in employment if lone parents meet the eligibility criteria. This may be available to other customer groups including eligible main claimants and dependent partners.
Income Support	IS is a means-tested benefit for those who do not have to sign-on as unemployed. This includes some lone parents who are not subject to Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) or are exempt from LPO.
Informal childcare	Unregistered childcare. This includes parent and toddler groups, unregistered family members providing childcare.
JSA 16 hour rule	An adult is ineligible for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) if they participate in an activity of more than 16 hours a week and if they are not available for work or seeking work. The activity can be employment or training. An individual must be actively looking for work and available for work to be eligible for JSA.
Jobseeker's Allowance	JSA is the main benefit for people of working age who are out of work, work less than 16 hours a week on average and are available for and actively seeking work.

Jobseeker's Agreement	<p>One of the entitlement conditions for JSA is that the jobseeker must have entered into a Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg) which remains in effect. The JSAg is intended to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• set out details of a jobseeker's availability for work including any 'pattern of availability' they have agreed to and any acceptable restrictions on their availability for work;• help jobseekers get back to work by agreeing the most appropriate steps for them to take when seeking employment;• provide a basis for their job search activities to be monitored and reviewed.
Labour Market Attachment	<p>A concept relating to a person's proximity to the labour force. It covers a spectrum from fully attached workers, those in employment at one extreme, to those who do not want a job at the other extreme. The latter group, which includes economically inactive retired people, might be considered to be completely detached from the labour market.</p>
Lone parent – generic definition	<p>Parent or guardian with a dependent child under 16 who is not in a co-habiting relationship.</p>
Lone parent on JSA	<p>An individual who has their marital status recorded as single, widowed, divorced or separated, and has an open ChB claim for at least one child under 16.</p>
Lone parent on IS	<p>A claimant who has dependent children and no partner.</p>

Lone Parent Obligations

Changes to entitlement conditions for lone parents claiming IS, starting from 24 November 2008. Most lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over were no longer eligible for IS if they made a new claim for benefit only because they were a lone parent, subject to certain exemptions and conditions. Instead those able to work could claim JSA and are expected to look for suitable work in return for personalised help and support. Lone parents with a health condition or a disability can claim ESA. The change is being introduced in three phases:

- a youngest child aged 12 or over from 24 November 2008;
- a youngest child aged ten or over from 26 October 2009; and
- a youngest child aged seven or over from 25 October 2010.

Existing lone parent's entitlement to IS is also phased in line with the above timescales.

LPO flexibilities

Additional flexibilities have been incorporated in the JSA regime for parents (all parents, not just lone parents). These are available to those with caring responsibilities for a child or children. These flexibilities include the hours that parents are available to work and whether appropriate/affordable childcare is available. Other flexibilities involve Jobcentre Plus staff following up parents if they fail to attend interviews before benefit entitlement becomes affected.

Lone parent transition loan

A loan provided to lone parents to cover financial gaps when payment of IS ends (weekly payments) and JSA and ESA payments (fortnightly payments) begin.

New Deal for Lone Parents

NDLP was launched nationally in October 1998. NDLP is a voluntary programme that aims to help and encourage lone parents to improve their job readiness and employment opportunities and gain independence through working. This is achieved through providing access to various elements of provision made available through a Personal Adviser. Eligibility for NDLP includes all lone parents aged 16 or over whose youngest child is aged below 16, and those who are not working, or are working less than 16 hours a week.

New Deal Plus for Lone Parents

This has been delivered through a number of pilot areas since April 2005. The pilot tests the delivery of an 'enhanced' package of support for lone parents and couple parents (key elements of the pilots were extended to couple parents from April 2008) to increase the number of parents finding and remaining in work through both increasing NDLP (and New Deal for Partners, which provides similar support as NDLP to partners of claimants on certain benefits or receiving either pension or tax credits) participation and outcome rates. Some elements tested in the earlier phase of the pilots have not been rolled out nationally, including In Work Credit and Childcare Assist. For lone parents, the In-Work Advisory Support and In-Work Emergency Discretion Fund elements have also been rolled out, and these are available to coupled parents in the pilot areas. This adds an additional range of support to existing NDLP provision. New Deal Plus for Lone Parents will be run as a pilot until March 2011 and is designed to assist lone parents in keeping their jobs.

New Claimants	Those who begin a new benefit claim and who have never claimed an out-of-work benefit before.
New Jobseekers Interview	A New Jobseekers Interview is attended by all new JSA claimants and is a face-to-face meeting between the claimant and an adviser. In this interview, a Jobcentre Plus adviser gives advice on the extra help that may be available, depending on the customer's circumstances and what is available in their area, such as access to specialist help on writing a CV or preparing for interviews, help to look for work, help with reading, maths or English and help with one-off-expenses that might help to find work, such as the cost of buying formal clothes for an interview.
Options and Choices Event	These are events organised for lone parents affected by LPO. The purpose of the events is to let lone parents know about changes to IS entitlement that affect them, as well as the support that will be available to help them with the changes and to develop skills and a better understanding of the labour market.
Post Office Card Account	These were introduced in April 2003 as an alternative for those who did not want to or could not open a basic current account when direct payment of benefits was introduced. A Post Office Card Account (POCA) can only be used to receive benefit, state pensions and tax credit payments. No other payments, such as HB, occupational pensions or wages can be paid into it. Payments can only be collected over the counter at post offices and the account will not let the owner go overdrawn or incur any charges. Credit checks are not carried out when a POCA is opened.

Quarterly Work Focused Interview

From November 2008, Quarterly Work-Focused Interviews (QWFIs) were introduced for lone parents in the last year before their child reached the relevant age where they may lose entitlement to IS under LPO. The QWFI enables advisers to provide advance notice of the changes and explain the differences in benefits and responsibilities when claiming JSA. They also allow advisers to offer an intensified service, helping the customer identify and tackle barriers to work, understand the help available to them from Jobcentre Plus and partner organisations, and move towards work.

Rapid Re-claim

This is available to all JSA and IS customers who reclaim the same benefit within 12 weeks of entitlement ceasing on their previous claim and have no change in their circumstances since the previous claim. The intent is to simplify the reclaiming process and encourage clients to take up employment, including short-term periods of full-time work, and ease the concerns about reclaiming benefits if a job ends unexpectedly.

Sanction

This is a penalty imposed by a Decision Maker. It is the removal of a proportion of benefit payment due to a customer's non-compliance with conditions placed on benefit receipt.

Self-employed

People who work on their own account, whether or not they have employees, in their main job.

Sustained employment

Sustained employment is defined as a job that involves a minimum of 16 hours a week, where the customer is in employment for at least 26 weeks out of 30. Breaks in employment must total no more than four weeks and the job must be started prior to completing the allotted time with the supplier or within six weeks of completing the allotted time.

Unemployment

The number of unemployed people. Unemployed people are:

1. those who are without a job, want a job and have actively sought work in the last four weeks and are available to start work in the next two weeks;
2. those out of work, have found a job and are waiting to start in the next two weeks.

Work Focused Interview

This is a mandatory interview for engaging with customers on benefits on a regular basis. It involves a face-to-face interview with a Jobcentre Plus adviser. The aim is to encourage and assist customers to address barriers to work and move towards sustainable employment, through accessing a range of support options. In particular, for lone parents, the interviews are intended to get them to consider taking part in the NDLP programme and for those who have moved on to JSA to discuss their job search and any problems they are experiencing. Lone parents are required to attend all interviews.

Working Tax Credit

Working Tax Credit (WTC) provides financial support on top of earnings. This is payable in addition to ChB. Child Support maintenance is wholly disregarded when calculating WTC.

Summary

Introduction

There are an estimated 1.9 million lone parents in Britain caring for 3.1 million children. The United Kingdom Government has an ambition to increase the lone parent employment rate to both support their aim to maximise employment opportunity for all and contribute towards the reduction in child poverty. Various policy measures have been introduced to try to achieve this. Since 1997, there has been a rise in the employment rate of lone parents of about 12 per cent, and the current employment rate among lone parents is 57 per cent (Office for National Statistics, 2009).

In *In work better off: next steps to full employment* the Government announced that from November 2008 lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over would no longer be entitled to receive Income Support (IS) solely on the grounds of being a lone parent, and from 2010 lone parents with a youngest child seven and over will lose entitlement. It is these changes, Lone Parent Obligations (LPO), that are the subject of this evaluation.

Lone parents who are no longer eligible for IS can claim other benefits, including Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), if they continue to require financial support. Conditionality is a key feature of the JSA regime and lone parents claiming JSA are subject to the same requirements as other jobseekers. The JSA regime for parents has been amended to include some flexibilities, for example, to the type of work parents are required to seek.

The aim of this evaluation is to explore whether and how lone parent employment interventions provide an effective incentive to look for paid employment, alongside an effective package of support for workless lone parents to enable them to find, enter and sustain paid employment.

This report presents findings on the early implementation of LPO, the operation of the IS regime and the early stages of the JSA regime as they are experienced by lone parents.

The findings are based on qualitative fieldwork with 75 Jobcentre Plus staff and 203 lone parent Jobcentre Plus customers in five case study areas. Qualitative research of this kind is useful to gain an understanding of how and why things happen, but is not statistically representative and the findings are illustrative and should not be generalised. The customer interviews were made up of:

- 52 interviews with customers with younger children receiving IS and as yet unaffected by LPO;
- 51 interviews with customers six to eight weeks before their IS entitlement was due to end;
- 51 interviews with new and repeat claimants to JSA since LPO had been implemented;
- 49 interviews with customers who had moved from IS to JSA because of LPO.

Customer characteristics and attitudes to work of those interviewed

Most of the lone parents that took part in the interviews were female and predominantly white British. The age of the lone parents interviewed ranged from under 20, to parents in their 50s. Most interviewees did not directly identify either themselves or their children as having health problems. However, health issues were raised with relative frequency during the interviews. The length of time interviewees had been lone parents varied, but many had been lone parents for significant periods of time. Most lone parents that were interviewed lived in rented accommodation and had lived in the local area for reasonable lengths of time (Section 2.2).

Most interviewees were qualified at Level 2 (equivalent to five GCSE passes A*-C) or below on leaving compulsory education. A number of customers had since engaged in a range of training and studying however, or had plans to do so. Their previous employment tended to be in low wage and low-skilled professions, working typically on a part-time basis. This included work in retail, hospitality, domestic services and factories (Section 2.2).

Most lone parents were not in paid employment at the time of the interview. Those who were working tended to be employed for less than 16 hours a week, alongside claiming benefits. A few had moved into work of over 16 hours a week between the time the research team accessed their contact details and the time of interview (Section 2.2.5).

Most of the lone parent customers mentioned the same 'life goals' for the next few years, one of which was to get a paid job or become self-employed. Interviewees described that the key motivating factors for them to gain paid employment, included:

- financial benefits and/or financial independence;
- personal independence and the social element of work;
- the opportunity to set a good example to their children (Section 2.3.1).

The perceived negative aspects of being in work reported by the lone parents interviewed were:

- they thought they would miss their child while at work;
- they felt they would find juggling work and domestic commitments difficult;
- a general reluctance to use formal childcare; and
- some a feeling that they would not be financially better off in work (Section 2.3.1).

The interviews indicated that lone parents shared many of the constraints experienced by other groups of benefits claimants. These included:

- external constraints such as the availability of suitable jobs in the labour market. Given the economic context in which this phase of the evaluation was conducted, it is unsurprising that lack of available jobs was cited as a major barrier to work by many customers;
- personal constraints relating to how 'work ready' individual lone parents felt they were. This included confidence and motivation to work, lack of work experience, low education and skills levels, and health-related issues; and
- constraints that were more specific to their circumstances as lone parents; their attitudes to combining work and family (including both the availability of childcare and their attitudes to using it) (Section 2.4).

The IS regime for lone parents

Lone Parent Work Focused Interviews (LPWFIs) are a key means by which lone parents engage with Jobcentre Plus services. They were introduced to encourage more lone parents to take up sustainable work and to ensure that all lone parents were aware of the help and support available to them, enabling them to make informed choices about the future for themselves and their children. During an LPWFI, lone parents on IS are provided with work-search advice including Better Off Calculations (BOCs), benefit entitlement information and guidance, and a range of personal support through a Lone Parent Adviser (LPA) (Section 3.1.1). Customers valued the flexible and individualised support on offer through LPWFIs and staff emphasised the importance of building rapport with customers in order to establish positive relationships (Section 3.2.3).

There was limited evidence that the increasing frequency of LPWFIs for lone parents had resulted in increasing the focus of lone parents on work. Both staff and customers suggested low levels of engagement with the action planning process (Section 3.1.7).

Sanctions were seen by lone parents as a key reason to attend LPWFIs. However, in a small number of cases, information collected through staff and customer interviews confirmed low levels of awareness amongst customers of the fact that failure to attend LPWFIs may result in a reduction in their benefits (Section 3.2.5).

Staff observed a gap in childcare provision for children with disabilities. Both staff and customers highlighted the high cost of childcare in urban areas and the lack of transport/work-home connections in more rural areas as issues. There was some discrepancy between parents and staff as to whether childcare was a real barrier to work. Some staff felt the barrier was to do with parents' perceptions of formal childcare. Staff felt that, in general, it would be an increasing challenge to find sufficient funded childcare places as LPO rolls out (Section 3.3).

Overall, it was felt that the effectiveness of the LPWFI regime in getting lone parents to think about and prepare for work depended on the customer and their attitudes to work. Staff felt that some customers told advisers what they wanted to hear and agreed to actions that they did not carry out, while others responded well to the work-related requirements of the regime (Section 3.4).

The ending of IS eligibility

Staff were provided with communications, guidance and training about LPO to aid their understanding of the changes and the processes underpinning the implementation. Staff were generally happy with the content of the guidance materials they had received (Section 4.1.2).

All staff interviewed were aware of the existence of exemptions and transitional protection built into LPO. Staff raised customer awareness of the LPO changes through LPWFIs, Options and Choices Events, and printed materials such as letters and leaflets. Staff felt that LPWFIs were very useful for getting customers to focus on the changes and felt that the quarterly frequency of these in the final year of IS eligibility was beneficial (Section 4.1.1).

The staff interviewed felt that customers had good levels of awareness about the LPO changes and the implications for them. This was borne out by respondents whose IS eligibility was shortly due to end who were generally aware of the forthcoming changes to the lone parent benefit regime and generally had a reasonable level of understanding of the basic changes involved. Although some customers may not have received all the communications at the time they were interviewed, most appeared to understand that once they became ineligible for IS, if they applied for JSA, they would be expected to actively seek work (Section 4.2).

Most staff said that uptake of lone parent transition loans (LPTLs) had been low (Section 4.3.3). Most respondents we spoke to who had moved from IS to JSA did not take up the offer of an LPTL in the main because they did not want to incur (more) debt. Customers said they would fill this gap by borrowing from friends or family or budgeting in the run up to the change (Section 4.4.3).

Most staff interviewed felt the implementation of LPO had gone well. The following factors were felt to have contributed to this success:

- thorough guidance and training;
- successful partnership working and communications;
- effective organisation and management of the changes;
- good customer communications (Section 4.3.4).

Looking to the future roll-out, staff suggested a number of issues that should be considered in order to ensure the continued successful implementation of LPO. These included a need to:

- ensure that sufficient appropriate and affordable childcare provision is available for children aged seven and above;
- continue to manage LPO effectively, especially if the number of lone parents affected by LPO increases in the future;
- increase the awareness of LPO for jobcentre staff who are not directly involved in the changes but who interact with customers who are affected (Section 4.3.6).

The JSA regime for lone parents

Lone parents on JSA are subject to the same legal requirements as other jobseekers. However, in recognition of a need to care for children, a number of flexibilities have been introduced into the JSA regime for parents with responsibility for caring for children.

The job role of staff that worked with lone parents on the JSA regime, and who, therefore, applied the parent flexibilities, varied between the case study areas. In some it was LPAs and in others it was generalist JSA regime staff. This affected the customer experience. Customers who were able to continue to see the same LPA when they were claiming IS and JSA tended to report more support, and appeared to benefit from the continuity of relationships and the trust and personalisation this brought (Section 5.3).

Although at the time of the research staff had had limited experience of applying the JSA parent flexibilities, they generally demonstrated a good awareness of them, but there were some exceptions (Section 5.3).

Within the parent flexibilities, staff described difficulty in defining appropriate childcare. This was seen as subjective and customer-led, whereas what would constitute affordable childcare was easier to calculate, for example, with the help of BOCs (Section 5.4.2).

Both customers and staff highlighted some gaps in childcare and after-school provision to support the JSA regime and working parents. Some lone parents had concerns about leaving their children on their own after school and feared that they might become involved in anti-social behaviour. In some instances this limited the type of work they sought (Section 5.4.1).

New and repeat JSA customers were more likely to be looking for full-time work than customers who had recently moved from IS, who tended to want to work part-time and within school hours (Section 5.5.2). Where JSA claimants wanted to change career direction there appeared to be tension between them complying with the JSA regime and searching for work and taking a longer-term approach, possibly involving training, that might have produced a better job-match (Section 5.5.2).

The internet was a key way interviewees searched for work. Some lone parents, most commonly those who had recently moved from IS, reported that they did not have access to the internet or the skills to use it. It was apparent that there were differences between the confidence and capability of JSA customers to 'self-help' during the first stage of the JSA regime (Section 5.5.3).

Generally customers had a good awareness of the requirements and conditionality of the JSA regime (Section 5.1). Signing-on appointments were felt by customers to be of little use to them in their job search, and of more use to the jobcentre to check they had been looking for work. Experience of the 13-week review was mixed. Some customers said it was no more useful than their regular sign-on appointment, but others had found it helpful to discuss their job search and work options in more depth. Where customers had raised the possibility of training with advisers, they were told they were unable to access it at this point in their claim. Several customers would have liked to have received this type of provision earlier (Section 5.5.4).

Staff are able to fast-track lone parents to later stages of the JSA regime if this is thought appropriate. However, there were no instances of JSA customers we interviewed having been fast-tracked. Lone parents on JSA also have continued access to support through New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). Staff had expected a greater level of take-up of NDLP than there had been, and they were unsure about the reasons for this. There were no instances of JSA customers we interviewed accessing support through NDLP (Section 5.5.5).

At the time of the first wave of the evaluation the transition of customers from IS to JSA was still in its infancy. Of the staff interviewed only one, a Labour Market Decision Maker, had any direct experience of involvement in disallowance or sanctioning under LPO. However, there were some indications from the interviews with lone parent JSA customers who reported a loss of benefit, and from staff, that it may be beneficial to review the provision of information to customers about disallowance and sanctions when discussing the JSA regime. Some staff reported that they do not directly discuss this when informing lone parent customers about

the JSA regime and a lack of awareness about how to re-engage and comply with the regime appeared to add to customer difficulties and anxiety if they found themselves in this situation (Section 5.6).

Being on JSA seemed to have had a positive effect on lone parents' attitudes to work. Many reported that they were more likely to look for work as a result, in part because of a dislike of having to sign-on fortnightly. There were some lone parents who, by the time of the interview, had found work and were no longer claiming JSA and others who were working less than 16 hours a week alongside claiming JSA (Section 5.7).

Interim recommendations

In general, implementation of LPO has gone well and many of the recommendations below are, therefore, suggestions to ensure that implementation continues to go smoothly. Given the overall aim of the evaluation, these recommendations are not limited to LPO but address issues with how lone parents experience the benefit system more widely.

We would recommend, based on these early findings, that in implementing the JSA regime for lone parents the following are considered:

- **Recommendation 1:** Make greater use of fast-tracking to Stage 3 of the JSA regime, and increase signposting to other support, including NDLP, for lone parents who need more support than is provided by Stage 1 of the JSA regime.
- **Recommendation 2:** Provide staff who have not worked with lone parent customers as frequently with more training on the (financial) support available to this customer group.
- **Recommendation 3:** Provide LPAs working with lone parents in the JSA regime with more information about the JSA regime.
- **Recommendation 4:** Increase the awareness and understanding of the JSA parent flexibilities among all staff supporting customers on the JSA regime.
- **Recommendation 5:** Make the process of how to re-engage after a JSA disallowance or sanction clear to all customers at the start of their claim.

We would recommend that in relation to childcare the following are considered:

- **Recommendation 6:** Further work with partner organisations to increase childcare provision for children with disabilities, provision for children aged 11-14, provision outside of normal school/nursery hours and seasonal/holiday provision.
- **Recommendation 7:** Give more clarity to help staff define affordable and appropriate childcare for lone parents on JSA.

Based on these early findings, we would recommend the following are considered to encourage more lone parents to move into work:

- **Recommendation 8:** Make BOCs more comprehensive so that they take into account all outgoings and therefore give a more accurate picture of the extent to which customers would be financially better off in work.
- **Recommendation 9:** Provide further explanation of the financial support available to customers who make the transition from benefits to work, such as In Work Credit and support with rent, to help to allay fears about this transition.
- **Recommendation 10:** Broker local (public) transport solutions to enable lone parents in rural areas to access jobs.
- **Recommendation 11:** Work with employers to promote part-time working and family-friendly working arrangements.

1 Introduction

1.1 Structure of the report

This report presents the key messages from the first stage of the qualitative evaluation of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO). It contains findings from research with Jobcentre Plus staff and customers, focuses on the early implementation of LPO, the operation of the Income Support (IS) regime and the early stages of the Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) regime as they are experienced by lone parents.

More specifically, the groups considered are those receiving IS who were not affected by LPO, customers whose IS claim was shortly due to end because of LPO, customers who had recently moved from IS onto JSA because of LPO, and new and repeat JSA customers affected by LPO.

The report is structured as follows:

- this chapter provides background information about lone parents in the UK and the policy rationale for implementing LPO. It also outlines the recent welfare-to-work lone parent policy and particularly the shift from voluntary programmes to LPO. How this report fits into the wider programme of the evaluation of LPO is set out alongside the aims and objectives for the evaluation. Finally, detail of the methodology used is presented.
- The background, characteristics, attitudes and constraints of the four customer groups included in this research are discussed in Chapter 2.
- Chapter 3 details staff and customer understanding and experience of the current IS regime for lone parents, and includes an exploration of childcare options and preferences for these customers and their experiences of IS sanctions.
- The process of ending IS entitlement as part of LPO is outlined in Chapter 4, alongside an exploration of customer and staff experience of the process.
- Chapter 5 looks at the JSA regime for customers affected by LPO. In particular, it focuses on customer experience of making a JSA claim, parent flexibilities and the usefulness of the support they received from Jobcentre Plus in the early stages of their JSA claim, and experiences of JSA sanctions and disallowance.

- Finally, Chapter 6 draws out the conclusions from the evaluation to date; what has worked well, recommendations for the next phase of LPO roll-out and for the next phases of the evaluation.

1.2 Lone parents in Britain

There are an estimated 1.9 million lone parents in Britain today caring for 3.1 million children. Lone parents now make-up a quarter of all families and the UK has proportionately more lone parents than most Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. The median age for a lone parent is 36 and two per cent of lone mothers are teenagers. Thirteen per cent of lone parents come from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities. It is also worth noting that around ten per cent of lone parents are fathers (One Parent Families, 2008).

The social composition of lone parent families has changed over the last 30 years. Hasluck and Green (2007) noted a diversity of marital statuses among lone parents, as well as differences in the age and number of children. These changes are the consequence of a number of factors, including a trend for people to marry less frequently and later in life, an increase in the rates of divorce and more births outside of marriage. Being a lone parent is often a transition stage. Marsh and Vegeris' (2004) analysis of a ten-year study of lone parents found a prevalence of re-partnering over time (a high proportion of which resulted in marriage).

1.2.1 Lone parents and employment

The UK Government has an ambition to increase the lone parent employment rate to both support the Government's aim to maximise employment opportunity for all and contribute towards the reduction in child poverty. It has introduced various policy measures to try to achieve this. There has been a rise in the employment rate of lone parents since 1997 of about 12 per cent and the current employment rate among lone parents is 57 per cent, up 0.4 percentage points from the previous year. This continues the increasing trend since comparable estimates were available in 1997, when the lone parent employment rate stood at 45 per cent (Office for National Statistics, 2009).

Gregg *et al.* (2006) found that of the 12 per cent increase in the employment rate of lone parents since 1997, five percentage points could be attributed to government policy, with the remainder owing to changes in the characteristics of lone parents over time, and to improvements in employment rates across the board. Equally however, there is a group of lone parents who claim benefits for long periods of time. Marsh and Vegeris (2004) reported that just over a third of lone parents (36 per cent) remained on IS for the ten years covered by their longitudinal research (1991-2001). For those lone parents who move into work, retention is key. Evans *et al.* (2004) noted the prevalence of cycling between work and benefits among lone parents, with lone parents twice as likely as other groups to leave employment.

1.2.2 Child poverty in lone parent households

A key reason for the employment ambition for lone parents is the Government aspiration to reduce child poverty. Children of lone parents are more likely to live in poverty than children in a two-parent family. Recent analysis of the Families and Children's Study by Barnes *et al.* (2008) showed that 63 per cent of non-working lone parent families experienced financial hardship, compared with 52 per cent of non-working coupled families. In-work lone parents were also found to be more likely to experience financial hardship than in-work coupled parents (24 and 13 per cent respectively). The same analysis showed that a year after moving into work, 70 per cent of families (both lone parent and coupled families) had moved out of income poverty.

The Harker report, *Delivering on Child Poverty: what would it take?*, called for welfare-to-work programmes to better support the needs of parents (both coupled and lone parents). The Command Paper, *Ready for work: full employment in our generation*, published in December 2007 and the March 2008 Treasury report, *Ending child poverty: everybody's business*, set out the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) future policy to meet the Government's target to halve child poverty by 2010, and eradicate it by 2020. It also responded to the Harker report by setting out policy measures designed to offer a more tailored and flexible package of support to help lone and coupled parents enter and sustain work.

Work is seen by the Government as the most sustainable route out of poverty and, since the late 1990s, a series of welfare-to-work policies and programmes have been implemented to increase parental employment. Specific measures include: the introduction of mandatory Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) for lone parents claiming IS; New Deal programmes to support the transition from benefits to work; and changes to the tax and benefits system to incentivise work and ensure that work pays. A substantial body of research and evidence now exists on the impact and effectiveness of these measures. The evidence base relating to lone parent policies is discussed below.

1.3 Recent welfare-to-work lone parent policy: from voluntary programmes to LPO

The government is committed to reducing child poverty and to increasing the employment rate of lone parents. Paid work is seen by the Government as the main route out of poverty for families with children, including lone parents, and a principal means through which to achieve the child poverty target. With this in mind, over the last ten years there have been significant changes to the benefits system for lone parents, with an increasing focus on work preparation and requirements to look for work. The main initiatives are outlined in this section, alongside available research and evaluation evidence about their impact and effectiveness.

1.3.1 Voluntary programmes

The New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) was introduced in the summer of 1997, and was rolled out nationally for lone parents making new and repeat benefit claims in April 1998. It is a voluntary programme now available to all non-working lone parents, with a strong focus on providing lone parents with work-focused information and advice.

Miller and Evans (2003) note that, while programmes that focus on economically inactive client groups are now accepted as part of the policy framework, in 1997 NDLP was seen as a 'radical departure' that 'moved away from a largely passive acceptance that lone parents could claim out-of-work benefits and would receive no assistance from the benefits system if they wanted to work or enter education or training.'

Lone Parent Work-Focused Interviews (LPWFIs) undertaken by specialist Lone Parent Advisers (LPAs) are the main gateway to NDLP (see Section 1.3.2 for more about LPWFIs). Lone parents who participate in NDLP work with their advisers to develop an individual action plan, and the Personal Adviser (PA) develops an individually tailored package of support and advice designed to help the lone parent move into employment. This can include advice about job search, working with the lone parent to identify their skills and interests, providing a Better Off Calculation (BOC), advice about claiming benefits, tax credits and childcare, and liaising with employers and other agencies offering in-work support. There is no set pattern of participation in NDLP; some lone parents may have long gaps between interviews with their PA, whereas others meet their adviser frequently.

Support also extends into the first few weeks of employment. Advisers can use the Adviser Discretionary Fund to help support the lone parent during the transition, as well as continuing to provide advice. However, following a review of evaluation evidence of welfare-to-work programmes involving lone parents, Hasluck and Green (2007) reported that they found little robust evidence relating to the effectiveness of in-work support for lone parents. The support available under the NDLP has changed over time and now includes a basic skills screening and financial help in the form of a childcare subsidy for lone parents entering work for the first 12 weeks of employment.

NDLP has been the subject of a number of evaluations that have examined how the programme has operated and its impact. Both the evaluations of NDLP conducted by Dolton *et al.* (2006) and Lessof *et al.* (2003) found that the proportion of lone parents who exited either IS or all three work-related social security benefits was between 20 and 25 percentage points higher for those who participated in NDLP than for non-participants.

Evidence also suggests that the advice and guidance provided by PAs through NDLP is effective. The impact of the NDLP has been associated with the flexibility and customised nature of the programme (Hasluck and Green, 2007). NDLP has tended to recruit lone parents who have worked in the past 12 months, and those

who are willing to work for the national minimum wage. Lone parents with three or more children, a very young child or a health problem or disability have been found to be less likely to participate. However, reviewing all the NDLP evaluation evidence, Cebulla *et al.* (2008) concluded that NDLP worked particularly well for lone parents who had very young children, perhaps because of their motivation, and those who had recently become eligible to the programme. They also noted that the impacts of NDLP on reducing IS receipt declined over time.

NDLP remains a voluntary programme and two-thirds of eligible lone parents have not participated in it. Brown and Joyce (2007) found that the reasons for this included attitudes towards parenthood, with it viewed as a full-time job, concerns about childcare and other people taking responsibility for caring for their children, personal circumstances, such as ill-health and other caring responsibilities as well as financial concerns about the transition from benefits into work. It is not clear how effective NDLP provision might be for this group.

Another programme, Employment Zone (EZ), was extended to lone parents in 2003 so that the 15 areas of Great Britain that had been running the programme since 2000 also started to work with this customer group. Participation in EZ was mandatory for eligible JSA claimants and voluntary for lone parents. Griffiths *et al.* (2005) found that only a small number of lone parents were referred to EZ, and these tended to be lone parents that NDLP could not help and who were not immediately job-ready. Lone parents were found to like the accessibility of EZ help, especially when delivered via outreach. When there were increased financial incentives for EZ to engage lone parents, they were more successful in doing so. Although quantitative comparative analysis of EZ impacts could not be undertaken because of difficulties with data, qualitative evidence suggested that for job-ready lone parents, EZ may be no more effective than the support available through NDLP (Griffiths and Durkin, 2007).

Hasluck and Green (2007) reviewed evidence that suggested that when EZ proactively sought to engage lone parents they fared less well than those who self-referred because the former group of lone parents tended to be less job-ready and required more intensive support.

In 2005, New Deal Plus for Lone Parents (ND+fLP) was introduced as a pilot. This brought together a range of support to help lone parents overcome barriers to work, and aimed to increase the number of lone parents finding and remaining in work by raising participation and outcome rates. The qualitative evaluation of ND+fLP found that the pilots worked best for lone parents who were more job-ready and those who were undecided about work. The support and training offer frequently helped to tip the balance towards work for lone parents, although the training on offer was felt to be best suited to lone parents who were job-ready. The additional staff resource was found to be critical to the effective delivery of the initiative, particularly the administrative resources which allowed advisers to focus on working with lone parents. To increase the focus of the family in the benefits system ND+fLP has recently been extended to coupled parents (including both

main claimant parents and dependent partners) in some areas. This extension is being evaluated as part of the parent consortium of which this LPO evaluation is part. ND+fLP is one of four lone parent initiatives that have recently been the subject of an impact assessment looking at benefit and work outcomes. This found that there was no robust evidence of an impact of lone parent pilots in pilot districts where ND+fLP was in place, than in pilot districts where only In-Work Credit (IWC) was in place (Brewer *et al.*, 2009).

1.3.2 IS conditionality: the WFI regime

LPWFIs are face-to-face interviews with a Jobcentre Plus adviser, during which the lone parent must participate in a discussion in relation to their potential employment prospects and the circumstances of their claim. LPWFIs can also be used as an opportunity to discuss with lone parents support that may be available, the working tax credit system and NDLP. The overall purpose of the LPWFI is to facilitate movement into paid employment through a variety of activities.

The mandatory WFI was introduced in 2001 for certain lone parent customers and included all lone parents on IS by 2004. This made it a requirement for lone parents to attend a WFI when making an initial claim for IS and at regular intervals thereafter. From April 2008, mandatory WFIs at six-monthly intervals were introduced for the lone parent group. As part of this change, lone parents with a youngest child aged 14 and over, or aged 11 and over in New Deal Plus areas, are required to attend quarterly WFIs (QWFIs). Under specific circumstances a WFI can be deferred or waived.

Diverse experiences of lone parent QWFIs are noted by Ray *et al.* (2007); those customers who had subsequently entered work tended to be more positive about the WFI while those who had not entered work were more negative. Lone parents who rated their WFI experience more positively appeared to value the practical and emotional support offered by the advisers. Customers reporting a negative experience tended to be less receptive to working and exhibited significant barriers to work. However, most of this latter group did express a desire to work and felt their needs were not being met.

Advisory staff in this study considered there was a cohort of more challenging lone parents who they could not help. Some staff also considered the mandatory schedule of quarterly meetings too inflexible and would have preferred more autonomy in deferral decisions. Overall findings from Ray *et al.* are that, while the QWFI system appears effective in signposting customers who are receptive to work towards appropriate services, the intervention does not effectively meet the needs, or alter the views, of lone parents further from the labour market.

Further to this, Goodwin (2008) finds that lone parent customers generally regarded the WFI as being useful. Negative aspects of the interview were identified to be the apparent repetition of questions considered by some lone parents not to be relevant. The perceived usefulness of the WFI was felt to decline with each repetition. WFI attendance was affected by a number of factors, the most

common being caring responsibilities, ill-health and dis-organisation on the part of the customer. Staff in this study raised concerns in relation to the title of the WFI, which many felt was a disincentive to lone parent attendance. Other issues noted included wide variations in WFI booking and rebooking practices, issues around the identification of vulnerable customers and variations in the processes used in communicating with lone parents.

The WFI programme is supported by a sanctions regime which is initiated if a lone parent fails to attend a WFI without showing good cause, but before this happens Jobcentre Plus has a process in place to contact customers so that they are given the opportunity to attend at a subsequent time.

Goodwin (2008) makes a series of key findings in relation to the sanctions regime. It was apparent that few lone parents in the study identified themselves as living with a sanction (see also Mitchell and Woodfield, 2007), instead believing that they had been subject to a benefit adjustment or a direct payment taken at source. Some lone parents did not appear to understand the sanctions regime and were unclear about how or when they could have incurred a sanction. Associated with these findings, many lone parents appeared to have no awareness in relation to the period of the sanction or the amount of benefit they had lost. Further, some lone parents in this study were adamant that they had not been sanctioned, this information being contrary to benefit records.

1.3.3 Lone Parent Obligations

The WFI regime helps to prepare lone parents for LPO and these regulations and the policy reasons for them are detailed below. The Harker (2006) and Freud (2007) reports reviewed the evidence on programme interventions and the progress made in increasing the lone parent employment rate. They concluded that with the right support package, including childcare, it would be appropriate to increase the responsibility for lone parents with older children to look for work and this could help tackle both worklessness and child poverty. In *In work better off: next steps to full employment*, the Government announced that from November 2008 lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over would no longer be entitled to IS solely on the grounds of being a lone parent and that by autumn 2010 the age of the youngest child would be reduced to seven years old. Those able to work will instead be eligible to claim JSA and will be required to be available for and actively seeking employment. Some lone parents who have another reason for being entitled to IS are exempt from LPO and will continue to be eligible to claim IS. Lone parents with health problems or disabilities may also move from the IS regime and, if eligible, claim the new Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) payment.

In addition, some groups of lone parents are offered transitional protection and are entitled to continue to receive IS for a limited period of time. These groups include lone parents on IS who are in full-time study, or following a full-time course on NDLP or on an approved training scheme. This transitional protection will only

apply to the course of study or training that the lone parent is undertaking at the point the IS entitlement changes come into force. Transitional protection will apply until the end of the course or the date the child reaches the relevant age in force at the start of the course, whichever comes first.

These changes are being implemented over three years for both existing and new customers. They are anticipated to affect around 300,000 existing customers (those with a youngest child aged seven or over) who claim IS because they are lone parents. The changes will also have an impact on around 2,000 new and repeat benefit claimants each month in the first year of LPO.

Support packages have been put in place in relation to these changes. These were designed to prepare lone parents for changes in payment regimes and to help them prepare for work. They include a wide range of pre-employment and in-work support. Option and Choices Events have been rolled out since April 2008 and are targeted at lone parents whose eligibility for IS is due to end within a year. These are group events for between 11 and 15 lone parents and attendance at these events is voluntary. The purpose of the events is to explain the changes to IS eligibility, discuss the world of work and explain Jobcentre Plus services.

In the first year of roll-out customers moving from IS to JSA had the payment of their benefits changed from a weekly to a fortnightly cycle. To bridge this payment gap of a week, lone parents were entitled to apply for a lone parent transition loan (LPTL) when their IS ended.

The process for ending IS involves a lone parent receiving a letter from Jobcentre Plus eight weeks before their IS is due to end. This lets them know when their last payment is due and invites them to a voluntary interview. Should the lone parent choose to attend this interview it will take place six weeks before the lone parent's IS is due to end. During the interview the adviser will discuss the LPO changes with the customer, how it will affect them and offer a range of support. Four weeks before IS is due to end, the lone parent will receive a letter from the Benefit Delivery Centre (BDC) informing them that their IS is due to end.

If the lone parent has not attended their voluntary interview at the six-week stage they will be invited to a second interview. If the lone parent does not attend the second interview they will be sent a further letter explaining the need for them to make contact. If there has been no contact with the Jobcentre Plus office in the previous three months, for example, at an Options and Choices Event, WFI or case load interview, then a home visit may be considered.

Five days before IS is due to end, the lone parent will receive a formal decision letter stating that their IS is ending. Once IS ends, there are various different destinations customers may move to, one of which is JSA. Details of the JSA regime, as it affects lone parents, are outlined below.

1.3.4 The JSA regime and lone parents

The ending of an entitlement to claim IS on the basis of being a lone parent will mean that a proportion of existing customers move onto the JSA regime. They will be subject to the same legal regulations as other jobseekers, including being required to complete a Jobseeker's Agreement, actively look for work and attend a jobcentre fortnightly to confirm that they have been available and actively seeking work. After 13 weeks, JSA recipients will be required to attend weekly for a period of six weeks. Lone parents will be provided with advice and support to prepare for and find work, and will continue to be eligible to participate in NDLP in their first year on JSA.

While most lone parents will be able to meet existing JSA requirements, it is recognised that the circumstances of parents are varied. Therefore new flexibilities have been inserted into the regulations for parents. There are a number of circumstances in which lone parents will be eligible for such flexibilities and these reflect the responsibility they have to care for children. The application of the flexibilities will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Notwithstanding the application of flexibilities, there are circumstances where a lone parent claiming JSA can lose benefit. A lone parent will lose entitlement to JSA if they fail to attend their Fortnightly Job Review (FJR) appointment without demonstrating good cause (a judgement on good cause will involve consideration of the additional flexibilities). Jobcentre Plus staff try to contact any parent, including lone parents, by phone or letter to ascertain whether they have good cause for non-attendance. At least one attempt to contact the lone parent should be made by phone on the day they fail to attend their FJR appointment. If contact is not made by phone, a letter will be sent to their home address telling them that if they do not contact Jobcentre Plus within five working days their entitlement to JSA will cease. A claimant can also be disallowed from JSA if they fail to meet the basic labour market conditions of the benefit. These include being available for work, actively seeking work and having a signed and up-to-date Jobseeker's Agreement.

In addition to disallowance, a benefit sanction may be applied to a lone parent for a number of reasons including where they have contributed to their unemployment, for example, left a job voluntarily or refused employment. The length of such sanctions is variable between one and 26 weeks and is determined at the discretion of a Labour Market Decision Maker (LMDM) which is a non-customer-facing role.

Once the referral is made the LMDM will assess the evidence, including the customer's view of the events, against case law and regulations. If the LMDM decides to uphold the sanction or disallowance, benefit is suspended or reduced. As with all jobseekers, a lone parent can ask for decisions to be reconsidered or appeal against them if they feel they can provide extra information to show good cause.

Those lone parents entering the JSA regime will be affected by the wider changes that commenced roll-out in April 2009. The new JSA regime is divided into four stages, with Jobcentre Plus delivering the first three stages and the fourth being delivered by contracted, external providers. The four stages are as follows:

- Stage 1: birth to three months: self directed job search and fortnightly reviews with a new group session to reinforce rights and responsibilities, and encourage access to the back-to-work help available.
- Stage 2: three to six months: directed job search, weekly signing for six weeks and submission to vacancies.
- Stage 3: six to 12 months: supported job search with an adviser, fortnightly job search review, a back-to-work action plan.
- Stage 4: 12 to 24 months: Flexible New Deal (FND) provider stage – mandatory referral for up to a year to a contracted provider that will have the flexibility to provide support matched to individual needs based on an initial in-depth assessment.

1.4 Evaluating Lone Parent Obligations

This evaluation assesses changes in lone parent eligibility for IS, known as LPO. The overall aim of the evaluation is to explore how and whether lone parent employment interventions provide an effective incentive to look for paid employment, alongside an effective package of support for workless lone parents to enable them to find, enter and sustain paid employment. Changes in lone parent IS eligibility are rolling out over a three-year period (2008-2011). The research programme will examine the transition phase (the roll-out) and the final regime (the steady-state).

In the transition phase the research considers the implementation, delivery, effects and experiences of the changing regime on customers whose IS eligibility has been reduced when their youngest child is aged seven to 15 (focusing on the first roll-out groups of lone parents with a youngest child aged 12-15 and the third roll-out groups of lone parents with a youngest child aged seven to nine). The final regime phase considers the IS regime for lone parents with a youngest child aged six and under. The evaluation comprises both qualitative and quantitative studies in addition to a review of international evidence (Finn and Gloster, 2010).

The qualitative work consists of three studies, each focusing on a separate phase of the obligations. Together they cover the IS regime for lone parents as it will be once the roll-out of LPO is completed, the process and experience of losing entitlement to IS, and all of the destinations that lone parents might move to once they lose this entitlement:

- The IS regime for lone parents with a youngest child aged six and under and ending IS eligibility for lone parents with a youngest child aged 12-15 (the first roll-out group). The first aspect of this study examines the IS regime for lone parents as it will be once the LPO roll-out is complete. The second part of this study focuses on the customer's experience of ending IS eligibility, before they have moved to another benefit or status. The communications used to inform them of the changes of this aspect are a specific focus, as are the support they had in preparation for the changes.
- The JSA regime as it affects lone parents (including sanctioning and application of the parent flexibilities) with a youngest child aged 12-15 (the first roll-out group) and with a youngest child aged seven to nine (the third roll-out group). This study includes both groups of JSA claimants that will be affected by the changes (new and repeat JSA claimants and customers recently moved from IS to JSA because of LPO). It examines the effectiveness of the JSA regime for these groups of lone parents as it is anticipated that, due to LPO, increased numbers of lone parents will claim JSA.
- Other destinations of lone parents (including ESA, unknown destinations, lone parents exempt from the obligations and those who start work) with a youngest child aged 12-15 (the first roll-out group). This study will capture the experiences of lone parents in all the destinations that lone parents might move to (except JSA) once they lose their IS entitlement.

Findings from the first study, about the IS regime for lone parents and IS eligibility ending, are presented in this report, alongside the early findings from the first of three waves of qualitative work evaluating the JSA regime for lone parents. Findings about the various other destinations lone parents may have once their IS eligibility ends will be included in later reports.

There will be a longitudinal cohort survey of lone parents affected by LPO. This will take place in four waves over three years and track the destinations and experiences of lone parents with a youngest child aged seven to nine (the third roll-out group). There will be four published reports based on this survey, the first of which will be published in early 2011. Reports will then follow in early 2012, 2013 and 2014 respectively.

A feasibility study for an impact assessment has been undertaken and the decision on whether a full impact assessment of LPO procedures will be taken mid-2010.

Two synthesis reports will draw together the findings from the various aspects of the LPO evaluation. The subjects of these reports remain to be decided. It is anticipated that the first synthesis report will be published in early 2011, with the second available when all the strands of evaluation have been completed in 2014.

The evaluation of LPO is part of a consortia approach to the evaluation of the current welfare-to-work policy for parents. The consortium consists of the DWP and independent research organisations working on the evaluations of ND+fLP,

IWC and LPO. The aim of the consortium is to have consistency in reporting and analysis across evaluations and to facilitate a strategic approach to research outputs. The consortium will produce two additional synthesis reports drawing on the evaluations of the policies that affect parents. The first of these reports is likely to be published in 2011 and the second in 2013.

1.4.1 Research aims and objectives

The overall aim of the evaluation is to explore whether and how lone parent employment interventions provide an effective incentive to look for paid employment, alongside an effective package of support for workless lone parents to enable them to find, enter and sustain paid employment.

More specifically, the aims of the research into the IS regime for lone parents, ending IS eligibility for lone parents and the JSA regime for lone parents, are as follows:

Implementation of reduced IS eligibility

- How effective are Jobcentre Plus communications and services at ensuring customers are aware of, and prepared for, the change in their benefit entitlement?
- How effective are Jobcentre Plus processes at identifying customers who will continue to be eligible for IS, for example, current foster parents?

Effectiveness of the benefits regimes for lone parents (IS and JSA)

- How effective is the increased frequency of the LPWFI regime at encouraging lone parents to seek work and/or take up NDLP and other provisions?
- How effective is the package of pre-employment support at encouraging customers to actively seek work and move closer to the labour market?
- How do lone parents respond to the JSA/FND regime? How will the JSA regime help to address the wide range of constraints lone parents can face? What has the experience been of the move from weekly to fortnightly payment in arrears?
- Are the additional JSA flexibilities introduced for parents being utilised and achieving their intended objectives? How is adviser discretion about what constitutes suitable childcare operating in practice?

Effectiveness of Jobcentre Plus and other support to implement the changes

- Will there be access to flexible and affordable childcare to support lone parents in finding and retaining work?
- To what extent do Jobcentre Plus operational constraints related to staffing roles, resources and training affect the implementation and delivery of the LPO?

Effect on customers' work and life choices

- Do lone parent employment interventions have an impact on lone parents' work aspirations and decisions regarding when to look for work?
- How effective is the package of in-work support at encouraging customers to actively seek, find, enter and sustain paid employment?

1.5 Methodology

The data presented in this report is based on qualitative fieldwork with Jobcentre Plus staff and customers. Qualitative research is useful for understanding how and why things happen or people respond to changes in certain ways. It is illustrative and its findings are not statistically representative and cannot be generalised to a wider group of lone parents. There are no figures or percentages arising from this work and where we indicate that an experience or opinion was common among the people that we interviewed this should not be taken to indicate that this is a common experience for all lone parents in a similar circumstance. The qualitative findings in this report aim to understand and represent the diversity of lone parents affected by the LPO changes and to consider how their attitudes and individual circumstances affect these experiences.

The qualitative part of the evaluation uses a case study methodology to ensure the opportunity to triangulate customer and staff experience of LPO and to try to capture some variation in implementation between operations in different Jobcentre Plus districts and offices. Fieldwork has been undertaken in five case study areas which are based on the geography of Jobcentre Plus districts. The five districts were chosen so that they included a Jobcentre Plus district in Scotland and one in Wales in part because childcare is a devolved responsibility. The selection also included both rural and urban areas so there was an opportunity to see how LPO might affect customers in different geographies. The case-studies also included some districts that were implementing other initiatives alongside rolling out LPO, for example, the Integrated Employment and Skills Trials (IESTs). They were also all areas with high proportions of lone parents receiving IS to ensure that there were sufficient volumes of customers to provide a sufficiently large number of customers from which to contact people for the interviews. The five case study areas were Birmingham and Solihull; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders; South East Wales; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth, and North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber.

Birmingham and Solihull

This is the second largest Jobcentre Plus district in the country. It is an urban area and has a diverse socio-economic and ethnic population. There are 14 Jobcentre Plus offices and two main BDCs covering the district. There are two Childcare Partnership Managers (CPM) for the district and Childcare Champions in each jobcentre. There is a central administration team (though some jobcentres have an administration team as well). The area is part of the IESTs and was part of the first phase of FND roll-out (April 2009).

LPA were responsible for lone parent customers while they are claiming IS and transitioning onto JSA. LPAs tended to tell customers about the LPO changes up to a year and a half in advance and used QWFIs to encourage customers to take up NDLP provision. FJRs and PAs worked most with lone parents on the JSA regime.

Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders

There are 12 Jobcentre Plus offices in the district. The Lothian and Border areas of the district are rural, so offices in these areas tend to cover a larger geographical area than those in Edinburgh. The district has one central administrative team, and every office has a Diary Administrative Support Officer (DASO) team and deals with a range of Jobcentre Plus services and enquiries. There are two BDCs in the district. The district has been part of the Phase 1 roll-out of FND.

Staff have tried to make lone parents aware of the changes to IS eligibility and the conditionality requirements flowing from a move from IS to JSA throughout the year before they lose their entitlement. Advisers said they have encouraged lone parents to make the most of training opportunities while on IS. Generally, LPAs worked with lone parents who were moving onto JSA. However, different offices organised staff involvement in the LPO process differently depending on their size.

Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth

This district is in London and had the FND (since April 2009) and an IEST. There are nine Jobcentre Plus offices in district. One BDC covers the district and this is located outside of the district in the North West of England. The district was undergoing significant change. A large number of advisers were being recruited and JSA staff in offices had been re-organised around the three stages of FND.

Instead of using DASOs, the LPO district lead used a team of Customer Engagement Team Leaders (CETLs) from across the district to prioritise the caseload and identify when customers should lose their IS eligibility. LPAs saw customers on IS, explained the process for ending IS and conducted the voluntary interviews. Lone parents were then seen by non-specialist advisers once they changed benefit.

South East Wales

There are 11 Jobcentre Plus offices in this district and it is covered by one BDC. The area was part of FND Phase 1. At the start of the LPO roll-out LPAs were working with lone parents who moved onto JSA. However, as the volume of lone parents making this transitions increased, this was not sustainable and early in year one of the roll-out lone parents who moved from IS to JSA were seen by generalist JSA staff, unless they participated on NDLP, in which case an LPA supported them.

The district has aimed to communicate the LPO changes to lone parents over the year before it affects them. In particular, advisers have tried to encourage lone parents to prepare for work and to undertake training as appropriate before their benefit status changed.

North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber

This district covers a large geographical area, most of which is rural. There are 20 Jobcentre Plus offices in the district and the area has the FND. Smaller offices tend to be made up of generalist advisers, while larger offices have teams of specialist advisers. There are two BDCs in the district, four centralised DASO teams and the district has three CPMs. Over a period of months before a lone parent's IS ends, advisers discuss job opportunities, training opportunities, Jobcentre Plus provision, childcare and tax credits (including changes to these and helping customers apply for them as appropriate).

Staff in a number of job roles worked with lone parents. Generally, LPAs worked with lone parents. However, in some offices lone parents who were moving onto JSA were now seen by JSA staff.

1.5.1 The customer fieldwork

Two-hundred-and-three customer interviews were completed with four groups of Jobcentre Plus lone parent customers. This section details how the sample was constructed before describing some of the key characteristics of the interviewed customers.

Constructing the sample

Given the roll-out programme for LPO and the aims of the qualitative work, there were four separate groups of lone parents included in the research presented in this report, each at a different stage of the LPO journey.

The four customer groups in the evaluation consist of:

- customers whose IS eligibility was due to end six to eight weeks before they were interviewed (these were sampled in two waves). The first sample was made up of customers who were due to lose IS entitlement between July and September 2009. The second wave of fieldwork was with customers who were due to lose their entitlement to IS between October and November 2009. The age of the youngest child of the customers interviewed was 12-13 in both waves;
- customers who had moved from IS to JSA as a result of losing their entitlement to receive IS in March 2009. The age of the youngest child of the customers interviewed was 14-15;
- new and repeat JSA customers making a claim between 24 November 2008, when LPOs came into effect, and early February 2009 when the sample was drawn. The age of the youngest child of the customers interviewed was 12-15;
- customers receiving IS whose youngest child was aged one to six and who were, therefore, unaffected by LPOs. The customers included in the IS study were those with a youngest child aged one to six born between August 2002 and August 2008. Some of these customers may be part of the transition of existing IS customers to JSA (in the third roll-out group), but most will be customers who are subject to the final policy regime (the steady state).

Figure 1.1 illustrates the roll-out phase and the age of the youngest child of the lone parents captured in each of the four groups of customers we interviewed.

Figure 1.1 Sampling customers for the LPO evaluation by roll-out phase

	2008		2009											
	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Phase 1 customers														
New and repeat: youngest child 12+ from 24 November 2008	■	■	■	■										
Existing youngest child becomes 16 between 25 November 2008 and 1 March 2009														
Existing youngest child becomes 16 on or after 2 March 2009					■									
Existing youngest child is 14 on or before 1 March 2009					■									
Existing youngest child becomes 14 on or after 2 March 2009					■									
Existing youngest child is 12 or 12+ on or before 5 July 2009									■	■	■	■	■	
Existing youngest child becomes 12 on or after 6/ July 2009									■	■	■	■	■	

■	IS ending wave 1 sample
■	JSA (IS stock) sample
■	JSA new and repeat sample
■	IS ending wave 2 sample

Key characteristics of the customer interviews

Some of the key characteristics of the four customer groups are detailed in Appendix B.

- Overall, of the 203 interviews completed, 14 were with male lone parents. Fifty-nine interviews were with customers who described themselves as being from a BME group.
- As might be expected, those customer groups with younger children, specifically IS customers whose youngest child was aged one to six, tended also to be younger. The highest number of interviewed customers had one child (64 interviewees), but 76 out of the 203 customers interviewed had a family with three or more children.
- Forty-nine customers described themselves as having a health problem or disability, and 45 described their child or children as having a health issue or disability.

- Twenty-nine customers were working at the time of the interview, 21 of whom were working less than 16 hours a week. These included interviewees in each of the four customer groups.

1.5.2 The staff fieldwork

In the five case study areas staff in a range of roles that are involved in the implementation of LPO were interviewed. Some interviews had a stronger focus on the IS regime, others on the process of ending IS eligibility and others on the JSA regime. The focus of the interview depended on the area(s) of expertise of the interviewee and included interviews with both customer-facing and non-customer-facing staff. The number of achieved interviews are shown in brackets:

- the lead for implementing LPO in the district (5);
- Advisory Services Managers (ASM) (10);
- CPM (5);
- CETL (4);
- DASO (5);
- FJR (3);
- PAs (23: 19 of which were LPAs);
- Benefit Delivery Officers and Benefit Delivery Team Leaders (15);
- LMDM (5).

In total, 75 staff interviews were completed between April and June 2009. Some detail about how these staff roles are involved in LPO and their responsibilities for the new processes is given in Appendix D. Of all the staff interviewed, some had been in their current role for less than a year, others for between one and five years, and others for more than five years.

After the staff fieldwork was completed an issue related to how Jobcentre Plus was working with lone parents with a medical condition was identified. This resulted in changes to LPO processes which came into effect on 31 August 2009. Under the new processes, lone parents receiving IS who have a disability or health condition and could provide medical evidence of this could continue to receive IS. Previously customers meeting these criteria were able to make a claim for ESA.

In October 2009, three staff in each of the five case study areas (15 in total) were contacted to take part in short phone interviews about this issue and the new processes that had been put in place. The staff were the LPO lead, an ASM and a PA.

1.5.3 Interviewing approach and discussion guides

Four customer discussion guides were used. While each had separate focuses on elements of the LPO process that customer's were experiencing, such as the ending of their eligibility or moving to the JSA regime, the guides were united by common themes and question areas which enabled comparisons in circumstances and attitudes to be made between customers affected by different stages of LPO. These core areas included questions about customer's finances, money management and household budgets, education and training, work and benefits history, their attitudes to work and benefits as well as an exploration of the constraints they felt held them back from finding the work they were seeking now, or would seek in the future. This aspect of the methodology was built on earlier work into the choices and constraints of lone parents (Collins *et al.*, 2006). This method will also be used in the quantitative study and future waves of the qualitative evaluation.

The concept of time and changes over time periods was critical to customer's experiences of LPO and how it might affect them. For example, whether customer's had a recent work history and, for JSA customers who had recently moved from IS, whether they felt reasons they had not worked in the past would change over time now they were required to actively seek work. For this reason, and as a tool to engage the interviewees, researchers used a timeline with stickers to aide the discussion about changes over time for key areas of the discussion guide.

Eleven topic guides were developed for the staff interviews to reflect the different ways in which they are involved in the LPO process and the JSA regime for lone parents.

1.5.4 Analysis process

The interviews were recorded (where the interviewee gave permission for this) and then transcribed, or notes written up if a recording had not been made. Two fieldwork debrief meetings were held, one at each of the research organisations involved in the evaluation, with the researchers that had conducted fieldwork for the project. During this meeting common themes from the interviews were drawn out and the interviewer's perspectives on the main messages were gathered. In addition, researchers that had conducted staff interviews wrote case studies of the implementation structures, processes and issues in each area to ensure that any differences between operations at a district level were captured.

In addition to this process, transcriptions of notes of each interview were uploaded into computer assisted qualitative data analysis software packages and analysed using an extensive analysis framework. Following a coding process the detailed outputs were reviewed by the report authors and used to write this report. All of the content was analysed by the four customer groups as well as any other variable that had arisen either in the fieldwork debrief meetings or since as an important factor that seemed to affect responses, such as case study area. For

example, lone parents in the London case study area had seemed to interviewers to be more fearful of leaving their children alone because of gun and gang crime than in the other case study areas.

1.6 Summary

- The UK Government has an ambition to increase the lone parent employment rate to both support their aim to maximise employment opportunity for all and contribute towards the reduction in child poverty, and has introduced various policy measures to try to achieve this.
- Changes to the benefits system for lone parents have been introduced in recent years with an increasing focus on work preparation and obligations to look for work. From November 2008 lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over were no longer entitled to receive IS solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. By autumn 2010 the age of the youngest child will be reduced to seven. It is these changes, LPO, that are the subject of this evaluation.
- Lone parents who are no longer eligible for IS have been able to move to other benefits as appropriate, including JSA. The JSA regime has been amended to include flexibility for parents, for example, in the hours of work they are required to seek. Conditionality is a key feature of the JSA regime and lone parents claiming JSA are subject to these.
- The aim of this evaluation is to explore whether and how lone parent employment interventions provide an effective incentive to look for paid employment, alongside an effective package of support for workless lone parents to enable them to find, enter and sustain paid employment.
- The findings presented in this report are based on qualitative fieldwork with 75 Jobcentre Plus staff and 203 customers in five case study areas. They focus on the early implementation of LPO, and the operation of the IS regime and the early stages of the JSA regime as they are experienced by lone parents. The research is qualitative and therefore is illustrative of experiences rather than being representative of a wider group of lone parents.

2 Customer characteristics and attitudes

2.1 Introduction

A range of attitudinal factors, personal characteristics and circumstances shape an individual's options and priorities in life; including their decisions and choices around paid employment. Previous research has shown that lone parents who claim benefits are a heterogeneous group that has a variety of different characteristics and attitudes to work (see, for example, Goodwin, 2008; Thomas, 2007). Therefore, in order to better understand what influences the work-orientation of lone parents affected by Lone Parent Obligations (LPOs), and how they react to their change in benefit status, interviewees were asked about their domestic and financial circumstances, any constraints to work, their attitudes towards work and family life, and combining the two.

The interviews also explored the changes over time periods experienced by customers in order to better understand how the LPO process might affect them.

This chapter presents the findings about:

- the characteristics of the lone parents interviewed, and of their households;
- the interviewee's employment and benefits histories;
- attitudes to working and claiming benefits and future aspirations;
- perceived constraints to working.

Where appropriate it draws out any differences and similarities between the four customer groups included in this research: Income Support (IS) customers with a youngest child aged under six, customers whose IS eligibility was due to end, customers who had moved from IS to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), and new and repeat JSA customers.

2.2 Background and characteristics

The following section summarises key customer characteristics gathered during the course of the interviews. It covers the characteristics of lone parents and their households, housing status and social networks, education and training, work and benefits history and customer's financial situation. The tables containing the data described in these sections are provided in Appendix B.

2.2.1 The characteristics of lone parents and their households

Most of the lone parents that took part in the interviews were female. Most also declared their ethnicity as white British although a number were black or mixed/other, with a smaller number of Asian lone parent customers. Looking at existing data to validate the mix of interviewees in the research shows that the gender split broadly reflects Department for Work and Pensions data on lone parent customers and the ethnic profile of the interviewees reflects latest Office for National Statistics (ONS) population estimates by ethnic group. However, as noted earlier, because this research is qualitative it is not statistically representative.

There was a significant degree of variation in the age of the lone parents that were interviewed. However, as might be expected, those customer groups with younger children, specifically IS customers with a youngest child aged six and under, were generally younger than other lone parents; a sizeable number were aged under 30, and no customers in this group were aged 45 or over. Conversely, customers with older children (i.e. customers whose IS eligibility was due to end, customers who had moved from IS to JSA, and new and repeat JSA customers) tended to have an older age profile. Most of the customers in these three groups were over 30, with a number in the 45-49 and 50-plus categories.

Most IS customers with a youngest child aged six and under said they had been a lone parent for three years or less, with a small number reporting between four and seven years. Given the fact that many lone parents in this customer group had only one child aged six and under, very few interviewees had been a lone parent for over seven years. Customers whose IS eligibility was due to end tended to be longer-term lone parents. Most reported that they had been lone parents for between eight and 12 years, with relatively small numbers reporting less than that period of time. Both new and repeat JSA customers, and existing customers who have moved from IS to JSA, had generally been lone parents for the longest period of time. A large number in these customer groups had been a lone parent for 13 years or more.

In response to a direct question of whether customers would describe themselves as having a health problem, most of the interviewees did not directly identify either themselves or their children as having health problems. Interviewees on IS with a youngest child aged six and under, and new and repeat JSA customers, were least likely to report having health problems. Customers whose IS eligibility was due to end and those customers who moved from IS to JSA were more likely to

report health problems (although most of these customers still generally reported themselves to have no health problems). In terms of their child or children's health, IS customers with a youngest child aged under six and under and those customers whose IS eligibility was due to end appeared slightly more likely to report having a child or children with health problems than JSA customers (both new and repeat, and those who have been moved from IS to JSA).

However, health-related issues (both personal and in relation to their children's health) were mentioned by respondents with relative frequency in relation to constraints to employment, particularly with those customers whose IS eligibility was due to end, and those customers who have moved from IS to JSA. The health concerns reported to the research team varied from various relatively minor complaints to more serious and/or life-threatening health conditions. These groups of customers tended to have been out of work for long periods. Previous evidence has found a strong association between worklessness and poor health, in part due to selection effect, but also because unemployment is harmful to health (Waddell and Burton, 2006). Health as a constraint to employment is explored further in Section 2.4.2.

2.2.2 Housing status and social networks

Most lone parents we interviewed lived in rented accommodation and mainly in local authority rentals. Only a small number of the lone parents interviewed owned their own home. There were, however, variations between the case study districts in terms of customers' housing status. For example, customers living in Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth were less likely to own their own home (none of the customers we interviewed) whereas in South East Wales more customers that were interviewed reported owning property.

Most of the IS customers interviewed (both those with a youngest child aged six and under, and those customers whose IS eligibility was due to end) had lived at their current address for less than ten years, although many indicated that they had lived in the local area for longer. JSA customers tended to have lived in the area for longest. Both new and repeat JSA customers and existing customers who had moved from IS to JSA had lived at their current address for 11 years or more and a large number for over 20 years. Again, there were some geographic variations in this respect. In particular, lone parents in South East Wales and North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber were more likely to have lived in the area for longer periods of time than other lone parent customers (20 years plus).

Overall, most customers interviewed reported that they had family and friends living nearby. More of the customers we interviewed in the Birmingham and Solihull, Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders and South East Wales case study areas reported having strong local social networks than the interviewees in Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth case study district. There was a clear link between the extent of local social networks and the longevity of residence, with customers who had lived in the same area 'all their lives' most likely to have a close network of

friends and family living locally. Relatives in customers' local social networks were most likely to be females in their immediate family, generally mothers or sisters. The following quote is typical of a number of customers that were interviewed:

'...my mum stays about two minutes round the corner...my sister's down the road and a sister's just round the corner.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

Many customers who reported that they did not have any family, or that their family did not live in the local area, tended to have close friends. However, in some cases, particularly in relation to recent arrivals to the United Kingdom, some lone parents that were interviewed felt isolated and unable to discuss important matters with anyone. One customer who was originally from Ghana commented:

'I've got friends, but it's like they are all with their families, so in this country you just can't rely on anyone.'

(Customer whose IS eligibility was due to end; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

As will be discussed later, the extent of lone parents' social networks affected their ability to use friends and family as a source of financial help in an emergency.

2.2.3 Education and training

Overall, most lone parents who were interviewed were qualified at Level 2 or below. Of these, customers with a youngest child aged six and under and customers whose IS eligibility was due to end were mainly qualified at this level, with a smaller number qualified at Level 3 or above. There was more variation in the qualification levels of JSA customers who have moved from IS to JSA. Although most of these customers were qualified below Level 2, a sizeable number had no qualifications at all. Further, although a large number of new and repeat JSA customers were qualified at Level 2, many were without any qualifications.

A number of customers talked of having fairly difficult school experiences which had impacted on their levels of engagement and attainment. For example:

'I got attacked off a few girls, and my mum kept going down to the school and nothing got done about it, so I got took out of school at 14.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

'I didn't actually do very well at school, I was in care, and I think that disrupted my education.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

Since leaving school however, a number of the interviewees had undertaken further study or training. The most frequent types of further study mentioned by different customer groups were as follows:

- IS customers with a youngest child aged six and under; job-related training, NVQ/GNVQ/SVA level study and additional IT skills;
- customers whose IS eligibility was due to end: IT skills, job-related training, other qualifications at higher education (HE) level or NVQ/GNVQ/SVA level qualifications;
- customers who had moved from IS to JSA: job-related training, IT skills, and other qualifications at HE level;
- new and repeat JSA customers: job-related training, IT skills, trade or craftsperson courses, NVQ/GNVQ/SVA and health and safety training.

Many interviewees were keen to be able to undertake further training and qualifications in the near future (see Section 2.3.3).

2.2.4 Benefits history and current benefit status

IS customers (both those lone parents with a youngest child aged six and under and those customers whose IS eligibility was due to end) reported a benefit package that generally included IS, Child Tax Credit (CTC), Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB), with small numbers receiving disability-related benefits and/or maintenance payments. Most of the IS lone parent customers interviewed indicated they had first claimed between one and two years ago with the key reasons cited including becoming separated from their partner or experiencing a change in personal financial circumstances.

The JSA customer benefit package generally included JSA, CTC, HB and CTB. There were a couple of variations however, with some lone parents interviewed reporting that they were no longer in receipt of JSA as they had either moved into work (and received Working Tax Credit) or study, some reported that they had put in a claim for HB but were yet to receive it.

2.2.5 Current work status and previous employment history

At the point of interview, most of the lone parent customers interviewed were not in paid employment. A few lone parent customers were currently in work of less than 16 hours (mini-job). A few had moved into work of over 16 hours a week between the time the research team received contact details and the time of interview. This reflects the circumstances of the lone parents interviewed for this study, who were included because they had recent IS or JSA claims. Further waves of this evaluation will include the experience of lone parents who have moved into work.

Across all interviewees, previous employment tended to be in low status, low wage and low-skilled professions, working on a part-time basis. The most prevalent employment sectors for all customer groups were retail, hospitality,

domestic services (such as cleaning and care work) and factory work. Overall, most customers reported that they had found their previous job either through informal means such as personal contacts with family and friends or through the jobcentre.

IS customers (both those with a youngest child aged six and under and those customers whose IS eligibility was due to end) were generally more likely to have previously worked full time but for shorter lengths of time. Overall, all JSA customers (both new and repeat, and those who have moved from IS to JSA) were more likely to have last worked part time, but for longer periods. There was also a degree of variation between the different case study districts. For example, lone parents in Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth were more likely to have last worked on a full-time basis than other customers. Indeed, full-time working in London is more common than the Great Britain average, with the proportion of employment in part-time jobs 27 and 22 per cent respectively (ONS, 2009b). Lone parents in Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders were less likely to say they had last worked full time. When asked whether they had enjoyed their last job, JSA customers (both those that had moved from IS to JSA, and new and repeat) were more likely to respond positively than lone parent IS customers across the board.

There were further variations between the different types of lone parent customers in terms of reasons they left their last job. Key reasons why the IS customers interviewed left their last job were health (either own health or that of their children) and pregnancy or childcare. For example:

'I was working in, in a nightclub, but obviously the further I got on in my pregnancy the less I was, I was going to be able to work, so I had to just stop.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

'Well, I did have a job as an administrator, but that was when my son was ill in hospital and they couldn't keep the job open for me.'

(Customer whose IS eligibility was due to end; Birmingham and Solihull)

The key reasons for leaving their previous employment, cited by the customers interviewed that had moved from IS to JSA, were family commitments including childcare and personal differences. However, redundancy was overwhelmingly the main reason cited by new and repeat customers for leaving their last job.

'I got laid off in 2007 due to redundancy and then from there I had about two other jobs which were temporary.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

Detail about the effects of the recession on these customers is discussed throughout the report and in relation to perceived job availability in Section 2.4.3.

2.3 Attitudes and aspirations

A key element of the research was to explore the attitudes, aspirations and personal belief-sets of lone parents on a range of topic areas, and to encourage customers to reflect on whether these attitudes had changed over a period of time. In particular, the research sought to explore customers' attitudes to work and benefits as lone parents, alongside their longer-term aspirations or life-goals and then how, if at all, LPO had influenced them.

2.3.1 Lone parents' attitudes to work

Interviewees were asked to describe what they felt were the key positive and negative aspects of being in paid employment as a lone parent.

Looking first at what motivates lone parents to gain paid employment,¹ a few key factors stood out across all customer groups (in order of frequency):

- financial benefits and/or financial independence;
- personal independence and the social element of work;
- setting a good example to their children.

First and foremost, the financial benefits of work, including the perceived opportunity paid employment offered for financial independence, was the number one motivating factor across all customer groups that were interviewed:

'The good thing is I'll get my own money, monitor how I want it, do whatever I want to do with my money. No-one is free to ask me any questions about it. Right?'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

This was closely linked to a sense that it would enable customers to realise broader lifestyle goals for both themselves and their children. A number of customers talked of this benefit:

'The positives obviously when you've got a family and if it's youngsters, teenagers or whatever, it gives you a lifestyle, you know, you've got a regular income coming in. It allows you to do things as a family and if you need something you can go out and buy it.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

Further key benefits mentioned by all groups of customers included the opportunity for social interaction with other adults at work. This was more frequently mentioned by lone parents with some previous experience of paid-employment, who talked

¹ The 'pragmatic' factors influencing lone parents' work-orientation that were identified by Bell *et al.* (2005) *A question of balance: Lone parents, childcare and work*, DWP Research Report No. 230.

about the socially isolating aspects of being an unemployed lone parent. In a number of such instances, the social benefits of work were rated as higher personal motivators than financial gain. Related to this was the positive effect that employment could have on helping them to gain personal independence and identity outside their roles as mothers and carers. As the following lone parents express clearly:

'Personally I'd rather be working. I mean I love spending time with her, don't get me wrong, but I'd rather be working to get the money...I get so bored sometimes. There's, there's only so many times you can walk down the town and look at things that you can't afford to buy.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

'...you become yourself again. That's something I'm struggling with at the minute because at the minute I'm just mum. You know, whereas you start to lose your adult self and you don't socialise as much with people and you are kind of drained because you are just in the same environment all the time, whereas when I was working I got to be around other people, you know, socialising and not sort of sat in your own space all the time.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

This reflects other research (Bell *et al.*, 2005; Peacey, 2007) which emphasised the high value placed by lone parents on the improved self-esteem and self-confidence brought by work. For some lone parents, this effect was strongly related to the feeling that being in work would help to distance themselves from some of the more negative stereotypes associated with being a lone parent on benefits. Indeed, the opportunity that work offered to set a good example to their children was a further positive association of working cited by many customers. This was particularly the case with new and repeat JSA customers who in general had a more recent experience of work than other customer groups:

'I think, 'specially when you've got three boys or where the age mine are, one's just going to start college in September, the others are like 14, to have me not working...I don't think that's an incentive for them at all...'

(New and repeat JSA customer; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

'The positive is you can show your child that, you know, you don't have to stay at home, that you can get a career and you can study and you can move on to do more positive things with your life.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

Moving on to consider the negative aspects of working, again a number of shared concerns emerged from the interviews. Across all lone parent customers, the following factors were perceived to be the key disadvantages of working:

- they would miss their child;
- it would be difficult to juggle work and domestic commitments;
- they would be reluctant to use formal childcare;
- they would not be financially better off in work.

Many lone parent customers talked of their concerns about missing their child and the opportunity to see them grow up. The need to spend quality time with their child(ren) and/or to simply 'be there' was a common discussion theme in many of the interviews. In particular, these concerns appeared to inform the views of many lone parents around working with a younger child:

'You can understand why some people don't want to go to work, when they're younger, because of what you miss. You know, I, I didn't work when my children were quite young: my partner worked then, and I was home with the children. And, you know, I've... friends of mine have worked virtually up until two weeks before they had the baby, and some of them have gone back a few weeks after they've had the baby. And I think to myself what they've missed, and some of them know that they've missed it as well. So I was so lucky that I didn't have to.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales)

A number of customers expressed the view that being in work would not be 'good' for their child. This was a particularly strong feeling amongst IS customers, both with younger children and those whose IS eligibility was due to end. Other customers, especially new and repeat JSA customers, talked about this issue in relation to being the only parent and therefore feeling more responsible for being around:

'As a single parent it's blooming hard. You know, I've got three children and one needs me, you know, you've got to be there and that's it because there's not anybody else, there's only you, and I don't have the extended family to help, you know, not nearby. So those are the negatives, and the pressures of raising a family on your own and sorting your finances and everything out as well when you are, you know, really struggling. Yeah, it's difficult.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

Second, these concerns were linked to many customers' fears about how they would manage to juggle domestic commitments with the time demands of work, particularly around the restrictions placed by school hours. In addition to the parental childcare responsibilities mentioned already, this referred to concerns about managing the more mundane household tasks such as shopping, cleaning, cooking and so forth, alongside formal paid employment. The following customer describes such a scenario well:

'...even though they are teenagers they still need you around very much and I think that is a myth people sometimes have, they think the older they get the less they need the parent and especially in a single parent family, I find when my daughter comes home, she's starving so and she just wants to have her dinner but I won't have cooked it and I think that's a very big thing with me, not so much in the morning, it's the coming home bit, so that I think the nine to five working for single parents with kids, even if they are teenagers, can be very difficult.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Third, many customers also expressed anxieties about using formal childcare to support their labour market engagement. In this context, such anxieties were less to do with views on rights or wrongs of putting children in formal childcare, or the cost and/or availability of childcare itself, but were based on lone parents' perceptions of how flexible and family-friendly work would be. Indeed, most lone parents across all customer groups were strongly sceptical of how feasible it would be to combine work alongside their responsibilities as a parent. This was both to do with the practicalities of working around school hours (the preferred work-option for most interviewees), and anticipated difficulties in relation to having to take time off for family emergencies such as sick children. However, although for some lone parents this view was based more on perception than actual experience, the fact that it emerged as a particularly strong issue for new and repeat JSA customers suggests that lack of family-friendly working practices is a real constraint for many working lone parents. Lone parent's views on childcare for both younger and older children are explored in more depth in Chapters 3 and 5.

The final issue raised by many of the lone parents interviewed was a belief that they would not be financially better off in work. Despite the fact that a key function of the Lone Parent Work Focused Interview is to reassure customers that being in paid employment would be beneficial through the Better Off Calculations (BOCs)², many customers were doubtful that being in work would actually improve their financial situation. For some, this view was based mainly on perception, while for others, concerns were based on personal experience. For example, some customers' concerns related to the perceived insecurity of paid work in comparison to the more 'stable' financial position of claiming benefits. For others, 'not better off' concerns were linked to feeling that they would only be able to access low-paid employment and so when all the necessary living costs were taken into account, working would not necessarily lead to a positive financial outcome. Several customers were also keen to ensure that the financial gain would be sufficient to justify the additional stress, time and energy that juggling work, home and children would demand. A number of customers spoke

² BOCs are used to personalise and demonstrate the financial gains of working to lone parents, and are one of the key tools used by advisers when working with lone parents.

about personal experiences of not being 'better off in work', or recounted stories of other lone parents that appeared to validate such concerns.

In part fear of not being financially better off in work related to many lone parent concerns about making the transition between benefits and work. Indeed, the complexity of the benefits system and the potential financial effects that the transition into work may have on the financial stability of a lone parent family has been cited as a constraint for lone parents moving from benefits into work in previous research (O'Connor and Boreham, 2002). However, a number of lone parent customers also saw this in the context of only being able to access jobs with low wages. One customer recalled her previous experience of being only very marginally 'better off':

'When I worked in Mothercare...I was forking out for my bus fares, I mean £3 a week better off. It isn't...that wouldn't make me get another job for that. It's got to be more than that because you want to have a comfortable living. But by the time you're forking out bus fares, dinner money, school uniforms, you ken [know] you do want to be better off.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

2.3.2 Lone parents' attitudes to claiming benefits

Customers were also asked to consider the positive and negative aspects of claiming benefits while having children. In both these areas, many customers understandably found it difficult to articulate their views on being a benefit claimant, and this was particularly the case for IS customers with a youngest child aged six and under.

In terms of the key positive aspects, two main issues emerged. First, lone parents felt that although financially limiting, claiming benefits has provided themselves and their children with a 'safety net'. This was a particularly strong message from customers whose IS eligibility was due to end, and new and repeat JSA customers. A number of interviewees articulated this point well:

'It gives me somewhere to live for a start...I have got a roof over my head and I can still put food on the table. Not much more than that to be perfectly honest, electricity but that's about it. Still afford bus fares now and again and when I get my family allowance then they will get a treat from my family allowance, if ones needing shoes. I can't do two in the one go but the other one knows that the other one will get them as soon as I can.'

(Customer whose IS eligibility was due to end; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

'...the positives are that you're not worrying about where the next meal comes from. You might have to buy the cheapest things, but in some countries...it's a safety net.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

Second, many lone parents felt that an additional key positive of claiming benefits was the opportunity it provided for them to spend more time with their child. This view was particularly noticeable in retrospect from JSA customers who have moved from IS to JSA. A number talked about how much they valued *'being able to stay at home to look after your kids'* (customer who has moved from IS to JSA, Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders); that they could *'spend time with the kids; you know, and you've not got to rely on anybody else to have them.'* (customer who has moved from IS to JSA; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber). However, it is important to note that some lone parents we interviewed saw no positive aspects of claiming benefits; as one customer commented *'I just hate it...there's nothing positive'* (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders).

Another negative aspect to claiming benefits while having children was reported to be a lack of money. This was particularly the case for JSA customers (both new and repeat, and those who have moved from IS to JSA). Many of this customer group talked about being *'constantly skint'* (new and repeat JSA customer, South East Wales). Some customers interviewed also expressed views that claiming benefits was not a desirable lifestyle.

'Yeah, I hate it because it's not...I think of my family, you know, and that's how they've all lived. I think I just always wanted better. You know, I wanted to go out and support my family myself.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

They described feeling a sense of stigma or negative stereotyping connected with claiming benefits and some emphasised their *'unique'* particular circumstances in order to distinguish themselves from what they perceived to be less *'deserving'* claimants. For example, one customer commented:

'I hate claiming benefits. If I could come off I'd do it because I really...I hate income support, it's the worst thing to be on because it's like if people are talking to you and they know that you're on income support and they know that you are like a single parent, and there is a stigma, I find, there is a stigma to that. I never asked for their dad to leave us, you know. And maybe some people, I don't know, they've got different circumstances from you, they've ended up on income support for other reasons.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

2.3.3 Future aspirations

Customers were asked what they would like to happen in their lives over the next couple of years. In order to gather this data and aide discussions, a key tool employed by interviewers was a timeline, divided into periods of more than a year ago, over the past 12 months and the future. Customers were able to select from a series of stickers summarising possible options, or to suggest an alternative life-goal.

When considering aspirations, there was unanimity in most areas across all four customer groups. Most of the lone parents that were interviewed mentioned the same four key life goals: to get a paid job or become self-employed, to go to college or to study, to move home, and to do some voluntary work. Talking about their personal aspirations, the following comments were typical of many lone parent customers as they summarised these goals:

'I'd like to go back to work and, obviously when my children are a bit older and I have some time to myself, I'd like to do a course and study.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

For some customers, the aspiration to gain paid employment was clearly connected to realising broader lifestyle improvements for themselves and their child(ren). As one customer said:

'...I'd like a job that pays you, you know, that makes it okay for you to go back to work and just do normal things, like people do, like go on holiday, buy your kid, you know, nice clothes and things like that...'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

There were a couple of slight variations in the list of priorities, firstly around wanting to move home, where this generally appeared to be a higher priority for IS customers (both IS customers with a youngest child aged six and under, and those IS customers whose eligibility is due to end). A number of these customers talked of the unsuitable housing they currently lived in, mainly due to insufficient space, as this example illustrates:

'Two-bedroom flat and three kids is getting a bit of a hassle now they are getting bigger. And a guinea pig and a rabbit. We've just changed from a cot to a bed for [A] and to get from one side of the room to the other you have to kind of go over each bed.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

Secondly, JSA customers interviewed ranked a desire to do some voluntary work higher than other customer groups, with voluntary work ranking alongside moving home as a priority. One customer commented *'I will do voluntary work to prepare me for work'* (customer who has moved from IS to JSA, Birmingham and Solihull). This reflects the findings of Bell *et al.* (2005) who highlight doing voluntary work as one of a number of potential gateways into paid employment for certain types of lone parents. However it is also important to note that a small number of customers were far more negative on this option: *'...voluntary work, no danger, I wouldn't work if I'm not getting paid for it...'* (Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders).

As part of the interview, customers were also asked to consider the question of future aspirations from a slightly different angle: what customers thought would actually happen to them as opposed to what they would like to happen. Again, customers' responses to this question were relatively consistent, although the 'likely' future options were more limited in scope. All customer groups seemed fairly confident that they would indeed secure paid employment in the future, despite the difficult economic climate:

'I'm hoping that maybe get a good job...I'm hoping that's what realistically will happen. I'm hoping that when I get the papers, hopefully there won't be no credit crunch thing and hopefully there will be work again.'

(Lone parent whose IS eligibility was due to end; Birmingham and Solihull)

'I've got to keep positive and think, yes, yes, I will find that job, it is there, it's got my name on.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

Many customers also felt certain that they would be able to realise plans for further study:

'...if I really want to go further in what I'm doing...like for instance a nurse or something like that...when it comes to moving forward in the job, then yes, I'll have to probably do some paperwork as well to develop that skill.'

(Customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Birmingham and Solihull)

2.4 Constraints to working

As described in Section 2.3, while the aspirations or life goals articulated by the lone parent customers interviewed showed a degree of unanimity, previous research, for example in their analysis of the Families and Children's Study (FACS) (2006), D'Souza *et al.* (2008) highlighted that lone parents' situations and circumstances are often considerably more varied.

When considering constraints to work, a variety of different factors were raised by the lone parent customers interviewed. Broadly speaking, these constraints can be divided into three overarching thematic areas which are explored in more detail in the following sections:

- constraints that relate to their domestic duties and responsibilities as parents;
- personal constraints around how 'work ready' individual lone parents felt themselves to be;
- external labour market constraints connected to a lack of suitable employment opportunities.

2.4.1 Caring choices and domestic responsibilities

Reflecting D'Souza's findings (2008) and the work of Bell *et al.* (2005), and as already described in Section 2.3.1, wanting to look after their own children was cited as a key constraint to work by a significant group of customers. Bell's (2005) work in particular emphasises the ways in which attitudes towards parental and non-parental childcare influence lone parents' decisions about whether to work, and what type of work to do. In our interviews, many lone parents talked of themselves as carers by choice: parental childcare was held as the ideal, and as such customers were strongly resistant to using formal childcare. Where alternatives to parental care were considered, they tended to focus on childcare that could be provided by close family members and friends. For this group of parents these views suggest that even where appropriate and affordable formal childcare is in place, their preference would still be for parental care.

Such perspectives on the use of formal childcare reflect those of previous research in this area, with both lone parents and working parents. Riley and Glass (2002) for example, point out that although much attention has been focused on the issue of whether a shortage of adequate childcare exists, few studies have addressed this issue in terms of the disjuncture between mother's preferred modes of care and the types of care available. Wheelock and Jones (2002) explore the contribution that informal childcare – relatives, friends or neighbours looking after children, usually on an unpaid basis – can make in allowing women to work.

However, for some customers, childcare issues related to practical concerns around the cost and availability of suitable childcare: particularly for lone parents with a youngest child aged six and under and those customers whose IS eligibility was due to end. Again, previous studies have highlighted these issues. O'Connor and Boreham's (2002) workshops with lone parent experts identified several constraints to work that related to the current childcare 'offer' available. These included the cost and affordability of childcare, the availability and flexibility of childcare, for example to care for children outside of office working hours and in school holidays, as well as a choice of provision. Views on and experience of using formal childcare are explored in more detail in Chapters 3 and 5.

Finally, some lone parents mentioned other family responsibilities as constraints to employment, such as caring for elderly parents. One customer, for example, described her responsibilities in relation to caring for both her elderly mother and father.

'...it's my responsibility to make sure she's got certain personal items and take her certain places...take her to her doctor's appointment. And now I'm also power of attorney, which means I've got to deal with her, whatever situation comes up, and dealing with the councils and the social workers and all that...His doctor's appointments, a number of appointments got to go to and then I've got to help him go shopping and make sure their houses are clean and it's, it's a big responsibility.'

(Customer whose IS eligibility was due to end; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

2.4.2 Feeling 'work ready'

Although not always perceived as a direct constraint, large numbers of lone parent customers talked of health issues during their interviews. Amongst those customers that identified themselves as having a health problem, there was a relatively high incidence of:

- asthma, both in terms of lone parents themselves, and the children of lone parents (mentioned by 12 customers);
- stress, depression and other mental-health-related illnesses (seven customers); and
- diabetes (four customers).

Other customers reported issues such as high blood pressure, various mobility issues and/or were parents of children with special needs such as learning difficulties. Previous research has pointed towards the relatively high incidence of health problems in lone parents when compared with the population as a whole (One Parent Families, 2008) and has explored how health can act as a barrier to work for lone parents (Casebourne *et al.*, 2004). As the findings of this research also suggest, for some lone parents it is not only their health that can be a barrier to work, but also the health of their child(ren), and any other family members they have caring responsibilities for. One Parent Families (2008) reported that 19 per cent of children living with a lone parent have a health problem or disability.

It is important to stress, however, that most of the interviewees did not see health as a key constraint to work, although those lone parents with more serious health problems did express some concern about their ability to sustain work alongside the effects of work on their health problem or disability. The need for a supportive employer and work environment was therefore emphasised by these customers. For example:

'I have got bad knees and I broke my hand, so some things, depending on whether it is sore or fine, if it was like doing something on the keyboard, sometimes it like just freezes up and I can't do it and I'm hopeless on the keyboard. So obviously you've got to weigh that in because they've got to check with your doctor anyway.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

Confidence, self-esteem and personal motivation were significant issues for a number of customers, and this was particularly the case for lone parents on IS (both those customers with a youngest child aged six and under, and those customers whose IS eligibility was due to end). Linked to the issue of confidence, lack of work experience in addition to low levels of skills and qualifications were seen as major barriers across all customers groups in finding work. Customers who had moved from IS to JSA were particularly concerned about their recent lack of work experience and/or the length of time they have been out of the workplace. For lone parents who speak English as a second language, language skills were also seen as a barrier to work.

2.4.3 Concerns about finding and accessing suitable work

In addition to individual attitudinal factors and personal circumstances, many customers also talked about the external constraints they faced in gaining suitable employment. Some significant barriers to lone parent employment relate to the 'buoyancy' of the (local) labour market; the availability of the jobs that match the skills of lone parents, and the policies and practices of employers. It is also important to note that some lone parents felt that they did not have any constraints to working.

The effects of the recession

First, given the economic context in which this phase of the evaluation was conducted, it is unsurprising that lack of available jobs was cited as a major barrier across all customer groups. The reported effects of the recession varied across case study areas:

- In South East Wales a major shopping centre was opening in Cardiff in autumn 2009 with a large department store and over 160 other stores recruiting for staff. Many lone parents we interviewed, who were due to lose their eligibility to IS or who were on JSA, had been referred by Jobcentre Plus to vacancies at the department store. However, there were reported to be few jobs available by customers in other parts of the district, including Newport.
- In Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders staff reported that many of the knitwear mills had been making staff redundant and these had been formerly a good source of flexible jobs for lone parents. Staff felt that there was a lack of jobs in some areas and one commented that *'if the jobs aren't there you can't invent them'*.
- In North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber some staff felt that the recession had resulted in more employers being willing to think about offering part-time work which could be beneficial for lone parent customers looking for work.
- In Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth customers reported that wages for jobs seemed to have got lower and that the same jobs were being advertised by multiple agencies.
- In Birmingham and Solihull staff reported that while there were still jobs out there, fewer lone parents were moving into work than before, in part due to the effect of industries closing locally.

In general, lone parent customers thought that the lack of available work was mainly due to the recession. Customers who were on IS with a youngest child aged six and under, or whose eligibility was due to end, were less likely to have an opinion on what effect the recession had had on job availability in their area as they had not been actively looking for work before the recession. New and repeat JSA customers were the ones most likely to be feeling the effect of the recession on job availability as they had often been working until recently, although some lone parents who had moved from IS onto JSA also had opinions on the impact of the recession now that they were actively seeking work.

Availability of part-time and flexible work

As well as the recession affecting the overall number of job vacancies, concerns were also raised by customers interviewed about a general lack of the types of jobs they were looking for. This echoes research by D'Souza *et al.* (2008) who found that a certain group of lone parents were distinguished by 'job concerns' about the lack of suitable job opportunities and particularly those that match the skills and availability of lone parents. A lack of jobs with suitable hours (generally suitable hours were defined as within school hours by most lone parents) was a significant concern for many customers. This was linked to worries about how family-friendly employers would be in accommodating everyday domestic responsibilities and occasional family emergencies. This concern was particularly strong in those customers who had moved from IS to JSA. Again, this reflects other studies which confirm the ways in which the availability of part-time work and the willingness of employers to offer other sorts of flexible working such as term-time only working can act to limit lone parent employment opportunities. Griffiths and Durkin (2007) for example, reported that a particular strength of Employment Zone for lone parents was their employer links and the ability of advisers to broker family-friendly working arrangements.

Transport constraints

Linked to the fact that most lone parents interviewed expressed a preference for locally-based employment, transport was identified as a constraint for many customers both in terms of transport availability, time spent travelling and the cost of transport. Most of the lone parent customers that were interviewed did not hold a driving licence and/or have access to a car. As such, most lone parents were reliant on public transport to access non-local employment. Transport was seen as a particularly strong constraint for many lone parent customers living in the more rural parts of our case study districts (such as the outlying villages near York in the North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber district, and in the Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders area). Customers talked about the impracticality of public transport on offer in these areas and also cited the cost of public transport as a constraint, particularly in the context of low wages:

'...two and a half hours it takes and you've got to be up there for, like, nine o'clock so you'd have to get the half six bus, sort of thing, and with having the kids it's just not possible...think it's nearly £12 for a return for the day.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

'...you've got to get a good job so that you can cover your week of expenses, you know?...it's £5.40 to go to York, and that's a return, so you've got to be paid over £6 to get your money back for the first hour, haven't you? Otherwise you're doing it for nothing. It's just out of pocket all the time.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

2.5 Summary

- Most of the lone parents that took part in the interviews were female and predominantly white British. The age of the lone parent customers ranged from under 20, to parents in their 50s. Most of customers did not directly identify either themselves or their children as having health problems. However health issues were raised with relative frequency during the interviews.
- The length of time interviewees had been lone parents varied, but many had been lone parents for significant periods of time. Most lone parents that were interviewed lived in rented accommodation and had lived in the local area for reasonable lengths of time. Most reported that they had family and friends living nearby.
- Most interviewees were qualified at Level 2 or below on leaving compulsory education. A number of customers had since engaged in a range of training and studying or had plans to do so. Previous employment tended to be in low status, low wage and low-skilled professions, working on a part-time basis. The most prevalent employment sectors for all customer groups were retail, hospitality, domestic services and factory work.
- Most lone parent customers were not in paid employment at the time of the interview. Those who were working tended to be employed for less than 16 hours a week. A few had moved into work of over 16 hours a week between the time the research team accessed their contact details and the time of interview.
- Key motivating factors for lone parents to gain paid employment included:
 - financial benefits and/or financial independence;
 - personal independence and the social element of work;
 - the opportunity to set a good example to their children.
- The negative aspects of being in work reported were:
 - missing their child(ren) and the difficulty of juggling work and domestic commitments;
 - a general reluctance to use formal childcare;
 - a feeling that they would not be financially better off in work.
- Most of the lone parent customers we interviewed mentioned the same four key life goals for the next few years: to get a paid job or become self-employed; to go to college or to study; or to move home; and do some voluntary work.

- This research indicates that lone parents share many of the constraints experienced by other groups of benefits claimants. These include:
 - external constraints such as the availability of suitable jobs in the labour market. Given the economic context in which this phase of the evaluation was conducted, it is unsurprising that lack of available jobs was cited as a major barrier to work by many customers;
 - personal constraints around how ‘work ready’ individual lone parents felt they were. This included confidence and motivation to work, work experience, education and skills levels, and health-related issues;
 - constraints that were more specific to their circumstances as lone parents; such as their attitudes to combining work and family (including both the availability of childcare and their attitudes to using it).

3 The Income Support regime for lone parents

Income Support (IS) is an income-related benefit which provides financial help for people who meet certain criteria and so do not have to sign-on as unemployed, where their income from all sources is below a minimum level set by Parliament. At the time this research took place lone parents with a youngest child aged under 12, who did not exceed the income level, were eligible for IS. After the roll-out of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) has been completed, lone parents with a youngest child aged six and under and who do not exceed at income level will be eligible for IS. IS is an inactive benefit with few conditions on the customer to remain entitled. There is no underlying requirement for customers to look for or take up work, nor currently to engage in work-related activity to prepare for work as a condition of receipt of IS. However, as a way of engaging with lone parents on benefits, it became a requirement from April 2001 to participate in Lone Parent Work Focused Interviews (LPWFIs) as part of making a claim for IS.

The aim of the LPWFI is to encourage and assist lone parents to address barriers to work and move towards sustainable employment, through accessing a range of support options. Until the year before their IS eligibility is due to end, based on the age of their youngest child, lone parents entitled to IS take part in six-monthly mandatory LPWFIs. These interviews are then conducted quarterly (i.e. every three months). While attendance at LPWFIs is mandatory, interviews can be deferred to a later date at the adviser's discretion, or waived altogether, based on the customers circumstances and if they think this is appropriate. If no contact is made, or contact is made and it is decided that the lone parent does not have good cause for non-attendance at an LPWFI, a sanction is imposed. This sanction is a fixed amount of 20 per cent of the over-25 rate personal allowance (currently £12.86). As soon as a lone parent with a benefit sanction attends an LPWFI, the sanction is removed and their benefit is restored to the previous level.

As a condition of completing an initial LPWFI, lone parents are also required to agree a mandatory action plan with their Personal Adviser (PA). This is to aid the adviser and the lone parent to identify their longer-term work goals and set the

steps they can take, or are going to take, to prepare for work. It is not mandatory, however, for the customer to carry out these actions, and they are not sanctioned if they do not do so. All lone parents at the point of claim, whether for IS or Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) can also move onto New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) on a voluntary basis and see an adviser who, as well as conducting regular LPWFIs with them, can offer an additional package of advice and support.³

This chapter summarises the key findings in relation to staff and customer understanding and experience of the IS regime for lone parents with a youngest child aged six and under. More specifically it covers:

- staff understanding and implementation of the IS regime;
- customer experience of the IS regime;
- attitudes to, and availability of, childcare;
- attitudes to work.

The IS regime for lone parents with a youngest child aged six and under will represent the steady state of lone parents on IS once the roll-out of LPO has completed. Customer interview data is from IS customers with a youngest child aged six and under, as well as from interviews with IS customers whose IS eligibility was due to end because of LPO. Where appropriate, comments from JSA customers who had moved from IS to JSA were also included in the analysis (e.g. retrospective comments capturing their experience of the IS regime). Some of these customers were engaged in NDLP and New Deal Plus for Lone Parents when they were claiming IS, and their experience of this support is also presented here.

³ This may include: advice on job vacancies including a search on the Labour Market System; explaining the benefits available when starting work, for example, Working Tax Credit (WTC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC); performing an in-work benefit calculation and helping to arrange payment of in-work benefits when required; explaining that financial help is available during the transition to work; providing advice on the availability and range of formal childcare services in the local area, including details of where to access further information, for example, through a Sure Start local programme; referral for advice on debt management; arranging work-focused training or mentoring, via New Deal 25 Plus and New Deal 18-24 provision, to enable the lone parent to update their skills, moving them closer to the labour market; arranging to provide funding for the costs of registered childcare, which may be incurred by the lone parent in connection with attendance at an employer or advisory interview or attendance under an approved activity; help with travel costs when attending adviser interviews, job interviews and training programmes; any additional measures being piloted in that area.

3.1 Staff understanding and implementation of the IS regime

3.1.1 Purpose of LPWFIs

Staff interviewed suggested that the LPWFI fulfils a number of purposes above and beyond the work focus.

'It's not just about work focus, even though that's the primary reason for the interview. It's about conditions of entitlement to IS, for us to keep up to date with your circumstances and any problems you've got.'

(Advisory Services Manager (ASM))

Staff gave examples of using the LPWFI to check customers were in receipt of the correct benefits and any additional support they were entitled to (such as free school meals for their children, help with uniforms, Disability Living Allowance if they have a disabled child etc.).

Staff also reported using the LPWFI to tell lone parents about any benefit changes that had taken place, or were approaching, that may affect them including LPO. They also used this as an opportunity to assess their intentions to look for work now or in the future, to tell them about the help available to them should they wish to return to work or full time education, and to provide appropriate support as required.

One member of staff suggested that the title of Work Focused Interview (WFI) could create barriers to building a rapport with customers and felt it did not adequately reflect the other purposes of the interviews including checking customers' benefits.

'I take offence to them getting sent a letter saying we want a WFI because the first thing they think I'm going to do is hit them with a big stick.'

(Lone Parent Adviser (LPA))

3.1.2 Frequency and duration of LPWFIs

Lone parents who claim IS must attend LPWFIs both when they make the initial claim and at intervals during the claim. From April 2008, lone parents who attended WFIs on an annual basis were now required to attend an LPWFI once every six months. For lone parents in their final year of IS eligibility (i.e. their youngest child is nearing the LPO threshold), there is a requirement to attend quarterly LPWFIs.

All staff interviewed had a good awareness of the required frequency of LPWFIs and the mandatory nature of the interviews. Most of the staff we interviewed were supportive of the increase in LPWFI frequency to every six months suggesting this helped keep up the momentum and focus of lone parents on the possibility of work. This allowed staff to follow up on actions agreed, while not being so frequent as to cause lone parents to resent the LPWFI process and disengage.

'Seeing them every six months gives them more regular updates on what's going on and it's another reiteration of the in-work benefits that they could get, what sort of training opportunities there are...I think it's probably yielded more results than just keeping it on an annual basis. There's so much more out there that they need to know about. Coming in more regularly does work and does help.'

(LPA)

Staff also highlighted that the six-monthly LPWFIs are the mandatory minimum but that lone parents were welcome to request additional voluntary interviews at other times should they like to discuss any issues with their LPA, or join the NDLP caseload in order to gain access to more intensive work-focused support. Another member of staff suggested that while six-monthly LPWFIs were probably appropriate for most people, it could be beneficial to follow up the new claim LPWFI before six months in some instances.

'Depending on the circumstances at the new claim stage, sometimes people can be very upset...it's a pretty traumatic situation...sometimes people don't take in very much at that point and six months is a long time...'

(ASM)

In some offices, advisers reported they followed up new claim LPWFIs eight to 12 weeks later where they felt it would be beneficial and the lone parent customer was in agreement.

Only a small number of staff interviewed wanted to see an increase in the frequency of mandatory LPWFIs for all lone parents rather than just those in their final year of IS eligibility. These staff felt that a further increase in LPWFI frequency could be beneficial in breaking down barriers to work and suggested that six-month gaps between interviews were too long to build a momentum.

'I would probably make everybody three months. You get positives coming out of the lone parents at their appointments and if you review that every three, it might encourage more lone parents to get back to work...a lot of them might think about things more.'

(LPA)

These perspectives on the optimum frequency of mandatory LPWFIs reflect previous research in this area. Thomas (2007) found that while most considered 12 months a reasonable interval before review for existing claimants, increased frequency was appropriate for new and repeat IS customers, those reaching the end of their IS eligibility and there may also be a need to vary LPWFI timing in response to key trigger points in lone parents' lives (such as children starting school).

It is also worth remembering that the frequency of mandatory LPWFIs does not solely have an effect on customers, but also affects the capacity of Jobcentre Plus staff to undertake all responsibilities of their roles. One ASM stressed the importance of taking into consideration the *'implications on our resource because we're seeing them more often'*.

Each LPWFI is scheduled to last 40 minutes. Most of the staff interviewed felt that the optimum length of an LPWFI varied depending on the needs of the customer, but that 40 minutes was an appropriate average. It was suggested that where a customer had no intention of looking for work, or the adviser had met with them several times so knew their situation, an LPWFI could be completed within 20 to 30 minutes. However, examples were given of circumstances where LPWFIs took longer than 40 minutes to complete, such as when a customer was struggling to understand the information being provided, potentially due to a language barrier, or because they wanted to discuss other issues.

One ASM suggested that while LPWFIs could be completed within 40 minutes, there was often a need for administrative support for the associated paperwork. Additional Diary Administrative Support Officers had recently been recruited to perform this support role in the office in which this ASM was based which was reported to have been helpful.

A small number of staff felt that scheduling LPWFIs to last 30 minutes each would be a more appropriate average.

'I think 40 minutes can be too long and if they do require any further help, that's when you would change them over and put them on New Deal.'

(LPA)

3.1.3 Content of LPWFIs

One of the aims of the research was to explore staff views on any effects of the increased frequency of LPWFIs and knowledge of LPO on the content and focus of LPWFIs with lone parents with children aged six and under. A number of staff suggested that the combination of both of these changes was having an impact on the content of the LPWFI. For example, one ASM commented:

'The advisers are now trying to make the interviews more work focused. It's not all about saying to them that they have to take up work...[but] it's about helping them use the time that they have to upskill and use the time that, perhaps while the children are at nursery, to do a course or a bit of studying or whatever.'

(ASM)

Most of the staff interviewed reported discussing LPO and its implications with customers at interviews. Many appeared to be using this as a motivator to increase the number of customers considering either work or their training needs prior to entering or re-entering the workforce. The quotes below illustrate:

'I tell them a year or two years beforehand, to give them that motivation they need to take advantage of services like Lone Parent Options to get qualifications.'

(LPA)

'If the parent is being very resistant [to the option of work or training] I'll pull out the big guns and say, "look, this is what's going to happen"...they come in and they see people's names being called and asked about looking for work...they don't like that...I'll go, "that will be you"...they will say "Oh, no, I don't want to do that, I really don't want to do that", well, let's start looking for work.'

(LPA)

There were some staff however, who believed that the content of LPWFIs had not changed as a result of their increased frequency and LPO. These staff argued that the content of LPWFIs was more dependent on the needs of the customer being interviewed and the level of familiarity with them and their circumstances, rather than the frequency of the interviews or LPO.

'Everyone's different...you get customers that are all at different stages...the content is very much judged by the person that you're seeing.'

(LPA)

Regardless of whether staff felt LPWFI content was or was not affected by their frequency or LPO, all agreed there was a need to tailor the content of LPWFIs to suit individual customers' circumstances and needs. Examples of this included lone parents who had been unemployed for a long time needing motivation and reassurance about their ability to work, and lone parents who were keen to work, but needed help with job searches and training information.

3.1.4 Deferrals and waivers

Jobcentre Plus offices are performance managed based on their ability to carry out specified labour market interventions, including IS LPWFIs, within a specified time frame. The Interventions Delivery Target (IDT), one of the six key Jobcentre Plus targets, states that 83 per cent of IS LPWFIs should be conducted within three months of them becoming due.

When lone parent customers are due to attend an LPWFI they are sent a letter informing them of this, stating the date and time of their appointment and providing a number to call should they be unable to attend the appointment. While attendance at LPWFIs is mandatory, advisers have discretion for an interview to be deferred (put off to a later date) or waived (cancelled altogether) depending on the customer's circumstances and what they feel is appropriate.

Staff interviewed suggested one of the key reasons for deferral is if a customer has to attend a doctors or hospital appointment. When an interview is deferred, a new date is set and the customer notified. Childcare was not generally accepted as a reason why customers cannot attend an LPWFI as Jobcentre Plus can help to fund childcare so that customers can attend interviews, as one LPA explained:

'We've got close links with the local authorities with regards to what childminders and childcare options are out there so we can always try and stop this barrier appearing really.'

(LPA)

There was also the option of waiving an interview if a customer has a serious problem or issue, for example, if the lone parent has an underlying Incapacity Benefit entitlement, their child is very ill and currently requiring constant care, they are pregnant and nearing their due date, and so on. In such a situation an interview can be waived, however this appears to be a rare occurrence:

'I haven't had any incidences in the last 16 months of having to completely put an interview off altogether.'

(LPA)

The guidance to Jobcentre Plus staff states that LPWFIs should be conducted face-to-face. However, in exceptional circumstances, the staff interviewed for this research noted that occasionally they undertake LPWFIs over the phone.

'There has been probably two or three occasions in the last 16 months that somebody has failed and failed and failed to come in to see me...[so] I have actually done it over the phone to hit my [Intentions Delivery] target but I've still made an appointment the next week for them to come in to run over the things again.'

(LPA)

Another LPA indicated that their office has conducted a small number of LPWFIs over the phone where the health or mobility of the customer has been an issue. Some offices also had an outreach worker who could conduct LPWFIs in the homes of customers. An LPA in one district suggested they use their outreach worker to conduct home visits when requested by lone parents with disabilities. An ASM in another district suggested they use home visit LPWFIs more generally to ensure they meet their IDT target.

3.1.5 Failing to attend

If lone parents do not come into the jobcentre for their LPWFIs on the appointed date and time, and have not been in touch in advance to request a deferral, waiver or home visit, this is classed as a Failure to Attend (FTA). Staff suggested that the reasons customers FTA were many and varied. Examples given included:

- genuinely forgetting about their appointment (particularly those with chaotic lifestyles);
- looking after a child who is ill or has behavioural problems;
- being ill themselves;
- family crises;

- being at work in a job they have not disclosed to Jobcentre Plus;
- difficulty in attending appointments at certain times of the day due to public transport difficulties;
- choosing not to attend in the belief that if they do not come in there will be no consequences;
- choosing not to attend because they are disengaged and either resistant to or unmotivated about taking part in Jobcentre Plus interviews.

Some staff believed that customers who fail to attend LPWFIs usually do so for genuine reasons and do try to attend where possible.

'They always try to come in. They'll phone, change the appointment time and they do come in.'

(LPA)

Others believed, however, that many customers were resistant to coming into a jobcentre for an interview and so either do not turn up or make excuses for failing to attend.

'Some people just never come into Jobcentre Plus...they see the sign and won't cross the door...these people are stagnated, they've never known work as an option.'

(LPA)

Lone parents who fail to attend an LPWFI, and cannot/do not show good cause for doing so, may have a sanction applied to their IS. Despite this, many staff suggested they still had high fail to attend rates amongst their customers.

'I generally do about 40 lone parent interviews a month, but to get 40 through in that time, I was booking roughly 70 interviews.'

(LPA)

There were, however, a number of steps Jobcentre Plus staff took to reduce FTA rates. In addition to the appointment letter, staff often contacted lone parents again shortly before their LPWFI to remind them of the appointment. The LPA quoted above went on to explain that in order to reduce the fail to attend rate being experienced in their office, they pre-called customers the day before their interview to remind them of their appointment and the need to attend. They said that the office now has approximately five customers that fail to attend a month, which is a substantial reduction. The success of such a system did seem to vary from office to office however. For example:

'There is a high FTA rate...even though we try to phone our customers the night before.'

(LPA)

If a lone parent still fails to attend their LPWFI, there were a number of steps advisers would take to try to contact a customer to find out the reason for their non-attendance and ascertain if it is for good cause. If the customer was not contactable by phone they would send out a letter advising them that they had failed to attend an interview, and asking them to contact the jobcentre within five days to rearrange. If there was no response to the first letter, a second would be sent and time given for the customer to respond before a sanction is considered. Staff felt that this process was fair and allowed *'customers as much time and help as we can'* (LPA).

3.1.6 Sanctions

If no contact is made, or contact is made and it is decided that the lone parent does not have good cause for non-attendance at an LPWFI, a sanction is imposed. This sanction is a fixed amount of 20 per cent of the over-25 rate personal allowance (currently £12.86). As soon as a lone parent with a benefit sanction attends an LPWFI the sanction is removed and their benefit is restored to the previous level.

There were mixed views from staff on the effectiveness of the threat of sanction as a means of encouraging customers to comply with the requirements of IS. Some staff suggested that sanctions do not always act as an effective deterrent to non-attendance because they felt customers do not always understand or accept the consequences this will have.

'...they just think nothing's going to happen. They just think that I'll move on to the next customer or I'll forget about it until it comes round again, because they're still not used to the idea that we can stop the money if they don't turn up.'

(LPA)

Other staff, however, perceived that the threat of sanction encouraged customers to attend their LPWFIs.

'If they can't make it they're ringing now to say that they can't. They understand that failure to attend their interviews affects their benefit.'

(LPA)

There were also mixed views on the effectiveness of applying sanctions as a means of encouraging customers to re-engage with the LPWFI process. Some staff felt that while the threat of sanction was not always sufficient to ensure attendance, the actual application of a sanction was.

'When they get the sanction on, that tends to bring them back through the door.'

(LPA)

However, some staff suggested that customers do not always realise that they have been sanctioned.

'Most of the clients that I deal with have social fund loans outstanding, electricity, water and sewerage coming from their benefit. I would say that 50 per cent of my clients who are on sanctions have no idea of a sanction. So this client doesn't turn up, you write to them, then write again, then sanction the benefit. Unfortunately, quite sadly, a lot of my clients that get a letter from me, they open it and if there's not a giro cheque in it, it goes in the bin.'

(LPA)

Obviously, where this is the case, the purpose of the sanction to encourage re-engagement cannot be realised.

3.1.7 Staff views on customer engagement with the LPWFI and action-planning process

Many staff suggested that the effectiveness of LPWFIs and the support available for encouraging customers to enter employment is largely dependent on the mindset and background of the customer. It was felt that if a customer had been on benefit for a long period or had never worked, had limited skills and qualifications, or been brought up in a family where no-one worked, they would be less likely to engage with the LPWFI process and look for work. However, staff described other customers that had been in work and who did not want to be on benefit. They would engage with the process and support available through Jobcentre Plus in order to move back into work as quickly as possible, as this quote illustrates:

'In my opinion there are three types of lone parent clients. About 50 per cent of the clients I see have no intention whatsoever of looking for work. They come from disadvantaged backgrounds and fourth or fifth generation benefit families. 25 per cent I see are maybe from disadvantaged backgrounds but can be persuaded that this doesn't have to be a way of life. And about 25 per cent of clients I see are on income support for the right reasons; basically there's been a disturbance in their life, maybe a breakup, and they're on income support using it as a raft and once their circumstances are settled again and they've got back on their feet they go back into the world of work.'

(LPA)

Building a rapport with customers was seen by staff as being an essential part of gaining a customer's trust and commitment, especially in breaking down barriers and getting them to engage with voluntary provision and potentially moving onto NDLP.

'I know the LPWFI side of it is something that they have to do...but there's the voluntary side of it too. When you build a rapport with a person, they want to come back.'

(LPA)

A small number of staff commented, however, that it could be difficult to accurately assess the level of engagement of customers as they can sometimes *'just give lip service'* (ASM) and *'tell [LPAs] what they want to hear'* (LPA).

In interviews with staff based in rural Jobcentre Plus offices, staff suggested that customer engagement was affected by the limited provision available locally and the reluctance of many customers to travel to access provision in other areas.

'My problem out here is that it's a very small town so we don't have any jobcentre provision here. We have a resource centre that the local town council have set up, but we're very much out on a limb. All the provision that we get is in Area [X] because it's so much bigger and anything that they want to take up is a bus journey away...they've always lived, worked...done everything in the same small town and getting them to venture outside that for anything is very hard.'

(LPA)

During LPWFIs, customers and advisers are supposed to work together to develop an action plan which is updated each LPWFI. While development of action plans is mandatory, customer engagement with them is voluntary; there were mixed responses from staff about how engaged customers were in the action-planning process.

Only a small number of staff interviewed felt that customers engaged with the process. The approach these staff took to engage customers and understand their needs appeared key to this and supports the staff comments on the importance of building a rapport.

'All of my customers, without exception so far, have been quite happy to participate in an LPWFI and that includes helping me complete the action plan. It's very much tailored to the individual customer's needs.'

(LPA)

Other advisers felt that lone parents were not very engaged in the action planning process.

'They see it as a jobcentre tool...they don't see it as a personal action plan that they're involved in.'

(LPA)

Most staff, however, felt that the level of engagement was dependent on individual customer circumstances and attitudes. There was a suggestion that new claims customers and customers interested in up-skilling or looking for work were easier to engage in the action planning process than long-term claimants. Such perspectives on the varying support needs of different types of lone parent customers under IS may have additional implications for their transition to JSA.

When asked about how many customers actually complete the activities outlined in their action plan, again staff responses varied. Some staff indicated that most of their customers undertook the activities agreed in their action plan. However,

one LPA suggested that customers who had English as their second language were less likely to complete their action plan activities. This potentially suggests a need for additional support for clients for whom English is their second language, both under the IS regime and potentially under JSA where levels of conditionality are greater.

'The majority to be fair. The only ones that don't are the people that have English as their second language.'

(LPA)

However, staff indicated that they felt some customers just paid 'lip service' to the plans in order to placate their advisers.

'...you do get a few that just say the right things at their interviews and then they just don't bother doing it.'

(LPA)

Other staff interviewed suggested that some of their lone parent customers know that completing the activities in their action plans is voluntary and therefore choose not to engage with them.

'Some people will outright say, 'I don't have to do anything on income support other than come here and I'm not prepared to do it.'

(LPA)

'The ones that are kind of panicked into it are the older ones because they know when their income support is going to stop. The under sixes [IS customers with a youngest child aged six and under] know that if they've got a two year old, that they've got at least four years left and so I can't make them do anything.'

(LPA)

3.1.8 Differences in attitude to work between customer groups

There was a general consensus amongst staff that lone parent customers with younger children tend to be more open-minded and receptive to the idea of work. They would be likely to have some work history and to want to work in the future, whereas lone parents on IS with older children were more likely to have been on benefit for a longer period of time. They would also be more likely to have a poorer work history and so find the idea of entering or returning to work more daunting. In some respects, this view reflects the findings of Chapter 2, which emphasised a number of factors effect the 'work-readiness' of customers whose IS eligibility is ending, or have recently moved from IS to JSA. These included issues relating to confidence and motivation, a relatively high incidence of health problems in comparison to other customer groups and perceived constraints around their lack of previous work experience.

'I think the younger age groups seem to be more receptive. I think those with the older children they, by and large, tend to become more receptive right towards the end, as we're going through the obligation process. It's those that have been on income support for a long, long time, it's ingrained in their psyche...they cannot see they're going to be better off.'

(LPA)

'The people with the younger children, you normally find that they're newly unemployed or they have been working but had a child and have decided to give up work...they have a work mentality in them and so are more likely to either look for work or retrain for something else while they've got the opportunity. It's the long termers that are...It's in their mindset to be on benefits.'

(LPA)

While lone parents with younger children were perceived by staff to be more receptive to entering or returning to work, staff reported that most such customers still want to wait until their child was at least of school age before working.

'I would say 95 per cent of the customers I see will say, "I've got a two year old, I can't work; I've got a four year old, I can't work." Once they get to school age, they seem a little bit more ready to listen to what I've got to say.'

(LPA)

This reflects the findings in Chapter 2 which confirms many lone parents, and in particular lone parents with younger children, see themselves as carers by choice and were resistant to work. Only a few staff felt that there were no differences towards work orientation between lone parents with children of different ages.

3.2 Customer understanding and experience of the IS regime

3.2.1 Customer understanding of the LPWFI process as part of conditionality

When customers were asked about their understanding of the IS regime for lone parents, the requirement to attend regular LPWFIs was the most commonly cited element of IS conditionality by all those interviewed. Most IS customers understand that they must attend these interviews as part of IS conditionality, i.e. in order to continue to receive their full benefit. Indeed, as previous research suggests, many customers see LPWFIs as a routine part of making a claim (Thomas, 2007). A large number of customers were clear that if they fail to attend these appointments their benefits may be reduced.

However, there were a mixture of customers who explicitly identified conditionality requirements during the interviews. Some of the customers, who either did not mention this element of conditionality or were unaware of the possibility of being sanctioned, had not previously been sanctioned (see Section 3.2.6 for more on customers and sanctions). Overall, levels of understanding of IS conditionality amongst IS customers with a youngest child aged six and under appeared greater than in those IS customers whose eligibility was due to end. Given the increased conditionality required under the JSA regime, this may be suggestive of the need for more support to raise awareness of the requirements customers transitioning from IS to JSA must fulfil to remain eligible for benefits.

3.2.2 Customer views on the timing and frequency of LPWFIs

Most IS customers were aware of the frequency of LPWFIs that they were required to attend. Most IS customers (both those customers with a youngest child aged six and under and those customers whose IS eligibility was due to end) were of the opinion that six-monthly was the optimum frequency for LPWFIs. A number of IS customers commented that if they became more frequent, the content would become overly repetitive:

'...if you had them too frequent, you just wouldn't go, you would get fed up at seeing the same thing. You can't find work if there's no work out there to find basically.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

'...is just about right, really, because it sort of like gives you time to think about things really, and what you want to do, and then it's sort of like a bit of a reminder, as well, after like a few months.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

For customers whose LPWFI frequency had increased (i.e. those customers approaching the end of their IS eligibility), most felt the content had indeed become repetitive. As one customer said:

'It made sense every six months, and then when they, they increased it, you know, you felt like you were consistently saying the same thing over and over again.'

(Customer whose IS eligibility was due to end; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

However, although most of the interviewees suggested six-monthly as the ideal frequency, a small number of customers suggested that the frequency of LPWFIs should be at the discretion of the adviser, depending on the needs and situation of the individual customer. For example, one customer suggested that lone parent customers who do not appear interested in looking for work should have a

mandatory LPWFI more often than those who were trying to find employment or have a genuine reason for not being able to work.

'I think it all depends on the circumstances, on who the person is and whether the person doing the interview can tell that's just somebody who wants to sit around or do they actually have a genuine problem. If they have a genuine problem then yes I think they should keep it at regular intervals, like every three months. Whereas for the other ones, I think they should be more often.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; South East Wales)

Others felt that more regular appointments were needed when customers required further guidance, either around work or training.

'...if I was any less sure of what I was doing, if I, wasn't in college, for instance, I'd want to go more often.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

3.2.3 Customer experience of attending LPWFIs

All IS customers interviewed stated that they managed to attend their LPWFI appointments, with only a few customers reporting that they have had to rearrange appointments on occasion. Customers who have rearranged appointments claimed that this was for a genuine reason, such as the LPWFI clashing with a hospital appointment or due to illness. Most of the customers we spoke to lived relatively locally to a jobcentre and so felt transport was reasonably straightforward. For many, getting to the jobcentre involved a short walk or a short bus ride. Most IS customers were aware that if they were unable to attend their allotted appointment time, they needed to call their Jobcentre Plus and rearrange the interview. A small number of IS customers interviewed described instances where they had needed to rearrange appointments and generally stressed how flexible and accommodating advisers were in this respect:

'I've always kept like the first date that they've sent me...unless like I had a doctor's appointment, then...I ring up and change. But I've not had any problems with them.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

One customer, however, suggested that some advisers were less flexible than others:

'I'm lucky that my adviser that I have is quite flexible basically, but there have been times when I've had somebody else and they weren't as flexible. So it all depends on who you've got as your adviser.'

(Customer whose IS eligibility was due to end; Birmingham and Solihull)

A few customers disliked the experience of attending appointments. One customer felt that by having to attend appointments, they were being monitored and found this *'really, really stressful'* (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth). Another customer found the experience of going into the jobcentre very uncomfortable to the extent that they had experienced panic attacks on occasion (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; South East Wales). A couple of customers also commented that they found it difficult to attend due to childcare-related issues.⁴ As one customer commented:

'The offices aren't exactly child friendly. He has to sit around being quiet for a long period and they don't like it.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

When asked about the content of their LPWFIs, customers generally reported discussing the following issues with their LPA:

- income;
- whether there has been a change in their situation over the past six months;
- job searching;
- Better Off Calculations (BOCs);
- support available to them if they choose to go back to work.

Some IS customers with a youngest child aged six and under also appeared to have taken up training offers. For example, one talked positively about a confidence building course she had attended (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders). Another had worked on their CV during a session at the jobcentre (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders). One had some training around self-employment (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber).

Findings suggest that in many cases, LPWFIs do not last the forty minutes allocated. Our interviews with lone parent IS customers showed that the length of appointments varied from around 20 minutes to a full hour. There was also evidence to suggest that the level and quality of support offered by different advisers can vary considerably.

⁴ It is important to note that, as stressed in Section 3.2, childcare is not generally accepted as a reason for non-attendance at an LPWFI.

3.2.4 Customer views on the usefulness of LPWFIs

IS customers were asked for their views on how useful they found LPWFIs. On this subject, responses were varied. On the positive side, a number of lone parent IS customers found these interviews useful, and this was for a number of reasons.

First, reflecting the LPWFI official focus on work-search, one customer found the appointments useful as a reminder every so often that the customer's aim is to look for work (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber). Others reported finding it useful as it kept them up to date with the latest job and educational opportunities available. One customer commented that she found the BOC reassuring and that they motivated her to find work; *'It makes you ken [know] that you're going to be fine'* (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders).

Secondly, many customers found LPWFIs useful because they helped to keep them up-to-date with the current benefit offers and any support they might be able to access should their circumstances change in the future. For example, one customer commented that they sometimes found it difficult to understand the letters they received about benefit changes. She said it was useful to go into the jobcentre so that the advisers could explain things and help her to understand.

Thirdly, in addition to work and benefit-related advice, other customers commented that LPWFIs were useful because of the wide range of more personal support and guidance offered by their adviser. This was particularly the case for customers who regularly saw the same LPA.

The customers interviewed who were engaged in the NDLP programme were extremely positive about the package of additional support on offer. NDLP customers mentioned the opportunity to undertake work trials and confidence building courses, and the increased contact time available with advisers, as particularly valuable. One customer had been given help to start up their own business. This included training, support in developing a business plan and more importantly, confidence building (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber). Another adviser had helped a customer obtain funding towards childcare and a bike they could use to travel to work (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber).

However, a number of customers also mentioned a range of negative aspects of attending LPWFI appointments. For example, a number of customers found LPWFIs overly repetitive. Many commented that they seemed to be asked the same questions every time and that often their circumstances had not changed since the last appointment. Typical customer responses were: *'she just goes over your options, same thing every time basically'* (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders).

A small number of customers described the appointments as a waste of time. They commented that when they were just asked if they were looking for work, the interviews only lasted five to ten minutes. They said *'the whole process seems a bit pointless and it's obviously wasting my time and theirs'* (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber). Another customer found the experience time-consuming as they had to walk into town to attend appointments.

Other customers, however, commented that while they did not find the appointments useful at the moment, they may do once they were in a position to look for a job and return to work because of the advice that the adviser could provide.

3.2.5 Customer understanding of IS sanctions

As reported earlier, failure to attend an LPWFI without demonstrating good cause can result in a sanction being applied (20 per cent cut in benefit). Interviews with lone parents in the IS regime suggest that most customers found out about sanctions through their LPA, and that awareness was high amongst many of the lone parents we spoke to. Indeed, most of the lone parent IS customers interviewed (both those IS customers with a youngest child aged six and under and those customers whose IS eligibility was due to end) appeared to be aware of the requirements of the IS regime and the consequences of not adhering to these, i.e. a potential loss of benefit through sanctions. Crucially, the prevention of sanctioning was most commonly cited as the main reason why customers felt it was important to attend appointments at the jobcentre. Comments such as *'you've got to or it affects your benefit'* (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders) and *'I think you can get your benefit cut if you don't attend'* (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders) were fairly typical of customers' responses. Only one customer interviewed commented that they did not think anything would happen if they did not attend their interviews (although as Section 3.2.6 outlines, lack of awareness may be more extensive than this suggests).

Few customers who were interviewed expressed an opinion on the role and use of sanctions as part of IS conditionality. Of those customers who did voice an opinion, views were split between those against and those accepting of the use of sanctions. A couple of customers saw sanctions as a reasonable element of conditionality. However, a small number of other customers objected to the use of sanctions against lone parents. In particular, these customers felt that there were usually genuine reasons for not attending LPWFI appointments. For example, one customer expressed their feelings about the mandatory interview and their awareness that if they do not attend, their benefit may be reduced:

'That's quite hard. It's almost I get bullied into it, kind of thing, because, you know, if you don't go, you're going to lose money. You don't want to go because you know you're not going to work but you can't...'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Birmingham and Solihull)

3.2.6 Customer experiences of sanctions

A small number of the customers interviewed reported that they had been subject to a benefit sanction under the IS regime. These customers generally reported that they had missed their LPWFI due to medical appointments, either their own or for their children, or that they had simply forgotten about the appointment at the jobcentre.

Interviews with two other customers suggested that they had been potentially sanctioned but they were uncertain about whether sanctions had actually been imposed. One customer recalled having missed one appointment, and when probed further about a possible reduction in benefit payment as a result, replied *'there's a good possibility that it did. Actually I think it might have'* (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber). The customer was unaware how long this reduction had lasted but as far as she was aware, her benefits had now been reinstated. Another customer reported that although they had missed appointments, they believed that their benefits had not been affected. On occasion, however, they stated that IS had not been paid but the customer believed this was not connected to missing LPWFIs (customer whose IS eligibility is due to end; Birmingham and Solihull).

The above cases closely reflect previous research around lone parent benefit sanctions which emphasised poor awareness of benefit sanctions amongst some IS customers (Goodwin, 2008). In particular, the research found that some lone parents reported being unaware of a sanction until they noticed a reduced payment and that others, who had a benefit sanction in place, appeared to be unaware of their reduced rate of benefit.

In addition to the experience of sanctions reported above, two other customers stated that their benefits had been stopped, which suggests that their IS claim had been disallowed (through not attending an LPWFI). In one of these cases the customer had been abroad for a number of weeks and appeared to be unaware that this would have an impact on their benefit entitlement. In the other case the customer recalled losing benefit when she forgot to contact the jobcentre to inform them that she would not be attending her LPWFI because she was in hospital having her baby. As a result, the customer believed that all her benefits were stopped, which she described as being sanctioned. The customer went on to state that when she came out of hospital she was able to have benefit reinstated although only her Housing Benefit was backdated. The customer commented that she found the decision to sanction her unfair given the circumstances. She also reported that it took some time for her benefits to be reinstated and she had to borrow money during the interim period.

'I was in hospital because my waters went a month early...I was in hospital for a month and they stopped all my money, all my housing benefits...When I came home, when I'd had her, they said I should have let them know that I was in hospital. I was like it's not the thing you think of, phoning the jobcentre up, when something like that happens...[my daughter] was born a month early and she was having to go into special care. With things like that, you don't think about contacting the jobcentre. I was quite angry... I didn't even get my money backdated.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

3.2.7 Customer views on Jobcentre Plus staff

Most of the customers we spoke to found their LPAs to be helpful and approachable, and felt that the advisers listened to what they have to say. For example, one customer found their adviser to be very helpful in providing information about where to go to college, how to address a language problem and how to look for job vacancies (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Birmingham and Solihull). Another customer said:

'The guy said I could always...if I wanted to go in and talk to him...all I needed to do was just ring him up and make an appointment to go and see him. He is really helpful, so I have, I have been in and made an appointment, and he was, like I say, he was looking for things for me that had come up through the jobcentre.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

Most of the customers we spoke to saw the same adviser each time they attended an appointment. Indeed a key message from the interviews was that customers much prefer having a designated adviser. This allowed them to build up a relationship with that person; they felt at ease knowing who they would see at each appointment and, because the adviser got to know their situation very quickly, they did not have to explain it each time they went to the jobcentre. The support offered, therefore, was more consistent. A number of customers expressed the view that they had built up a good relationship with their adviser and felt comfortable going to them with a problem. Conversely, the small number of customers who reported seeing a different adviser each time they attended an LPWFI found this frustrating.

Overall, only a small number of customers commented on having mixed experiences of LPAs. For example, one customer commented that although the first adviser they saw was 'really nice' and helped explain things to them, the second adviser 'seems to be too busy to talk...and in a hurry to end the appointment' (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; South East Wales). A few also reported feeling pressured into finding work, and in particular being pressured to apply for unsuitable jobs. One customer described how the jobcentre kept calling her about unsuitable jobs:

'Oh, we've got jobs [at] Area [X], that's 45 minutes for you' and I'm like, 'and who is paying the bus expense', because I'm struggling with the money I'm getting, let alone one paying the bus expense...they are just pushing, pushing, pushing.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

In comparison, customers generally expressed more mixed or negative views on Jobcentre Plus staff as a whole. Other Jobcentre Plus staff were not generally seen to be as helpful as LPAs and, in particular, were seen to provide a less holistic approach to the support they are prepared to offer. As one customer commented *'They're alright when you're only in to see about jobs...but...[not] if you're needing help or anything...'* (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders). Another customer said that they felt jobcentre staff looked *'down on you'* for claiming benefit (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders).

3.2.8 Customer views on moving from benefits into work

In financial terms, many IS customers viewed a future move from benefits into work as a positive one. Indeed a number of customers said that they were looking forward to moving off IS, the key reason being the financial constraint of living on benefits:

'I've never really had to depend on being on the social, with working, kind of, and it's quite hard to go from being on a wage to living on what they give you...I do find it a struggle, [especially] having three bairns (children).'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

For most of the lone parents on IS that we interviewed, income in the previous year had been stable, with the main source being benefits. A few had worked in the past year but most had been on IS continuously. In general the interviewees did not receive income from child maintenance payments and most had no savings.

Some lone parents found receiving their benefits in several different instalments difficult to manage, while those who had previously worked found the drop in income hard. Some highlighted the increase in prices for food and energy and the negative effect this had on them. Some lone parents described how they paid their bills as soon as their money came in and ensured that they did not buy anything they could not afford so as to manage financially on benefits. Some worried about money a lot and most had had help from friends and family in an emergency with money being given for food, clothes for children, and in one case, to buy a washing machine when their last one broke down.

Many of the lone parents on IS we interviewed were also in debt. The types of debt varied and were often multiple (including credit cards, rent arrears, student loans, debts on utility bills, loans through private finance companies, catalogue debt,

and crisis loans). Most felt that they were managing their debt and said that they were making regular payments, whereas a small number found their debt levels stressful and some had used the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) as a source of help to manage complex debt. In a few cases debt had led to relationship breakdown and in one case a lone parent had gone bankrupt. One lone parent had £9,000 debt in total, which was debt left from previous relationships including a County Court Judgement (CCJ) and a crisis loan for £400 used to get a car back on the road. They felt their debt had 'spiralled out of control' and they had talked to the CAB to get help to sort out the CCJ. This fear of debt had an effect on their attitude to work:

'Um, it is making me want to work. Um, just so that I can pay it off a lot quicker. Um, but at the same time I'm scared that from the transition of, you know, from benefits to wages, and all the rest of it, I'd be scared that I wouldn't have the money to pay, you know, by the deadline dates.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

As explored in Chapter 2, other customers were looking forward to moving off IS because of the sense of stigma attached to being benefit-dependent. One customer commented:

'I was absolutely traumatised, absolutely traumatised. It has really knocked my confidence because I'm self-sufficient and I was looking after myself and my family.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

These types of more positive work orientations appeared less prevalent in customers who had either worked in part-time employment (or mini-jobs), or those who had been on benefits for a number of years. Many long-term IS customers were reluctant to move off benefits and into work, finding being on benefits a more stable or 'safe' situation than relying on paid employment. For example:

'I always have been unsure about moving from benefits to work because... it's a bit of a comfort blanket, once you're in the kind of the benefits trap. You can find yourself going out to work for 30 or 40 hours and never seeing your child and bringing home less money than you would get before.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

Some customers also focused on the comparative stability of claiming benefits as opposed to engaging in temporary or short-term working. As one customer commented:

'It kind of puts me off doing temporary work, because...it just seems a lot more hassle than what it's worth, because by the time you get all your wages and you hand in your pay slips and all the rest of it, you end up with no money for a certain amount of time and then if you're going back to IS, or whatever...you have to...So it's the sort of transition between the two? Yeah, it's the transition.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

Some customers either perceived, or had direct experience of, the process of benefit re-engagement being complex and time consuming. This view affected their work-orientation.

3.3 Childcare for children aged under seven

The availability of good quality, affordable childcare has typically been construed as a cornerstone of a welfare system that would make work possible for lone parents. Reviews of the effectiveness of active labour market interventions in increasing the rate of lone parents' employment have typically indicated that provision of childcare is a vital part of these programmes (Harker, 2006; Freud, 2007). It is important to note that childcare is devolved in Scotland and Wales and so childcare provision by government is different across the nations which affects the availability of childcare for lone parents. However, analysis of the interviewees undertaken for this research did not show any key differences in the responses between staff and customers in England, Wales and Scotland.

The Childcare Act 2006 included duties, for the first time, on local authorities in England and Wales to secure sufficient childcare to meet the needs of working parents (Scotland, which is not covered by this legislation, and Wales have their own childcare strategies). It is the role of Jobcentre Plus to feed back customers' preferences to the relevant local authority in order to ensure that this provision is secured and that any gaps are recognised. Systems that have been implemented in Jobcentre Plus, for example, with the introduction of the Childcare Partnership Manager (CPM) role, aim to communicate childcare-related barriers to the local authority. However, some gaps in provision and the availability of different types of support were perceived to persist, and may have a detrimental effect on lone parents' feelings about being able to seek and retain work. This section will discuss these issues, focusing on the views of staff and of lone parent customers under the IS regime, whose youngest child(ren) are aged six and under.

3.3.1 Staff views on gaps and constraints in childcare provision

In discussing gaps in childcare provision, staff across all areas noted a significant lack of places for disabled children, especially those with learning disabilities and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. Mention was also made of parents' own perceptions as to the willingness of childminders to take on disabled children with these disabilities, as the following quote illustrates:

'We have had one gap, it was for parents with children with disabilities; and that's something that we have actually flagged up to the policy team as well... it is something that we are concerned about, so parents with children with autism, special needs...it is something that needs to be looked at due to the lack of provision.'

(CPM)

This gap has been noted in other research, such as in the Families and Children Study (Philo *et al.*, 2008), and was also recorded in customers' experiences, as detailed further below.

The high cost of childcare for children aged six and under was seen as potentially preventing the uptake of childcare. This was particularly observed in two of the case study areas; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth; and Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders. As one PA commented:

'The biggest hurdle is affording it on a low salary, even though, Working Tax Credit is there to help you. A child under three, it's £40 a day. A child over three, for nursery, it's £30 a day. It's an awful lot of money. So, quite frankly, if those people that are on income support at the moment, until their child is seven, I expressly say, well, if you want to go back to work, that's fine, but you must look for childcare and a price for it and then we'll do a calculation to see if you'd be better off.'

(PA)

This comment comes in the policy context of providing help with the affordability of childcare, particularly for those on low incomes. This includes encouraging employer-provided childcare, for example, through the use of childcare vouchers to help with the cost that can be redeemed by approved childcare providers. These vouchers can be given in return for a salary sacrifice, i.e. a reduction in the amount of pay received (Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), WTC5, 2009). Other support includes CTC, a means-tested annual amount paid directly to parents, and the childcare element of WTC, which parents can apply for if they are using registered childcare (so excluding informal help from family/friends). As part of the latter, the maximum amount that families can claim for the childcare of one child is £175 a week and £300 a week for childcare of two or more children, with 80 per cent of eligible costs covered (HMRC, WTC2, 2009).

Some staff stated that the problem of costly childcare could be balanced out by the fact that childcare for younger children was generally easier to source, i.e. it is simply more available, making the main issue here that of cost versus accessibility. Where staff found parents unable either to afford or to access formal childcare, they also found that these parents relied heavily on informal help from family and friends. However, staff tended to see this as less reliable than paid-for childcare and also financially problematic as parents could not claim for unregistered provision, for example, if they were paying a friend to act as their childminder.

Geographical constraints were another significant aspect. Some staff noted that parents may prefer to have childcare available where they lived rather than where they worked, given the travel time/distance to work, but that this was not always possible if they lived in more remote areas and commuted into towns or cities to work. In such cases, where parents lived far from their work and childcare was not conveniently located, this led to logistical problems in terms of transporting younger children to nursery or school and fitting this into their home-work-home routine. The following comment illustrates this:

'I think it could be geographical, because in [place name]...they seem to have even less...getting anywhere to do any work would be a problem. Transport isn't brilliant, unless you drive.'

(ASM)

This geographical disconnect and the problems it potentially breeds for lone parents has been noted in other studies (Bell *et al.*, 2005) and indicates that better childcare provision in more rural areas should be a priority. Indeed transport was identified by many lone parents in this study (see Section 2.4.3) as an employment constraint, particularly as most of the lone parent customers we interviewed are either unable to drive and/or do not have access to a car.

3.3.2 Staff views on the effects of childcare availability on lone parents finding work

Generally, lack of childcare was seen by staff as a barrier to work for lone parents, particularly of younger children, since older children were seen as more independent and less reliant on formal childcare. As one ASM commented:

'People that are under, that's got children under six, I would say the biggest problem or barrier is the childcare aspect.'

(ASM)

However, there was also widespread ambivalence among staff as to the authenticity of this barrier. Often staff felt that there was a discrepancy between parents' perceptions of the cost and quality of childcare, and the reality of formal provision:

'Most of the problems we face is the barriers that the customers will put themselves. So, there's...You know, I would say that childcare isn't a particularly big barrier here.'

(ASM)

In particular, staff felt that parents' resistance to formal childcare was linked with their distrust of childminders. Again, some staff felt such concerns were based more on parents' perceptions of childminders than actual experience. As such, some staff did not think these concerns constituted a real barrier to work:

'There is no reason why they can't work when their kids aren't in school with the childcare and nurseries, but people have got this sort of stigma attached to child abuse and nurseries, that's the problem. People pick up on the negative things that happen in the press rather than on all of the thousands of people that use childcare every day; I'm trying to convince them that way.'

(LPA)

Concerns relating to childminders also emerged as a strong theme in the views of customers themselves (see Section 3.3.4).

For parents whose children had already started or were about to start school, staff in most areas said that a lack of school holiday childcare was another key gap in provision that could limit parents' job prospects. For example, staff felt that many parents would compete and potentially struggle to secure term-time-only jobs in order to be free during school holidays:

'I think the main thing is there are plenty of private nurseries for kids under five, you know, and all that jazz. That's no problem. Wraparound childcare in all this is probably going to be the biggest problem. You know, after-school clubs, breakfast clubs to fill the gap and the holidays. Because it's all right saying, oh, all lone parents have to work a certain time only but, you know, it's not that easy to find term time only jobs... You know, not everybody wants to train as teachers... So the need for holiday childcare when we reduce the age down to seven, or five even, you know, I think that the Government really will need to look at making sure there's enough wraparound childcare everywhere... That's the biggest barrier that ever comes up, not with the age we're doing now, because they're older, but it will be.'

(LPA)

This comment is representative of many staff who emphasised the need for more wraparound childcare (such as pre- and after-school care) throughout the year to cater for the needs of parents with younger children.⁵ This means that, depending on where they live, a lack of wraparound childcare is likely to be a continuing issue for lone parents as the age of their youngest child decreases under the rollout.

⁵ In England, the Government is committed to helping every school in the United Kingdom become an extended school by 2010, including £1.3 billion for the core offer. In particular, it wants to see extended schools offering pre- and after-hours services including parenting and family support. However, a 2008 evaluation of the core offer found that funding, a lack of time and on-site space, and poor communication with external agencies were proving significant barriers to the ongoing development of extended services in schools (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008).

3.3.3 Staff views on childcare availability and promotion

In promoting formal childcare, staff said they employed a variety of techniques to engage customers. These included signposting them to services via the Family Information Service (or the Working for Families Service in Scotland), with the role of the CPM seen as vital in helping to cascade down the relevant information to advisers. Staff in some case study areas also mentioned that outreach support in community centres was available to help parents understand the childcare provision on offer. Staff in another case study area said they allayed parents' concerns over the cost of childcare and encouraged them to take up places by providing detailed information about the type and location of childcare provision. The BOC and explanations of WTC and CTC were seen to aid these discussions.

However, some staff emphasised that their 'sell' of childcare was more or less proactive depending on how ready the parent was deemed to be to work:

'By discussing what their needs are, how their child's going to settle, what kind of childcare they need...how they actually feel about letting their child be looked after, which will gauge how much they want to go back to work. It might be the fact that they are dying to go back to work but the child is still clingy, maybe still being breastfed, maybe...the parent may be anxious. So I don't sell it at that stage; I just put in all the things that they need to consider beforehand, and obviously the price. If that's okay, then I will physically refer them to our partnership...who are excellent at providing extra funding as well finding the right childcare and explaining, again, to parents at that stage, the cost that would be involved.'

(LPA)

Generally, childcare for younger children was found to be a more popular option than that available for older children, although parents' preferences were mainly for free school or nursery. As indicated in Section 3.3.4, childminders were widely noted to be a more contentious source of provision. In response to this, some staff worked on dissipating negative stereotypes by encouraging parents to have taster days through NDLP and meet childminders or experience an after-school club, occasionally in tandem with an adviser interview:

'The advisers are quite good at encouraging the parents to go out and actually see the childcare in action. Because often parents haven't ever used formal childcare, and they don't know what it's all about, so the advisers do encourage the parent to pop out and have a look at the local nursery and see what's on offer.'

(CPM)

However, some inconsistency emerged across the different offices with regard to the childcare discussions. Even though these were embedded in each local office's processes, in practice advisers did not always implement these consistently, often owing to time constraints. Moreover, it was widely noted that childcare conversations mainly tended to occur when parents had already decided to work

rather than as a matter of course. Further, LPAs were generally found to be more informed and confident in disseminating this information systematically and more in-depth than mainstream PAs, which was a concern for some non-front-line staff:

'I think Lone Parent Advisers tend to be the people that do because they always have dealt with lone parents who've got children; mainstream advisers...in their minds, they don't deal with lone parents but trying to get them to understand if parents...some parents, as well, have said they've got barriers to work because of child care. I'm trying to get them to refer and that's been a battle but they're getting better at it but I think the Lone Parent Advisers would actually go that further step.'

(CPM)

This suggests the need for better alignment of mainstream PAs' childcare conversations and knowledge with that of LPAs in helping lone parents to overcome childcare issues as a barrier to work.

3.3.4 Customer views on childcare for younger children

There was a mixture of IS customers with a youngest child aged six and under who had either used informal help from family or friends when their children were very young, or had not used any childcare and were the sole carer. Others had placed their child in nursery, although concerns over the cost and quality of nurseries were often mentioned. In particular, considerations of the cost of childcare informed parents' ability to work, as also observed by staff (Section 3.3.3). As the following customer emphasised:

'70 per cent of the childcare was paid for and I paid the other 30 per cent, which was a massive help. It really was. If I didn't have the help with the childcare then I wouldn't have been able to work.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under, North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

This suggests that a lack of awareness of the financial support available for childcare can be significant in limiting lone parents' capacity to find work. The cost of childcare continued to be a concern with regard to parents' current childcare (at the time of interview) and their lack of knowledge of how to access any financial support for this.

While nursery remained a popular option for helping to juggle childcare responsibilities with any move into work, this was often discussed in tandem with family help. However, for the future, most parents said that they would avoid using childcare by tailoring any work they did to fit round school or nursery hours, suggesting that this would limit the type of work they could look for, as also highlighted in other research (Ridge and Millar, 2008). The following customer quote illustrates this:

'If I had to go back to work, it would only be during school hours, and I would have to pick him up at the end of the day. I don't like leaving him with other people.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; South East Wales)

Significantly, and consistently across all case study areas, respondents conveyed strong suspicion of childminders, referring especially to the negative way they saw them portrayed in the media and presenting a contrast to staff opinions on this issue.

Often this distrust of childminders, and occasionally other formal childcare options such as private nurseries, was a greater barrier to these parents using childcare than not knowing about or being able to afford the options available, and often owed much to popular media representations, as also found in the study by Bell *et al.* (2005) of lone parents, childcare and work.

Most parents reported having either had no discussion with their adviser about childcare options, or a very basic one in the context of work, where parents felt that advisers only perceived childcare as relevant if they were actively looking for work or were about to start work. Alternatively, the conversations mentioned were often in the context of the finances of work (i.e. childcare costs as calculated in the BOC), and specifically LPO. Thus the way in which childcare options were presented was work focused rather than family focused, with parents often saying they had not received specific information about local provision:

'I just spoke to the lady that, is there any help that they could help us, help me, because at the moment I don't get anyone to help me. And they were just saying that, well, unless I'm working that's, that's the main, if I'm working before they can help me with childcare.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

However, most parents said they did not actively seek these discussions as they were not currently looking for work and/or did not feel formal childcare was needed. Considering these views, alongside the staff perspectives discussed above, suggests that few parents explicitly thought that a lack of childcare places per se was a barrier to them working; concerns over cost and time constraints, such as the compatibility of childcare availability with working hours, and travel time to and from childcare were more likely to feature.

3.3.5 Implications for future roll-out of LPO

The evidence presented in this section points towards a degree of alignment between staff and customer views on the availability of appropriate childcare and its relationship with lone parents' ability to find and retain work; and the potentially high cost and fixed hours of childcare limiting job prospects, particularly during school holidays. Given the decreasing age of children under LPO, problems were foreseen by staff in having enough funded places to accommodate younger children in pre- and after-school clubs and out of term time.

Staff also discussed gaps in provision for disabled children and for lone parents living in more rural areas, which suggests that a more joined-up approach between services and more specialist provision would be beneficial to future LPO roll-out.

The biggest discrepancy between staff and customer perspectives on childcare was in deciding what was a real as opposed to a perceived barrier. Staff sought to encourage parents' engagement with formal childcare on the grounds that their discomfort with it stemmed from misplaced stereotypes, while parents asserted their real fears in this respect. Given the often sporadic nature of childcare conversations, as reported by both customers and staff, one implication for the roll-out is that making these conversations more consistent could aid staff understanding of parents' fears and therefore facilitate more informed and effective solutions.

3.4 Staff views of the effects of LPO on the IS regime

A number of staff were optimistic that the increased frequency of LPWFIs will help to change customers' attitudes to work in a positive way and thus increase their likelihood to search for and secure work. For example:

'I would like to think it is. You're dealing with...generations upon generations of people that have never worked...it's about trying to re-educate the customers...to say that yes, work is better. It's better for you financially, it's better for you socially.'

(ASM)

Other staff did not believe that the increased frequency of LPWFIs impacted on customers' likelihood to search for and secure work, however, due to the complexity of their reasons for their unemployment and because their attitudes towards work were often deeply engrained. One ASM explained:

'I think there are a lot of factors that impact on [customers' likelihood to look for work]. I'm not sure that more frequent LPWFIs is one of them.'

(ASM)

Overall, staff felt that the package of support now available to lone parents on IS, including through NDLP, was more extensive than it had been in the past and that BOCs could be particularly helpful in encouraging lone parents to consider a move towards work.

Generally, however, it was felt that the effectiveness of the IS regime depended on the individual customer and their attitudes to work. Staff felt that some customers told them what they wanted to hear and agreed to actions that they did not then carry out, while other customers were believed to respond well to the IS regime.

Since the introduction of LPO, staff reported that the content of the LPWFIs they undertook with lone parents had changed. Advisers said they now used LPWFIs to explain the forthcoming changes and increased the emphasis they placed on

encouraging customers to train and to take advantage of the package of support available to them, particularly through NDLP. LPWFIs were also used to more strongly encourage them to think about work while they were claiming IS and taking steps to find the type of work they wanted. Some staff also reported using LPO to encourage lone parents with younger children to consider the type of work they would like to do in the future, rather than *'going for any old job, that's what you'd be forced to do when you go on JSA'* (LPA). This change of emphasis was with a view to best preparing customers for a future transition to another benefit – for many JSA – and this could potentially help encourage job sustainability once customers do enter the workforce. Overall, it appeared that there was a greater emphasis on activation in LPWFIs than had been the case pre-LPO, and more active encouragement of lone parents to take up the help offered as part of NDLP.

Alongside the increased frequency of LPWFIs many staff felt that the LPO changes, and customer aversion to a possible move onto JSA, was effecting customer attitudes to work and increasing the likelihood that work was seen as positive. For example:

'Lone Parent Obligations works well...because you're basically giving them that extra push they need and then giving them the opportunity to gain the qualification to move into the work they like.'

(LPA)

'I think they're starting to realise that we're not going to go away, that they are facing changes in the benefit system...I've got grandparents of 41 on my caseload who have got children of 17 who are now having their first babies, second babies. So this is a second and third generation of people that have just been allowed to live on benefits for quite some time...Breaking that chain, getting the message through that once the children get to seven years of age this benefit is going to stop...we have to keep up that momentum.'

(LPA)

3.5 Attitudes to work of lone parents on IS

Lone parents on IS interviewed for this research were often aware of the LPO changes that would affect them in the future but many said that this would not affect their attitude to work, largely because they wanted to work anyway either now, or when their youngest child was older. Indeed, some lone parents on IS were looking for work when they were interviewed. Others were focusing on studying or were looking after their children full time. The type of work that lone parents on IS were looking for tended to be low skilled and included:

- childcare;
- care work;
- cleaning;

- counselling;
- retail;
- administration;
- beauty therapy;
- bar work.

Not all lone parents had clear ideas about the type of work they wanted to do, and were more concerned with the working hours. Many lone parents on IS said they would want work that would fit around school hours (i.e. 9am-3pm).

Lone parents on IS who were already looking for work were using a range of ways to do so. All interviewees who were looking for work were presented with a list of common job search activities (see Appendix C). Some lone parents on IS were using Jobcentre Plus services (including LPWFIs and NDLP) and Jobcentre Plus providers to help with their job search and preparation. Other forms of job search activity included using employment agencies, searching the internet and looking in newspapers.

On the whole, lone parents on IS who remembered having a BOC had found it helpful, although some felt that the BOC did not always take all the extra costs of work into account. IS customers had a mixture of views of whether they would be financially better off in work: some thought they would be, some were not sure and others thought they would not be. Those that thought they would not be financially better off in work said their view was based on previous experiences of being in work. This included one lone parent who had four children, one lone parent who had got into debt while working and others who reported that if they started work they would have to re-pay money they owed. Some of the lone parents who were unsure about whether or not they would be better off in work felt that it would depend on the rate of pay they could find.

None of the lone parents who were on IS when sampled had moved off IS and into work of 16 or more hours a week by the time of interview. A few lone parents receiving IS were doing mini jobs of less than 16 hours a week. This included work as a dinner lady, cleaner or childcare assistant at their child's school.

3.6 Summary

- LPWFIs provided lone parents on IS with job search advice including BOC, benefit entitlement information and guidance, and a range of personal support through the LPA. Customers valued the flexible and individualised support on offer and staff emphasised the importance of building rapport with customers in order to establish positive relationships. There was limited evidence that the increased frequency of LPWFIs for lone parents had resulted in increasing the focus of lone parents on work.

- Interviews with both staff and customers suggested low levels of engagement with the action planning process. Customers did not focus on this element of IS conditionality at all during discussions.
- The threat of sanctions was seen by lone parents as a key reason to attend LPWFIs. However, in a small number of cases, staff and customer interview data confirmed low levels of awareness amongst customers of the fact that failure to attend LPWFIs may result in a reduction in their benefits.
- Staff observed a gap in childcare provision for children with disabilities. Both staff and customers highlighted the high cost of childcare in urban areas and the lack of transport/work-home connections in more rural areas as issues. Staff felt that in general, it will be an increasing challenge to find sufficient funded childcare places as the age of the youngest child under the roll-out of LPO decreases.
- There was some discrepancy between parents and staff as to whether childcare was a real barrier to work. Some staff felt the barrier was simply to do with parents' perceptions of formal childcare.
- Overall, it was felt that the effectiveness of the IS regime in getting lone parents to think about, and prepare for, work depended on the customer and their attitudes to work. Staff felt that some customers told advisers what they wanted to hear and agreed to actions that they did not carry out, while others responded well to the work-related requirements of the IS regime.

4 The ending of Income Support eligibility

The conditions for entitlement to Income Support (IS) for lone parents who are claiming solely based on being a lone parent are changing as part of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO). From November 2008, lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 and over, and from October 2009 lone parents with a youngest child aged ten, lost their eligibility to IS (unless they are exempt from the LPO changes). The final phase of roll-out takes place from autumn 2010, when lone parents with a youngest child aged seven or over, will no longer be entitled to IS solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. Instead, those able to work may claim Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), and would be expected to look for suitable work in return for personalised help and support. Those with a disability or health condition may make a claim for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). For other lone parents, they may stop claiming benefits of any kind or move into work.

Customer interview findings in this chapter draw predominantly on the views and experience of IS customers whose IS eligibility was due to end in six to eight weeks time. Where appropriate, retrospective comments on the experience of ending IS eligibility from JSA customers who have moved from IS to JSA are also included in the analysis; along with comments from IS customers with a youngest child aged six and under who will become ineligible for IS in the future.

This chapter summarises the key findings in relation to staff and customer understanding and experience of ending IS eligibility. This includes the views and experience of Jobcentre Plus staff on the processes supporting the ending of IS and the switchover to alternative benefits for customers who do not move into work. More specifically it explores:

- staff awareness and understanding of the IS-ending processes;
- customer experience of their IS eligibility ending, including how they heard about the changes and their take-up of lone parent transition loans (LPTLs);
- staff and customer views on the effects of IS ending.

4.1 Staff awareness and understanding of the ending of IS eligibility

4.1.1 Staff awareness of LPO and perceptions of customer awareness

All staff interviewed were aware of LPO and the different roll-out phases for ending IS eligibility and were aware of the existence of exemptions, and transitional protection. All the Advisory Service Managers (ASMs) and Lone Parent Advisers (LPAs) interviewed knew the specific criteria for exemptions and transitional protection, but some other staff indicated that they did not know the detail of the criteria, though were aware they could look for this detail in the guidance if necessary. Knowledge of the rationale behind LPO, including the reducing child poverty agenda, was mixed but greatest amongst ASMs and LPAs.

Front-line jobcentre staff, and LPAs in particular, saw the promotion of LPO to lone parent IS customers as an important part of their role and they described a number of methods they used to raise customer awareness of the changes, from discussions in Lone Parent Work Focused Interviews (LPWFIs) and Options and Choices Events (see Section 4.3.1 for more information on Option and Choices Events) through to printed materials such as letters and leaflets.

Staff felt that LPWFIs in particular were very useful for getting customers to focus on the changes, and suggested that the increased frequency of these to quarterly in the final year of IS eligibility was beneficial as it allowed staff to drip feed information to customers. This was felt to be important as it was suggested that lone parents could be *'confused or panicked if given too much information'* (LPA). All LPAs reported that they discussed the changes, alternative benefit options and the voluntary interview at every quarterly LPWFI and recorded this in customers' action plans.

Most staff felt that customers had generally found out about the changes through Jobcentre Plus but that some customers had heard about them through other lone parents or the media coverage of the changes. One Childcare Partnership Manager (CPM) felt the press coverage had been handled well and reflected on some case studies shown on television programmes which she felt would help lone parent IS customers to see they could be better off in work, not only financially, but also in terms of well-being. Some staff, however, were surprised that, despite what they perceived to be significant media coverage publicising the changes, that some customers had not heard about the LPO changes prior to being informed by Jobcentre Plus. One LPA suggested that customers who had not heard about LPO prior to being informed by Jobcentre Plus did not typically read newspapers, and were also sometimes customers who worked part time and were therefore socialising predominantly with people who work rather than benefit claimants. However, a couple of LPAs suggested that it could be an advantage for lone parents to hear about the changes for the first time from Jobcentre Plus. They felt that lone parents who first heard about the changes 'on the grapevine' often had

an inaccurate picture of the changes, for example, they would have to look for full-time work on JSA.

Overall, staff generally felt that most lone parent customers, and particularly those with older children, had good awareness of the LPO changes and the implications for them. ASMs interviewed also felt the process of communicating the changes to lone parents had been handled well by the LPAs and front-line staff as well as through supporting materials. For example:

'We now explain at every interview that the rules for benefit have changed and that Income Support will cease to be paid to them once the child is seven. We give them the timescales as well. I've noticed in the last three months there's very few that say, "I didn't know anything about that"... The people that we are seeing are aware of it.'

(ASM)

While staff generally felt lone parent customers were prepared for the changes, a number suggested that there were some customers who were not as prepared as they should be. One staff member felt that some customers had issues understanding the changes and suggested that for some customers, LPO *'has gone completely over their heads'* (LPA). Another member of staff felt that the issue was not with customers' ability to understand the changes but their willingness to. One ASM suggested that sometimes customers *'don't listen, or they don't believe what you're telling them'* and therefore, IS ending would still come as a shock to them.

4.1.2 LPO communications, guidance and training

Staff were provided with communications, guidance and training about LPO to aid their understanding of the changes and the processes underpinning the implementation. All staff interviewed were aware of, and were using, the intranet guidance and others had also received additional communications, guidance and training. This included information sessions, communications meetings, conferences, presentations, face-to-face training, briefing memos, e-learning and leaflets.

The methods used and depth of training staff received was not always consistent and some staff in the same role reported different levels. For example, in one district LPAs in a larger office described the face-to-face training they had received, whereas an LPA in a smaller office in the same district reported that their awareness of the LPO changes and their learning about the new processes involved was mainly through the intranet guidance.

Most staff interviewed for the research that had received face-to-face communications and training were positive about what they had received. They generally felt it was clear and covered what they needed to know in order to perform their part of the IS-ending process effectively. The level of training and

guidance staff had received about the LPO processes was generally identified as one of the reasons why the implementation had gone smoothly to date, as one ASM described:

'I think there's been a lot of time invested in taking people away from what they're normally doing, in terms of training...and I think we've reaped the benefits of that in the long term.'

(ASM)

Staff that had not received any face-to-face communications and training about the LPO process changes would have welcomed this type of approach in addition to the written communications and guidance documents they had used. The intranet guidance was generally considered good by all staff interviewed. Most staff felt it was comprehensive and, where staff did have questions the guidance did not answer, they described how they were able to raise any queries and get them resolved through their managers or information lines.

Although they were generally happy with the content of the guidance materials, staff also made some suggestions for improving the communications, guidance and training they had received. Some staff, particularly those who had not had any face-to-face training sessions, felt it would have been beneficial to have more time to work through the guidance. Other staff mentioned that the search function could have been improved to enable them to find answers to specific queries more easily and because of the density of the guidance some staff with specific roles in the LPO process felt it would have been helpful to have the guidance for their role in a separate section. There was also some concern that the guidance could be open to interpretation and could therefore lead to inconsistency, for example, in relation to applying the parent flexibilities (see Section 5.3 for more detail about the parent flexibilities). This seemed to be a more notable issue where staff had not received face-to-face training and just had the guidance.

In addition to these more general points, some groups of staff also reported specific training requests. LPAs working with lone parents in the JSA regime wanted more information on the JSA regime. Staff working in the JSA regime, such as Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviewers (FJR) who had not worked with many lone parent customers before, reported that they would have liked more training about lone-parent-related financial incentives and childcare (see also Section 5.3).

4.1.3 Management support during the LPO roll-out

All office-based staff and some Benefit Delivery Centre (BDC) staff felt they had been sufficiently supported by senior staff during the LPO changes. Staff felt that managers were good at passing on all relevant information and keeping them up to date with any process changes. One LPA described how their manager created an LPO desk aide and went through it with all the advisers to make sure they understood the changes. Staff also reported that their managers were willing to help with any questions or problems and provide them with answers to their questions. For example:

'...there's no way I could fault my managers. They sat down and...got to grips with it for me because I wouldn't have had the time, I wouldn't have known where to start...but...they worked it out...easy steps to follow.'

(Diary Administrative Support Officer (DASO))

Some jobcentre and BDC staff, who also line managed staff, felt they had been able to sufficiently support staff themselves. Others felt they had been able to support staff during the introduction of LPO but only to a point. The overwhelming reason given for this was time constraints:

'I would like to spend a whole lot more time out on the shop floor sitting with advisers...it's not only for me to make sure that they're...communicating the right messages to the customer...it's a good insight for me to know just exactly what the challenges are to advisers. Over the past year, there's been so many changes, so many meetings, that sometimes it's very difficult to try and actually spend good quality time. Communication-wise I feel as though I'm very much on top of it, but for the personal one-to-one I feel...that is something I need to strive to make time for.'

(ASM)

No staff felt they lacked the capability or knowledge to support staff in implementing the changes. One Customer Engagement Team Leader (CETL) explained that while they needed to refer to the guidance a lot, they felt they still had the knowledge needed to manage the DASO team through the changes.

4.2 Customer awareness and understanding of the ending of IS eligibility

Awareness of the changes to the lone parent benefit regime varied significantly between the different customer groups that were interviewed. Levels of awareness were good in both the group of customers whose IS eligibility was due to end in the near future (some may not yet have received the full communications), and those customers who had moved to JSA once their IS eligibility ended. Overwhelmingly these groups of customers were aware of the changes (although a small number of customers who had moved from IS to JSA seemed unaware that this move had taken place). In these groups of customers, many reported that they had been informed about the changes during appointments with their LPA, either at their six-monthly or three-monthly LPWFIs. Some customers were also given printouts or booklets explaining the changes in more detail. The remainder found out about the changes through letters that they received in the post from Jobcentre Plus, although some commented that these letters contained little information and were therefore of limited use. One customer commented that *'If I just got the letter I probably wouldn't have understood the change'* (customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders) and another said *'I don't think it explained a lot, I had to still ask questions when I went up'* (customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders).

In general, IS customers with a youngest child aged six and under were the least aware of the changes to the IS benefit regime. When asked if they were aware of any changes that were due to take place, a number of customers confused broader regime changes with other adjustments to their benefits, particularly incremental increases in the amount received: *'They've been going up'* (IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber). Given the current status of these customers (i.e. all had a youngest child aged six and under), this level of awareness is to be expected, although potentially has implications in terms of the limited scale of any anticipation effect.

Many new and repeat JSA customers said they heard about the changes to the regime when they contacted the jobcentre to make a claim and discovered they were not eligible to claim IS due to the age of their youngest child: *'I automatically thought because it was myself and two boys, lone parent, that it comes under Income Support, you see'* (new and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull). One new and repeat JSA customer (Birmingham and Solihull) commented: *'I didn't realise I was on Jobseeker's Allowance, I thought it was Income Support.'* Again, based on the status of the customer group, this level of awareness would be expected.

Customers generally displayed a reasonable level of understanding of why their entitlement was ending. For example, many customers whose IS eligibility was due to end were aware that IS eligibility was dependent on the age of their youngest child, and that this age threshold would be reducing over time. Most of this customer group appeared to understand that once they became ineligible for IS, if they could they would be expected to actively seek work, during which time they could claim JSA. As one customer explained, they are:

'...lowering the age of your youngest child when you can claim Income Support. And they're basically putting everybody onto Jobseeker's Allowance. And also in the next year or so they're also changing when you get your money, I think, as well.'

(Customer whose IS eligibility was due to end; South East Wales)

Few customers were aware of what the process of changing benefits would involve or when it was due to happen. There appeared to be an assumption on the part of many lone parent customers that jobcentre staff, in particular their LPA, would ensure that the necessary changes were made to their benefits. As one customer commented, when discussing the information received via their LPA: *'He says nothing changes, it's just called Jobseeker's rather than Income Support'* (customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders). Indeed a number of customers gave a fairly confused account of the processes involved and what would be required of them:

'I had one letter which I think was about three months ago saying that it's all going to change and its going to be called something else now, but how you claim it or how you do it I haven't got a clue.'

(Customer whose IS eligibility was due to end; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

'Apparently, they say if I work for 16 hours, I get some support, some support, and that's child, is it? I'm entitled to Child Tax Credit or something.'

(Customer whose IS eligibility was due to end; South East Wales)

4.3 Staff experience of implementing changes to IS eligibility

4.3.1 Staff experience of Options and Choices Events

Options and Choices Events are group sessions organised by Jobcentre Plus but run in an alternative setting, often a professional labour market environment. The purpose of the events is to enable lone parent customers to understand how Jobcentre Plus can help them work and to explain their options when their entitlement to IS ceases. At the end of the event, each lone parent will be offered an opportunity to be seen individually by an LPA to identify a specific course of action. The main outcome of the events is envisaged to be encouraging lone parents to join New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). A separate evaluation of Options and Choices Events in trailblazer districts has been conducted (Jenkins and Lloyd, 2008).

Districts gave examples of a number of Options and Choices Events they had run. The most common locations for the events appeared to be employer premises, community centres and Sure Start Children's Centres. Many of the staff interviewed highlighted issues with getting employers to host or engage with the events since the recession had begun.

'Last year, we were quite successful, and this year, we weren't able to hold any Options and Choices on the employer sites, because we couldn't get any, you know, to commit. So we actually had to hold them in, like, the Community Centre, or a jobcentre.'

(ASM)

One ASM suggested this may be because employers perceived the purpose of the events to be about providing vacancies rather than discussing the benefits of work. However, one of the districts visited reported high success levels in engaging local employers and the city council in the events. This district also engaged lone parents who have found work and invited them to speak at the events. This practice is recommended in the Jobcentre Plus guidance.

A number of staff felt Options and Choices Events were very effective at explaining the LPO changes and giving lone parents a flavour of the world of work. The events were seen as useful for customers that attended and were genuinely interested in work. It was also reported that feedback from customers was positive.

'We're taking them into employers' premises. We are getting employers to give talks to them about what it's like in the world at work...And we're telling them about the changes...I think they've been very effective for those that attend.'

(ASM)

'I think a lot of lone parents probably fear the thought of...being forced to look for work and the Options and Choices Events actually help remove that fear.'

(CPM)

A number of staff across districts reported low attendance levels at Options and Choices Events. One district was trialling changes to their Options and Choices invitation letters. They had removed the voluntary wording and also included a list of comments from previous attendees stating how they benefited from the events. They reported that attendance had since improved significantly.

4.3.2 Staff experience of the process leading to the end of customers' IS claims

Every few months staff in Jobcentre Plus districts receive LPO schedules that identify lone parents due to lose their IS eligibility. DASOs use a ready reckoner tool to work out the customers' IS ending dates. The ready reckoner is a national tool used to calculate IS ending dates⁶ based on the customer's youngest child's birthday and the date when they had their last mandatory LPWFI. In some of the case study areas this process was undertaken by a central DASO team and in other districts it was done by office-based DASOs. One district, which used office-based DASOs to complete this task, went through the LPO schedules at district level and then disseminated office-specific schedules. In other case study areas, staff disseminated the whole schedule to all the offices where staff then had to go through them to select customers in their geographic location.

Checking exemptions and transitional protection

Lone parents on IS will be exempt from LPO (i.e. will continue to be eligible to claim IS) if they have an underlying entitlement to the benefit, for example, if they have a child/children who are entitled to the middle-rate or highest-rate care component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA), receive Carer's Allowance, are fostering and have a foster child living with them, are blind or are pregnant and within 11 weeks of the expected due date. Lone parents on IS who are currently in full-time study, following a full-time course on NDLP or on an approved training

⁶ IS ending dates are set out in legislation.

scheme, will also continue to be entitled to IS but this transitional protection will only apply until the end of the course and will only apply to a course of study or training that the lone parent began before their youngest child reaches the current relevant LPO age.

Checking for exemptions and transitional protection is part of the role of jobcentre staff at every stage of the IS-ending process. DASOs do an initial check for any lone parents on the schedules that are exempt from LPO by looking at the payment systems and checking, for example, if the customer's child is receiving a higher rate of DLA in addition to them receiving IS. LPAs do a second check for any possible exemptions during discussions with customers at Quarterly Lone Parent Work Focused Interviews (QLPWFIs) and they also check whether transitional protection applies to a customer. If transitional protection applies, the LPA sends a pro-forma to the BDC to indicate this. The jobcentre is then responsible for notifying the BDC when the transitional protection expires (i.e. at the end of the course) and therefore IS entitlement ends.

Ensuring receipt of Child Tax Credit

When a lone parent's entitlement to IS ends, they will no longer be able to receive Child Dependency Increases for their children when they claim JSA or ESA. To continue to receive money for their children they will need to claim Child Tax Credit (CTC) if it is not already in payment. Where customers are yet to make a claim for CTC by the time of their voluntary interview, then this application process also forms part of this stage of the IS-ending process. CTC is a payment from the Government for people bringing up children. It provides financial support for all families with children and an income of up to £58,000 a year.

There appeared to be some variety in practice as to when advisers checked if customers were in receipt of CTC and switched them over if not. Some advisers reported promoting CTC to every customer, irrespective of the age of their children, and therefore supporting customers to make the transition to this tax credit while they were claiming IS. Other staff reported helping customers to claim CTC as part of the IS-ending process. Both practices are outlined in staff guidance and can be used as staff best feel is appropriate.

DASOs also have a role in moving customers to CTC. They check on the computer system to see whether a customer is in receipt of CTC 12 weeks prior to IS ending.

There was some variety in practice as to how this was dealt with if the customer was not in receipt of CTC. In some of the districts, the DASO would complete a deemed application on the customer's behalf to switch them over. In other districts, the DASO would put an alert on the computer system so that at the customer's next interview (QLPWFIs or voluntary), the LPA would know to complete a CTC application form with the customer, advise them about what would happen next and send it off to be processed. Staff also reported that if CTC is not in payment by the IS-ending date, there is a four week run-on period that can be activated so that CTC can be in payment when they change benefits.

Voluntary interview

Eight weeks before a lone parent's IS ending date, DASOs contact them to let them know when their last payment is due and invite them to a voluntary interview six weeks before this date. In four of the five districts involved in the evaluation, DASOs reported that they try to contact lone parent customers by phone to arrange a suitable time for the voluntary interview. However, incorrect contact numbers for lone parents was reported to be a big issue across all districts. If contact cannot be made by phone, the DASOs booked an interview date and time for them and posted an appointment letter giving the details. In the other district, the DASO reported that they booked voluntary interview dates and times and sent out appointment letters without attempting to contact the customer by phone first. Staff in some of the districts indicated that either DASOs or LPAs tried to phone customers to remind them about the interview the day before. This was felt to have significantly decreased the number of people not turning up by some staff. One district reported having piloted schemes such as texting interview reminders and were now investigating whether recording customer email addresses and emailing them reminders would be beneficial.

There were mixed views on the attendance rate for voluntary interviews. One CETL felt that the process of getting lone parents in to voluntary interviews had been quite successful, an LPA reported not having a problem with customer attendance and a DASO estimated that only four or five customers out of every 100 did not attend. On the other hand, one ASM felt fail to attend rates were a problem and another ASM thought a good percentage of lone parents did not attend voluntary interviews.

Staff in all districts described how they would invite lone parents to a second (and sometimes third) voluntary interview if they had not attended the first. If a lone parent did not attend a voluntary interview prior to their IS end date, their IS benefit claim would be closed as planned. Should they wish to then move onto other benefits they would need to go through the Contact Centre new claims process.

As part of the IS-ending process, jobcentre staff should refer customers for compliance checks if they have not responded to any of the mail shots, letters or phone invitations to attend for voluntary interview. Customer Compliance Officers then visit the customers at their homes to check for possible welfare cases, for example, customers who cannot read and therefore have not understood the impact of the letters, and also for possible fraud cases. The interviews found a great deal of variance and also confusion surrounding this part of the process. An ASM and LPA in one district, and a CETL and LPA in another, were unsure when a customer would be referred for a compliance check. In one district, a DASO stated that they would not refer lone parents for a compliance check as the interviews are voluntary and so they did not think it appropriate. This implies a lack of awareness of the purpose of the compliance check, including ensuring the

customer is aware of and has understood the changes. In three districts however, staff described referring customers for compliance checks if they failed to attend three voluntary interviews and were not contactable.

The voluntary interview is conducted by an LPA and is expected to last 40 minutes. Most LPAs felt 40 minutes was an appropriate length for the interviews though a couple of advisers reported that their interviews generally lasted only 30 minutes and, conversely, a couple of LPAs reported preparing the paperwork in advance where possible as they felt time was limited during the interviews and one LPA felt a longer period such as 50 to 60 minutes would be more appropriate for the interviews.

During the voluntary interview, LPAs should:

- tell the lone parent about how and when the change affects them;
- discuss the support available to prepare them to move into paid employment;
- assist them to make a claim for CTC, if required;
- discuss access to NDLP;
- assist them to make a claim for JSA if they are able to work, or ESA if they cannot work due to a health condition or disability;
- explain the entitlement conditions if they decide to claim JSA or ESA;
- if appropriate, tell them how to claim DLA if they have a child with a disability and assist them to do so;
- tell them when they can expect to receive the first payment of their new benefit and the period this will cover;
- advise lone parents that, if they are unable to budget for the change from weekly to fortnightly payments, they may be able to claim an LPTL and support them to do so (see Section 4.3.3 for more detail payment changes and LPTL).

Advisers described covering the above during voluntary interviews, though a significant number reported that the predominant focus of the interviews was the benefit switchover and the associated paperwork. Many staff highlighted that they have already discussed the changes, support available, benefit options and NDLP with customers at the quarterly LPWFIs preceding the voluntary interview.

The work of BDCs

The final part of the IS-ending process is completed in BDC. After a customer has attended their voluntary interview, the LPA completes an electronic benefit switcher form and emails it to a central inbox at the relevant BDC. These forms are actioned by Benefit Delivery Officers (BDOs) who explained that they complete a final check for any exemptions and to ensure CTC is in payment, then terminate IS claims by entering the relevant termination code (either JSA or ESA) and the IS ending date on a customer's record on the Legacy system. BDOs could terminate

claims as soon as a form was received following a voluntary interview, which could be six weeks in advance of the IS end date, as they had an option to set the date the claim is due to end for the day after the last IS payment is due to be made to the customer. The customers' new benefit claim is then set up by the JSA or ESA team within the BDC as appropriate.

There were limited views on the IS-ending process expressed by staff. Most staff who expressed an opinion felt the process worked quite well and was fairly accurate. Some staff felt the process was generally efficient though others felt it was quite slow. Some BDC staff indicated that there had been some initial 'teething problems' with jobcentre staff not completing forms correctly but felt these issues had since been resolved.

Benefit Delivery Team Leaders (BDTLs) in all districts were provided with copies of the LPO schedules sent to DASOs and they felt these were useful for predicting workloads and checking all the correct IS ending requests are being made. One BDTL expressed some concern about the accuracy of the LPO schedules and reported having received a number of benefit switcher forms for customers that had not appeared on the LPO schedules.

IS ending for customers with health conditions

After the staff fieldwork was completed, an issue relating to how Jobcentre Plus were working with lone parents with a medical condition was identified. This resulted in changes to LPO processes which came into effect on 31 August 2009. Under the new processes, lone parents receiving IS and who have a disability or health condition and provide medical evidence of this, could continue to receive IS. Previously customers meeting these criteria were able to make a claim for ESA.

In October 2009, three staff in each of the five case study areas (15 in total) were contacted to take part in short phone interviews about this issue and the new processes that had been put in place. The staff interviewed in each case study area were the LPO Lead, a front-line manager (ASM or CETL) and a Personal Adviser.

All 15 staff interviewed indicated that they were aware of the change in the IS-ending process for lone parent customers who have a disability or health condition. One ASM interviewed however was not aware that such customers could continue to receive IS, indicating that her knowledge was not based on the revised process. Information about the revised process was initially cascaded by the Change Team in each case study area via phone conferences, staff meetings and emails. Staff in all areas were also aware of, and referred to, resources on the intranet including the modified guidance in the LPO section. On the whole, staff felt the information and guidance they had received was sufficient to implement the changes. Advisers felt the guidance was very detailed and clear. They described how it contained step-by-step instructions and how they felt comfortable with the process. One ASM, however, did feel that the guidance was open to some interpretation, for example, in relation to how long a claim should be held open while waiting for a customer to provide an SC1 medical certificate. There was

some minor variety in terms of when staff heard about the change, with some staff indicating they heard about the changes a few weeks before they came into effect and most approximately one week before. The amended process was reported to have been implemented in all areas on 31 August 2009 as planned and no staff felt there had been any issues with meeting this implementation date. Staff in two of the case study areas indicated that since finding out about the changes, but before the implementation date, they had 'stockpiled' the forms of customers for whom the revised process would apply, then sent these off to the BDC on 31 August.

Most of the staff interviewed for the research indicated that no issues had arisen in relation to the implementation of the changes. Staff felt that the change had resulted in minimal impact on the conversations they or their staff have with customers and no staff interviewed had received any enquiries from customers related to the change. Many staff reported that they had dealt with limited numbers of customers to whom the change applied as most of their customers moved to JSA.

Staff felt that the greater impact of the change had been an internal one felt by staff. A number of staff commented that the period of time between notification of the change and implementation was short and felt this change had been another pressure and overload of information. One LPO Lead reported that their area is planning longer term to revert to specialist adviser roles as they feel advisers are now expected to be aware of too many processes. There were also questions raised by some staff about what the process for lone parent customers with a disability or health condition would be in Phase Two of the LPO roll-out. This was something they would have welcomed an update on.

4.3.3 Staff experience of the lone parent transition loan process

At the time of the first LPO roll-out phase, IS was paid weekly in arrears whereas JSA and ESA are paid fortnightly in arrears. This means that, even if a lone parent's entitlement is continuous, there will be a gap of a week between the period their final IS payment covers and their first payment of JSA or ESA. They may, therefore, need additional financial support to cope. Lone parents may therefore apply for an LPTL to cover this gap in payment.⁷ As this is a loan, customers who take one out will have to pay it back.

Most of the ASMs, LPAs and BDC staff interviewed across all districts felt that uptake of LPTLs by customers had been lower than anticipated. A number of staff felt the reason for this in many cases was that the loan amounts offered were not as high as customers had hoped and therefore, not considered worth accepting.

⁷ It should be noted that IS benefit payments are due to change from weekly to fortnightly and so the payment gap and LPTL will be a feature of the first phase of the LPO roll-out only.

One ASM explained that the loan amounts offered were based on household income calculations, not a week's benefit money, and therefore some customers were only entitled to a few pounds. They, therefore, felt that most customers were interested in the loan initially but that when they found out how much money they could get did not proceed.

'Compared to how many we've closed, and how many have requested it, we haven't had as many through as I thought we would have done...However, I think, it's a case of, how much am I getting...no, don't bother thanks very much...if you ring them up and say, we've got £1.50 for you, do you want to take that up?...Then we usually get the phone slammed down on you. The amount...if it sounds reasonable and if it's near benefit rates, they'll have it. If it's an insult, a slap in the chops, they won't have it.'

(BDO)

Other staff suggested that many lone parent customers were reluctant to take an LPTL because they already had outstanding loans and so did not want to take on more debt that they would have to repay.

'When you ring them up and tell them they have to repay it, they're not happy about...well, they just didn't expect that they had to, I don't think. And then they say they'll manage...they don't want to take on any more loans.'

(BDTL)

Indeed, LPAs in two districts described how they encouraged customers not to apply for the LPTL where they could manage without it and reminded them they would have to pay it back. One BDO estimated that nine out of ten customers were refusing the loan and felt those who were accepting it were, in the main, customers who already had existing social fund loans.

Only a small number of staff felt the uptake of LPTLs was high and, of these, most were front-line staff who upon further exploration were found to be referring to initial LPTL applications and not the actual acceptance of these which may ultimately have been lower. These ASMs and LPAs, based in two of the districts visited, reported that they were advising all the lone parent customers they saw to apply for the LPTL as they could refuse it later if they decided they did not want it. This highlighted a large variation in practice between districts with some actively encouraging LPTL applications and others actively encouraging customers to manage without where possible.

If a customer decides to apply for an LPTL, an LPA will complete an application form with them during the voluntary interview and email it to the BDC alongside the benefit switcher form. BDOs are responsible for calculating loan amounts and rates of repayment, and reported that loan amounts varied from around £100 to less than £10. One BDO suggested that they had some flexibility in their calculation which enabled them to make the loan a little higher for customers.

The day after a customer's New Jobseeker's Interview, a BDO contacts the customer to tell them what the amount of the loan will be and see if they still want to accept it. LPTLs cannot be released until benefit delivery staff have been able to speak to the customer and obtain verbal acceptance of the loan. There was some variation in what was reported to happen next if staff were unable to contact the customer on the first attempt. Staff at some BDCs suggested they would make a number of continued attempts to contact the customer, for example, *'three calls in three days'* (BDO). Some staff however suggested they would only attempt to get in touch with the customer on the day they were processing the loan. If staff ultimately could not contact the customer the loan would be rejected.

Once customers had been contacted and the payment accepted by them, staff indicated there were no problems with getting payments to the customers. Loan payments are made by giro cheque and were reported to be generally released the same day the customer accepted the loan.

While many staff felt the LPTL process was working quite well, a number of issues were raised by staff in relation to the process. The main issue, raised by BDC staff, was that LPTL application forms completed and submitted by jobcentre staff on behalf of customers were not always fully completed. However, one BDO explained how such issues had been raised and fed back to jobcentres and felt that matters were improving.

4.3.4 Staff views on implementation to date

Most of the staff interviewed felt the implementation of LPO had gone well or very well to date. They felt both staff and customers understood the changes and the process of switching over customer benefits. Only one member of staff interviewed felt the implementation had not gone too well to date. They felt there had been too many changes happening at the same time and so found it difficult to take in all the information.

'The time it was delivered...we had a lot of changes happening at the same time...I thought it was too much all at the same time...we felt burnt out. It was information overload.'

(LPA)

A number of staff felt that the success of the roll-out was particularly noteworthy because of the scale of the changes.

'It was one of the most major changes of our times, part of the welfare reforms...and I think it was really handled quite well.'

(CPM)

'I think for such a major change...I don't think it could have been any smoother than it has...I'm absolutely amazed.'

(LPA)

Staff interviewed identified a number of factors which they felt contributed to the perceived success of the roll-out. These were:

- thorough guidance and training;
- successful partnership working and communications;
- effective organisation and management of the changes;
- good customer communications.

Training was discussed earlier in the chapter and, while experiences did vary, where staff felt prepared for the changes though comprehensive training and guidance this was considered a major contributor to the success of the LPO roll-out.

'As soon as it went ahead we knew exactly what we were taking on... because of the guidance.'

(LPA)

Good communication channels and strong partnership working between teams involved in the process was also felt to have contributed to the success. Many of the staff interviewed felt that partnership working between jobcentre and BDC staff was working effectively and only a few staff felt partnership working needed to be improved. Examples were given of progress meetings, successful cascading of information from management, teams working well together and keeping each other informed.

'We have got a really good Change Team and they cascaded down... we were all involved from the beginning and the actual amount of communication... I just think it's been brilliant.'

(LPA)

Good management and organisation of the changes were also raised as a reason for the success. One ASM felt the staggered approach to the roll-out was particularly useful and others described the structures put in place at all levels in the organisation to support the changes:

'There were the structures in place right down to district level, right up to national level. I think it was very well thought of.'

(CPM)

Staff also felt that adopting a positive manner when communicating the changes to customers, a long way in advance and on numerous occasions, has helped improve customer attitudes to the changes.

'I think if you explain why it's happening... then you're going to get less problems. As far as I'm aware, I think we've only had one objection.'

(ASM)

As would be expected as part of any large change, a number of staff also gave examples of 'teething' problems they had experienced to date. Most of these teething problems were in relation to the benefit switcher and LPTL application forms completed by jobcentre staff and emailed to BDC staff, with issues raised such as forms being sent to the wrong email addresses and forms not being completed correctly. However, many staff raising such issues felt they had been resolved quickly.

Some staff felt that particular processes were convoluted and could be made more efficient, such as the process of calculating IS end dates and the LPTL process. Some felt that the biggest challenge was getting customers to face up to the fact their IS benefit is coming to an end and some expressed some concerns around capacity to deal with the changes, which is discussed in more detail in the following section.

There were some concerns raised about meeting local adviser performance targets related to the conversion rate from interviews with lone parent customers to NDLP sign up. While jobcentre Plus has planning assumptions based on expected conversion rates there is no nationally agreed performance target for this. However, advisers interviewed in some districts did appear to be managed against a local target. Where this was reported to be the case, some staff said that while they were meeting their conversion target they were finding that a number of customers who they signed up to NDLP did not then attend subsequent NDLP interviews. Staff were, therefore, indicating that NDLP conversion rates do not always reflect sustained performance. Some staff also reported issues with fail to attend rates and some felt they struggled to meet productivity targets suggesting that having a target for the number of customers seen per day has an impact on the quality and effectiveness of LPWFIs.

4.3.5 Capacity to deal with the changes

Most staff interviewed felt that the implementation of LPO, especially during a recession, was having an impact on staff capacity. Despite this, overwhelmingly most staff interviewed across all districts felt there was currently enough capacity to deal with LPO. In many cases, this appeared to be due to the recent recruitment of additional staff, particularly in jobcentre offices but also in some BDCs. In other cases, more existing staff were being trained to deal with the LPO-related processes. Some jobcentre officers were coping with the increased workload through restructuring and increased flexibility. In two offices, staff involved in LPO felt it was beneficial that they had been ring-fenced to deal with this only and were not involved in other current changes such as Flexible New Deal. Some BDC staff reported that their LPO-related work comes in peaks and troughs and so had found ways to even out their workload to a more consistent and manageable level, for example, by closing down claims in advance during quiet periods. In jobcentre offices, some advisory staff reported using the free time created when customers failed to attend appointments to read LPO guidance and keep on top of paperwork.

Staff who felt there was currently enough capacity to deal with LPO did provide caveats to this. A number felt they had not had enough capacity until new staff had been recruited.

'I think it was difficult to implement at first because of the extra work it involved. And at the time we hadn't got the resource to do it. We have now got the staff.'

(ASM)

Others felt that even though they were managing to keep on top of the work, LPO had increased their workload and there were examples given by BDOs and LPAs of needing to do overtime on occasion. One ASM felt that they had problems finding the time to up-skill staff to deal with LPO; other managers felt that DASOs and LPAs were quite stretched and felt the recruitment of more would be helpful.

Some LPAs in Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth we interviewed had been pulled off their normal roles to help with the general increase in the JSA claimant count due to the recession and offices had become much busier than before. In Birmingham and Solihull it was reported that turnover amongst Jobcentre Plus staff had reduced as people valued these jobs more than they had before.

Only a handful of staff interviewed felt there was not enough capacity to deal with the changes. One BDC appeared to be experiencing capacity issues. The staff interviewed there described backlogs of work despite overtime having been worked, no spare capacity to train more staff on LPO and some staff being taken off LPO to work on other things. The team leader at this BDC felt there was a need to recruit more staff.

4.3.6 Staff views on future implementation issues and suggestions for improvement

Looking forward, staff suggested a number of issues that should be addressed over the next 12 months in order to ensure the continued successful implementation of LPO.

Firstly, a number of staff felt that a key challenge was the need to continue to inform customers about the changes and overcome any resistance from them, alongside educating them about the benefits of work and motivating them to find work. Some staff anticipated that as LPO applies to lone parent customers with increasingly younger children there will be increased reluctance from customers to look for work and make use of formal childcare.

'I guess it will be as the age limit for children comes down...there will be a lot more reluctance from the parents...I think the jobcentres are going to have a massive job on their hands.'

(LMMD)

Linked to these concerns, some staff felt that a further issue for the future was to ensure that sufficient appropriate and affordable childcare provision is available for children aged seven and above.

'The first stage isn't too bad because a lot of older children can get themselves to school in the morning, you don't need the level of childcare...with under fives you've got childminders and nurseries and Children's Centres. It's the block in-between, the seven year olds, that's where the problem's going to be.'

(CPM)

Second, a number of staff also expressed concerns about the impact of the recession and the current state of the labour market on customers' likelihood of finding work that matched their needs and expectations. Another member of staff reported:

'Employers are now not recruiting nearly as much, and when they are recruiting they've got a huge choice of people to recruit from. Company [A] have just had 330 applications for 15 part-time posts...we are saying to lone parents you have to now make yourself available for work...that's a challenge, to keep them motivated...a challenge and a concern, actually...'

(CPM)

ASMs and LPAs felt an important part of their role would be to keep abreast of the state of the labour market, ensure jobcentres are aware of all job vacancies that might be suitable for customers and work to attract employers to liaise with Jobcentre Plus regarding their vacancies.

Lack of suitable jobs was a particular concern in relation to lone parent customers' general preference for part-time working.

'It's keeping on top of the labour market and finding out...what specific jobs are out there for our customers...the challenge for ourselves is to try and attract employers who are looking to employ people less than maybe full-time hours.'

(LPA)

Staff raised a number of other suggestions for improvement to the IS-ending processes.

There was suggestion that increasing the awareness of LPO among telephony and processing staff, who are not directly involved in the changes but who may interact with staff and customers who are affected, would be beneficial for improving partnership working between jobcentre teams and enhancing the customer experience of switching benefits.

A number of process changes were also suggested to streamline and simplify the benefit switchover. It was suggested that the process for calculating IS ending dates could be made more straightforward, easier to implement and less confusing if based solely on the age of the youngest child and not the date of the last LPWFI as well. For similar reasons, it was also proposed that LPTLs should be based on a week's benefit payment and that the paperwork associated with the loans reduced.

4.4 Customer experience of the changes to IS eligibility

4.4.1 Customer experience of Options and Choices Events

The interviews suggested there has been low take-up of Options and Choices Events amongst lone parents whose IS eligibility was due to end. Most of this group of customers said that they had not heard of Options and Choices (even once the events were explained further). A number of customers recalled being invited to Options and Choices Events but for various reasons had chosen not to attend. For example, one customer was concerned that she would be the oldest attendee (customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders).

For the small number of customers that reported having attended an Options and Choices Event, views on how useful the experience had been were mixed. A couple of customers whose IS eligibility was due to end commented that the event was not useful because the employers that attended seemed to be only looking for full-time staff or that the work available was unsuitable, for example, being too far away from one customer's home. For others who had attended some time ago, they reported feeling that this was too early as they did not feel 'work ready' at that point in time. A small number of customers who had attended these events were more positive, commenting on how interesting and useful they were for example.

4.4.2 Customer experience of the process leading to the end of their IS claim

Customers whose IS eligibility was due to end did not often recall attending voluntary interviews, although, as noted earlier, changes to the wording of letters in some areas could have meant that customers thought their voluntary interview was in fact mandatory. In addition, it is possible that some of the customers whose IS eligibility was shortly due to end were yet to reach this stage of the IS-ending process and take part in a voluntary interview, or that they had attended but failed to distinguish it from other meetings at the jobcentre, such as Work Focused Interviews.

The key appointments mentioned by lone parents in this group of customers were LPWFIs. Most customers reported going to the jobcentre either every six months or every three months, depending on when their IS eligibility was due to end. Most of the lone parent customers that were interviewed who were due to lose their IS eligibility reported that they were now in receipt of CTC. However, there was evidence that some customers were confused about the process and purpose of claiming this benefit. For example, a couple of customers commented that they were ineligible as they were not currently in employment, suggesting that they confused this with Working Tax Credit. Other customers believed that CTC had replaced IS: as one commented, it was '*what I get now instead of IS*' (customer who has moved from IS to JSA; South East Wales).

4.4.3 Customer experience of LPTLs and the move to fortnightly payments

Given the difficult financial situation that some lone parents faced, particularly those with debts, concerns related to how they felt they could manage a switch from weekly to fortnightly payments once they moved from IS to another benefit: *'You're struggling enough anyway to make ends meet and then they go and do that'* (customer whose IS eligibility was due to end; Birmingham and Solihull). This is also an issue for some lone parents we interviewed once they had made the transition onto JSA, with many finding the change from weekly to fortnightly payments one of the most difficult aspects of changing benefit. For example:

'It's a bit of a mess like now...I starve one week and feed the next.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; South East Wales)

'If you are receiving £60 every two weeks with this credit crunch and you are paying bills...It's not as if you are earning and you can put aside a little reserve. If it's £60 every two weeks, between the last payments and for two weeks you have nothing.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Birmingham and Solihull)

At the point of transition from IS to JSA, however, customers report the introduction of a range of financial coping mechanisms.

For some, the transition was managed through basic spending cuts or by putting money aside in preparation for the switch-over. For example, one customer described how they had put some money aside in anticipation of the changes rather than apply for a loan, commenting *'...to me, it's you just cut your cloth to suit your means'* (customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders). For those who had chosen to borrow money to support them through the changeover, there was a clear preference for approaching informal lending sources, such as close family or friends. As one customer commented:

'I would probably go with family and friends first and then if they couldn't help me, then I would go to the jobcentre.'

(IS customer with a youngest child aged six and under; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

However, many customers stressed how family members could often ill-afford this help, particularly those whose immediate family was also reliant on benefits as the main source of income: *'They're all in the same position right now'* (customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth). The support provided was therefore seen as a short-term 'bail-out' rather than something that could be relied on over the longer term. Further, even though most customers reported having access to various sources of financial support, many were reluctant to borrow money because of the long-term effect that it would have on their income when paying it back.

Most of the existing customers interviewed who had been moved from IS to JSA did not take up the offer of an LPTL to meet the gap in payment of benefit, some because they had not been told about it, but mostly because they did not want to incur more debt owing to previous or ongoing negative experiences with debt (especially if they were coping with a longer-term reduction in benefits). As the following customer quote illustrates:

'They said we should be given, they will give us loans, but I've got so many loans I'm paying already, I don't want to go for any more loans.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Birmingham and Solihull)

One customer reported that they had not been informed of the option of taking out an LPTL by their adviser and appeared unaware of the details of the changeover from IS to JSA, including the change in benefit frequency from weekly to fortnightly. *'I lost about £90 altogether, and they didn't warn me about that'* (customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Birmingham and Solihull). Whether this customer had not been informed by their adviser, or had been informed but had not understood the information, it is an important illustration that not all customers felt prepared for the change. Hardly any customers contacted another organisation for help or information regarding financial difficulties during this transition.

4.5 Staff views on the effects of IS ending on customers and their families

Staff were asked how effective they felt IS ending was in moving lone parents towards work. It is important to note that when doing the interviews with staff it was quite early in the roll-out of LPO for staff to have views on the effects of LPO on lone parents. Staff felt that the ending of IS entitlement, and subsequent JSA conditionality for lone parents who chose to move onto that benefit, would help to encourage lone parents to look for work and also challenge the culture of benefit dependency felt to be prevalent amongst some lone parent customers. Staff were generally in agreement that lone parents and their families are financially better off when a lone parent is in work than on benefits, and cited a number of other social and economic benefits of working, including setting a good example for children and combating child poverty through increased income. The responses below are typical:

'...when they actually get a job, they come back and they say, "I'm so glad..." we get a lot of lone parents with depression...so it's good for their health, their wellbeing, and for their children as well.'

(ASM)

'It can only be a good thing helping customers back into work, and positive for their children.'

(LPA)

Staff felt that the longer customers were on inactive benefits, such as IS, the more difficult it became for them to return to work. All staff interviewed (bar two), agreed with the changes. However, a small number of staff who were broadly supportive of the changes questioned certain elements. Some front-line jobcentre staff and a number of the BDC staff felt that reducing the LPO changes to affect customers with a youngest child aged seven was too young. These staff felt that customers with a youngest child aged ten, or in one case 12 and one case 14 should be the youngest age to which LPO should apply, as these quotes illustrate:

'...it does seem to be a very young age when we get down to the seven-year-olds.'

(BDTL)

'Ten upwards is great. Seven, personally I feel is too young. I've got a seven year old and I've done it but I'm with a partner and I've got a support network of in-laws, my parents...'

(LPA)

There were differing opinions from staff on the reactions and attitudes of customers to the LPO changes. Advisers felt that lone parents' reactions to the ending of their IS eligibility depended on individuals' attitudes to work and their personal circumstances. They felt that some lone parents went through the motions of thinking about work while bringing up every possible barrier, whereas others engaged and really wanted to work.

Advisers also said that they were trying to persuade customers to do courses while they were still eligible for IS to help them move closer to work, particularly if they were interested in longer courses. Staff reported that there had been an increase in the take-up of training due to LPO. One adviser cited a customer who, before LPO had not actively engaged with jobcentre support, since LPO had gone on a training course and had become a lot more motivated because the end of IS eligibility was imminent. Staff reported customers undertaking health and beauty, nursing and teaching assistant courses.

A number of front-line staff reported that on the whole the lone parent customers they saw had so far reacted well to, and accepted, the changes. One FJR believed that once lone parents had understood the JSA flexibilities, a move to JSA became more acceptable to them. However, one CETL reported having worked with a few lone parents who were not happy about the changes and an LPA in the same district also supported this. One ASM expected an increased amount of resistance from lone parent customers with each phase of the roll-out and an LPA, whose customers had generally reacted well to the changes, felt that customers would react differently as the age is lowered to seven.

Alongside the process of ending customers' IS eligibility staff felt it was important to emphasise the potential benefits of work and to allay customer concerns. Staff recognised that moving from IS would be a big transition for many customers and particularly those who had been receiving benefit for a long time, and those who were third or fourth generation benefit claimants. As one BDO explained:

'The biggest challenge is making customers understand why it's happening. A lot of them have just been too used to being on benefit...so it's really more of a cultural change.'

(BDO)

It is important to note that the attitude of customers to LPO was not static and often varied dependent on what stage in the process they were at. Staff highlighted that customers were most likely to be negative about LPO before and during the IS-ending stages but that once the transition was complete and customers were settled onto an alternative benefit or into work, their attitude to the change was often more positive (see Section 5.7).

'They think it's just...maybe an annoyance, but when they actually get into it and especially when they get a job that they've maybe not thought about before, they're really, really happy.'

(FJR Team Leader)

Staff reported an 'anticipation effect' with some customers who were due to lose their eligibility leaving IS as soon as they found out about their IS ending. Staff reported that some moved into work, some moved off benefits as they had been doing undeclared work or had partners. A few advisers from different case study areas reported that some lone parents had fallen pregnant again or had taken custody of one of their grandchildren to avoid the ending of their IS eligibility.

4.6 Customer views on the effects of IS ending on them and their families

Some lone parents felt that they had too many family responsibilities to look for work, were studying or had a health condition that they felt prevented them from working. Others had started to look for work after hearing about LPO. The types of jobs lone parents whose IS eligibility was due to end were looking for included:

- taxi driver;
- teaching assistant;
- office worker;
- school catering assistant;
- civil servant;
- retail worker.

However, some lone parents had no idea what they wanted to do or said they would do anything. Those who were looking for work were using a range of work-search activities. These included help from Jobcentre Plus (including NDLP), looking through newspaper adverts, asking friends in work, going around local shops, going to local job brokerage services, and searching on the internet. Some seemed confident that the LPO changes would not effect them as they planned to be in work anyway.

Many lone parents had had Better Off Calculations (BOCs) and most thought that they would be financially better off in work, although said they would not know for sure until they actually did it. BOCs could have positive impacts on lone parents' attitudes to work. One customer's BOC had shown that she would be £90 a week better off:

'I was chuffed about it but I was more determined to get work then. Because the rent's so high on this place I didn't think I would be better off, but I'd be much better off. ...If I didn't go to these interviews I would have still been thinking that I can't go out to get a job because I can't afford it. Because I went to one of these interviews they said I'm going to be £90 better off and I wouldn't have known that.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

However, some lone parents thought that they would be worse off in work due to the extra costs of prescriptions, dentists and opticians, travel to work and childcare. Some had previous experience of work where they had found that they were not much better off after paying back debt and expenses such as children's school meals.

A small number of lone parents who were in the run-up to their IS eligibility ending when sampled for this research had moved off IS and into work of 16 hours a week or more by the time they were interviewed. These included jobs as a hairdresser and working in their children's school. A few others had mini-jobs of less than 16 hours a week which they were doing while still claiming IS.

Customers expressed concern about reducing the age of the youngest child in LPO for other lone parents in a similar situation to themselves. A small number felt that reducing eligibility to a youngest child aged seven was acceptable; although interviews suggest that a reduction under age seven would meet with negligible support from lone parents. However, a number of customers felt that even at age 12 children were too young to cope with a working lone parent. For many customers, this perspective reflects the lack of awareness about, and reluctance to take up, formal childcare for older and/or school-age children (see Sections 2.4.1 and 5.4). For example:

'...I don't think it's human...Leaving a 12 year old in a house, I just don't think that's right.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

'...the teenage years they rather need the parents more. So, I think that the Government needs to go back to the drawing board...That is why the evidence is out now for the whole world to see that British children unfortunately are having a lot of serious problems [such as] teenage pregnancy.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Birmingham and Solihull)

However, other lone parents felt that concerns about leaving their children to go out to work would be offset by the positive benefits of work (see Section 2.4.1).

4.7 Summary

- All staff interviewed were aware of the existence of exemptions and transitional protection. Staff raised customer awareness of the changes through LPWFIs, Options and Choices Events, and printed materials such as letters and leaflets. Staff felt that LPWFIs were very useful for getting customers to focus on the changes, and felt that the quarterly frequency of these in the final year of IS eligibility was beneficial.
- Staff were provided with communications, guidance and training about LPO to aid their understanding of the changes and the processes underpinning the implementation. Staff were generally happy with the content of the guidance materials they had received.
- The staff interviewed felt that customers had good levels of awareness about the LPO changes and the implications for them. Respondents whose IS eligibility was shortly due to end were generally aware of the forthcoming changes to the lone parent benefit regime and generally had a reasonable level of understanding of the basic changes involved. Most appeared to understand that once they became ineligible for IS, if they applied for JSA, they would be expected to actively seek work.
- Most staff said that uptake of LPTLs had been low. Most respondents who had moved from IS to JSA did not take up the offer of an LPTL; some because they had not been told about it, but mostly because they did not want to incur (more) debt. Customers would fill this gap by borrowing from friends and/or family and budgeting in the run up to the change.
- Overwhelmingly, staff interviewed felt the implementation of LPO had gone well. The following were felt to have contributed to the success:
 - thorough guidance and training;
 - successful partnership working and communications;
 - effective organisation and management of the changes;
 - good customer communications.

- Looking to the future roll-out, staff reported a number of issues that should be considered in order to ensure the continued successful implementation of LPO. These included a need to:
 - ensure that sufficient appropriate and affordable childcare provision is available for children aged seven and above;
 - continue to manage LPO effectively, especially if the number of lone parents affected by LPO increases in the future;
 - increase the awareness of LPO for jobcentre staff who are not directly involved in the changes but who interact with customers who are affected.
- Staff felt that the ending of IS entitlement, and subsequent JSA conditionality for lone parents who chose to move onto that benefit, would help to encourage lone parents to look for work.

5 The Jobseeker's Allowance regime and lone parents

A proportion of lone parents who lose their entitlement to Income Support (IS) will make a claim for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). This section presents data from interviews with two groups of customers: one group who have recently moved from IS to JSA because they lost their IS eligibility due to Lone Parent Obligations (LPO); and another group of new and repeat customers with a youngest child aged 14-16 who have made a claim for JSA since LPO was introduced. Information from staff interviews relevant to the JSA regime for lone parents is also presented in this chapter.

Lone parents on the JSA regime are subject to the same legal regulations as other jobseekers, including being required to: complete a Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg); actively look for work; and attend a jobcentre regularly to confirm that they have been available for and actively seeking work. While many lone parents will be able to meet existing JSA requirements, it is recognised that the circumstances of lone parents are varied. Therefore, new parent flexibilities have been inserted into the JSA regulations for lone parents and dependent partners of main claimants who are parents to recognise their responsibility to care for a dependent child. The content and application of these flexibilities will be discussed later in this chapter.

Notwithstanding the application of flexibilities, there are circumstances where a lone parent claiming JSA can lose benefit and be sanctioned. Lone parents entering the JSA regime will be affected by the wider changes to JSA that commenced roll-out in April 2009, of which all of the case study areas for this evaluation were part. The new JSA regime is divided into four stages, with Jobcentre Plus delivering the first three stages and the fourth being delivered by contracted, external providers. The four stages are as follows:

- Stage 1: initial claim to three months: self directed job search and fortnightly reviews with a group session to reinforce rights and responsibilities and encourage access to the back-to-work help available.
- Stage 2: three to six months: directed job search, weekly signing and submission to vacancies.
- Stage 3: six to 12 months: supported job search with an adviser, fortnightly job search review, a back-to-work action plan.
- Stage 4: 12 to 24 months: Flexible New Deal (FND) provider stage – mandatory referral for up to a year to a contracted provider that will have the flexibility to provide support matched to individual needs based on an initial in-depth assessment.

Further detail about the format of the JSA regime for lone parents is given throughout this chapter and in Section 1.3.4.

This chapter explores:

- customer understanding of the JSA regime and their experiences of making a claim for JSA;
- staff and customer experience of the JSA parent flexibilities;
- the childcare that is in place to support lone parents to return to work;
- the support lone parents have received from Jobcentre Plus in their work-search, and the types of work they are looking for;
- customer and staff understanding and experience of sanctions and disallowances under the JSA regime;
- the early effects of the JSA regime on lone parents who have recently moved from IS, and new and repeat JSA customers also affected by LPO.

5.1 Customer understanding of the JSA regime

Most new and repeat JSA customers and JSA customers that had recently moved from IS that were interviewed for this research had a good understanding of the requirements of the JSA regime. There were no differences between new and repeat and existing customers in terms of understanding. Customers could recall having the regime explained to them and knew what was expected of them. For example:

- the need to sign-on (customers knew they had to attend jobcentres fortnightly, and for those that had reached that stage, weekly after their 13-week review meeting);
- what being available for work meant (although one customer thought that if a job came up they would have to be available to take it up the following day);

- the need to seek work (and provide evidence of doing so);
- the need to provide evidence of any mini-jobs/volunteering they were doing;
- completing a JSAg and the need to be looking for three types of work;
- after six months having to extend the type of work they were looking for.

A few customers, however, felt that they did not understand the information that they had been given and a few showed in their responses that they did not always understand exactly what the requirements of the JSA regime were. For example:

'You have to prove that you're applying for jobs. You get a sheet of paper and you just write which ones you've applied for, what your follow-up is like, when there's a closing date or whatever. You take that with you every fortnight. So I think that you have to apply for at least four...four jobs a week, or something, or four or six jobs, or it might be it's eight, I don't know. I just...I just write down the ones I do, and I take it along.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

There was some evidence of customers moving to weekly signing once they reached their 13-week review meeting (Stage 2 of the JSA regime). While in the example below the customer speculated as to why they had changed from fortnightly to weekly signing, most customers who had reached Stage 2 of the JSA regime knew they had to sign weekly instead of fortnightly for a period, they did not always understand why that was.

'Just a few weeks ago they changed my fortnightly signing to weekly signing. And I think they did that for like four weeks in a row.'

Interviewer: Why did they do that?

I think it was...do you know what, I think I was actually told that they do that because then you would have more help in you finding work. So, rather than you coming every fortnight you would be signing every week, and maybe it's to make you think I can't keep coming every week to do this, I need to get myself a job. So, that may have been another way to sort of giving you a kick.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

5.2 Making a JSA claim

This section examines staff and customer perspectives of the process of claiming JSA, both for new and repeat customers, and existing customers who have moved from IS owing to LPO. New and repeat JSA customers have to make a claim through the Jobcentre Plus call centre, and then attend their local jobcentre for a face-to-face interview. Making a JSA claim for lone parents whose IS eligibility has ended is slightly different as the information usually gathered via the call centre is collected as their IS ends, and a benefit switching process occurs (as described in

Chapter 4). Therefore, all the contact customers who have moved to JSA from IS have with Jobcentre Plus is face-to-face. First the staff experience of helping lone parents to make a JSA claim is explored, and particularly their perceptions of lone parent customers' work-readiness.

5.2.1 Staff experience of helping lone parents to make a JSA claim

Staff interviews demonstrate a distinction between the two 'types' of lone parents at claiming stage. Existing customers whose eligibility to IS had ended were noted to be more resistant to the change, often lower-skilled with less work experience, and less prepared for the JSA regime. In contrast, new and repeat JSA customers were reported to be more 'savvy' about the process and/or increasingly tended to be higher-skilled professionals who had been made redundant during the recession and were using JSA to bridge them into a new job. The latter group of customers also tended to be more positive and proactive with job search discussions at the claim stage. Compare, for example, the following staff impressions:

'The ones that are new and repeat understand exactly what's going on. The ones that have been switched over are reluctant for the change to effect... they will change because they have to, but it's enforcing it. And they don't like the enforcement, really, but there's nothing else they can do and they realise that it's up to them...It's no longer our responsibility to call them in; it's their responsibility to come in, to avail themselves at work, to show us what's been happening on a fortnightly basis and then on a weekly basis at 13-week stage. And it's a much more structured regime and I think, perhaps, it's the structure that they don't like, or being structured or organised.'

(LPA)

'We do kind of get some lone parents that they come immediately onto JSA...their child may even be under that age group but because they've come from employment, they're quite happy to claim Jobseeker's Allowance and they're proactive in their job search...they expect to be working in a very short period of time and some of them, for example, have been made redundant recently. They're professional; they're well-educated, you know, that they have the skills and qualifications. They know how to look, where to look and, you know, that are not going to be on our register for very long...they're claiming JSA because they are unemployed, so they need the financial support but don't want to be associated with Income Support as they see that as a step backward.'

(FJR)

In recognition of these differences, staff rephrased their explanations of the JSA regime accordingly. For example, while staff generally said they emphasised the conditionality of the JSA regime to ensure that lone parents were aware of the requirements, this was particularly the case when communicating with existing customers, when effort was made to explain the difference compared with being on IS.

Staff often expressed concern as to how some existing customers would adjust to the change. Often they noted how, at the claim stage, the new reality of JSA did not quite sink in:

'Customers don't completely understand it [the JSA regime] as it's too much for them to take in. So it's not until this stage that the customers fully understand how strict JSA is. In particular, the holidays are not so flexible, can't go on holiday as often as when they were on IS...But we have to be strict with them, we really do, and it is difficult for them.'

(LPA)

Given these difficulties, adequate preparation of existing customers for the changeover was cited by some staff as key to a smooth claim-making process. This further demonstrates how staff perceptions of the divergent customers' attitudes towards the JSA regime are mirrored in their different approaches to securing customers' understanding. The following discussion considers customers' perspectives of this process and the overlaps, as well as differences, between these two customer groups.

5.2.2 Customer experience of making a new or repeat claim for JSA

Most of the new and repeat customers we interviewed said that calling the call centre initially was straightforward and an efficient way of starting their claim. The following quote is typical:

'It was, it seemed very fast, very efficient, very quick: the lady was very polite, very professional: haven't got no problem with how I was dealt with and how quick that was.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

However, some new and repeat customers found the process daunting as they were not aware they needed to call a number first before attending the jobcentre in person, while several also reported frustration at then having to give the same information in the face-to-face interview. For example:

'I'd not done it before so I didn't know quite when I had to do it, who I had to contact, when I had to contact them. It was quite a daunting prospect.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

'Now over the phone, they take every single detail off you. They tell you it's all processed. You've got an appointment to go to your jobcentre at such and such date. You go to the jobcentre, and then they make you sit there and fill out the whole lot all over again. And you're like, well, hang on a minute, I've just done this two days ago on the phone.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales)

At the interview stage, new and repeat JSA customers reported mixed experiences: some remember signing a JSAg, while others do not; not everyone could recall having an action plan; and there was some evidence of arbitrariness in terms of having the conditionality of the JSA regime systematically explained, or at least in customer's recall of this happening. While the same issues were indicated by many existing customers who had recently moved from IS, as a whole new and repeat JSA customers indicated that they had covered this more thoroughly, or at least that they could better recall having this explained. While most customers in both groups said they had a basic discussion of their work needs and aspirations, and basic direction regarding job search activities, a thorough work-search discussion at the point of making a claim was reported to be rare. Some customers implied this was not sufficient:

'Yeah, there was a little bit of an action plan. It was only, like, you must do three things a week to find work and you're available to work day or night, travel a reasonable distance. What are the other things I had to do? I had to use my own network of contacts to try and find work and this sort of thing.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

Some new and repeat JSA customers also commented that they felt there was a stigma associated with claiming JSA, which contributed to a negative experience at claiming stage. For example, one customer who had worked in the recent past and not made any other previous benefits claims said:

'You're made to feel as if you're scrounging and begging for money.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

The effects and influence of claiming JSA on motivations to work is explored in more detail in Section 5.7. Many new and repeat JSA customers mentioned that making a new JSA claim often went hand in hand with complications to their other benefits, such as Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) given their altered circumstances. This, along with often needing to negotiate different agencies responsible for the different benefits, could make the experience stressful and confusing. Below are two examples that are typical of the language used by respondents to describe this process:

'Stressful. The jobcentre were helpful but it was the whole process of getting everything sorted, my Housing Benefit, and everything, and you know, when you do the follow-on. There's a follow-on over for the Working Tax Credit (WTC), which messed up my Housing Benefit, because they weren't sure when I was on JSA, so I had a whole stress, a stressful two or three months of it.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales)

'It's just having to deal with all the different people. I mean, it's quite straightforward at the jobcentre but...then you've got to deal with the local Council about your HB and CTB and they tend to throw spanners in the works.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

These experiences suggest that a 'one-stop-service' would be helpful, where customers could coordinate their whole benefits package rather than having to navigate different organisations by themselves. Similar administrative disruptions have been noted in other research examining the transition to and from benefits as the claim process is fragmented between different agencies and sections (Finn *et al.*, 2008).

Many new and repeat JSA customers noted a two-week delay in receiving their first JSA payment; this could be seen as owing to the fact that JSA is paid fortnightly in arrears and perhaps indicates some confusion in customers' understanding of this. Other new and repeat JSA customers, however, reported four to six weeks' delay in receiving their first JSA payment; either owing to perceived advisers' confusion or their previous employer delaying P45 forms. Some customers in this situation had taken out crisis loans or borrowed money from family or friends which created, or in some cases added, to debt. For example, one customer recalled her experience of making a JSA claim in early February and signing on for the first time. Her payment was delayed because she had to send proof of an IT course she was taking before her first payment could be processed:

'While I was waiting for that, it was holding up my HB claim. Because they knew that I'd lost my job, so they already informed them, to tell them I was now like zero income, and then they were asked, well, what are you living on? And I was like, well, actually, at the moment I'm not living on anything, because I'm not getting Jobseeker's because they can't pay me because they haven't got this letter. And then housing people were threatening to cut off the existing money that I had, because I couldn't prove how I was living. It took to April until everything was sorted.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

Another customer, when asked if there was a gap between making her first claim and receiving her first payment, recalled a four-week delay:

'I think that was four weeks...I've borrowed money from my mum before for food or whatever, you know, because I think I'm in about £400 debt already, so I'm seriously having to get to work, and I basically can't do anything, can't give [daughter] anything.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

However, while many customers had experienced delays, they generally reported that their payment was fully backdated when it did come through.

5.2.3 Existing customers' experiences of the switching process

Existing customers who had been switched from IS to JSA had, on balance, a more straightforward claim process. Good communication here was deemed crucial. In the Phase 1 roll-out of LPO customers moving to JSA from IS had their payments changed from weekly for fortnightly. Prior to Phase 2 of LPO, IS customers will have been transferred to fortnightly payments.

The same payment gaps and disruption to other benefits noted by new and repeat JSA customers were also present with some existing customers' changeovers to JSA. In addition, there were occasionally issues with lost paperwork and a lack of access to other vital support such as money for bus fares to pay visits to separate benefit departments (e.g. for Council Tax or HB respectively). As one customer commented:

'There was a lot of confusion...When I came off of IS I had an interview and I filled in all the forms to say I'm switching over to JSA, and then I didn't hear nothing so I went back down there and told them, and apparently they lost all my papers. So, I had to do it all over again. I didn't have nothing for four weeks.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Another customer recalled how her Housing Association (HA) had misunderstood her situation, assuming that her benefits were stopping entirely rather than changing from IS to JSA. Consequently, she was told she needed to obtain verification from the jobcentre to present to the HA, which she did over several round bus trips to and from the different offices, extended given the additional factor that the jobcentre had the wrong address for her. The cost added up considerably and eventually she had no money left to pay her bus fare and proceed to the next meeting, delaying the process further.

5.2.4 The JSA claim process overall

Comparing new and repeat JSA customers' experiences with those of existing IS customers of making a JSA claim highlights structural and process differences between these two groups. Customers who had moved from IS to JSA overall had a smoother experience of the claims process owing to pre-existing relationships with their LPA who helped them fill out the relevant forms, as opposed to new and repeat JSA customers who sometimes were unsure how to proceed. Individuals in both groups, however, experienced delays of several weeks with their first JSA payment and recounted disruptions or late starts to other benefits, notably housing and Council Tax subsidies, which often led to arrears for both groups. Despite this vulnerability, as discussed in Section 4.4.3 few existing customers said they wanted to take up the lone parent transition loan (LPTL) as they preferred to avoid creating (more) debt.

5.3 The JSA flexibilities for parents

Additional flexibilities have been introduced to the JSA regime to meet the specific needs of customers who are responsible for caring for a child(ren). To provide consistency and ensure equal treatment, these flexibilities do not just apply to lone parents. For a main claimant jobseeker who is a parent and who has a dependent partner at home, the non-working partner would be expected to provide childcare and the flexibilities would be applied to the dependent partner parent not the main claimant parent. The flexibilities in the JSA regime for parents include:

- postal signing if short-term childcare arrangements cannot be put in place to enable a parent to sign-on during the school holidays;
- where a bereavement or domestic emergency has occurred, Jobcentre Plus may accept that they are not available to take up work for one week on a maximum of four occasions in any 12 months;
- extending the timescales for attending a job interview from 48 hours to one week;
- extending the timescales to take up a job offer from one week to 28 days;
- extending the reasons for Good and Just Cause for leaving a job or failing to take up a job, on the account of whether appropriate and/or affordable childcare is available. Section 5.4.2 discusses in more detail how what constitutes appropriate and affordable childcare is decided by lone parents and advisers;
- enabling parents to restrict the number of working hours to a minimum of 16 hours a week;
- allowing parents to restrict their availability for work in any way during times when a parenting order or contract is in place or a child is excluded from school. Parents may be treated as available for work (i.e. eligible for JSA) when a child is excluded from school and childcare arrangements cannot be made;
- treating parents as available for work (i.e. eligible for JSA) during school holidays if childcare arrangements cannot be made.

The member of Jobcentre Plus staff required to apply these flexibilities, conduct sign-on meetings and support lone parent customers on the JSA regime varied between our case study areas and in some cases between Jobcentre Plus offices in the same case study area. For example, in some instances it was the FJR who conducted sign-on appointments with lone parents, in others it was an LPA. There were also differences between the staff supporting new and repeat JSA customers and the staff supporting lone parents who had recently moved from IS to JSA.

In two of the case study areas – South East Wales, and North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber – LPAs saw lone parent customers who moved from IS to JSA during the initial implementation of LPO. However, as the obligations rolled out, it was reported that the workload of LPAs became too great. In the later stages of

Phase 1 implementation, lone parents in these areas who moved from IS to JSA were seen by generalist front-line staff. In Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders LPAs generally worked with lone parents who moved from IS to JSA during the initial implementation of LPO, but there was some variation by office. In all three of these areas lone parents who were new or repeat JSA customers were seen by generalist staff.

By contrast, in Birmingham and Solihull, and Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth, lone parents who moved from IS to JSA were seen by generalist staff. These staff also worked with new and repeat JSA claimants who were lone parents.

These different staffing arrangements imply that there is likely to be differences between case study areas in the customers' experience of the JSA regime. In some areas there will be differences between the experience of lone parents who are new and repeat JSA claimants (who meet with FJRs and generalist JSA staff) and those who have moved from IS to JSA (who are signed on and supported by LPAs).

The remainder of this section will focus on staff awareness and understanding of the JSA parent flexibilities, as well as their experience of using them. Finally it will review evidence from the JSA customer interviews to assess the extent to which the flexibilities are being applied and whether they are being applied consistently.

Most of the interviews conducted for this phase of the evaluation were with specialist staff and those who had been very involved with the implementation and roll-out of LPO in the early stages, so a high level of awareness and understanding is perhaps to be expected. Overall, the staff that were interviewed for the evaluation demonstrated a good awareness and understanding of the flexibilities in the JSA regime. For example, most staff were aware that lone parents claiming JSA could restrict the working hours they sought to 16 hours a week, that they could specify when they wanted to work, for example, within school hours, that postal sign-ons could be used if necessary and that travel times and geographic work-search areas could be limited as required. In general, it was reported that a common sense approach when dealing with parents looking for work was required and this was felt to be embodied in the flexibilities. The staff knowledge of flexibilities in the JSA regime is demonstrated below.

'They'll often come in and say I can't go out to work full time. You're like, no, you're going onto JSA, but you know, it's fine, you can restrict your hours to school hours...and when they realise we're a bit more human they're all right.'

(LPA)

'The flexibilities are all about using common sense...for JSA you'd be required to be available for 40 hours per week, with the JSA flexibilities that could be brought down to a minimum of 16 hours'

(ASM)

With the flexibilities for parents receiving JSA in place, one member of managerial staff reported that in effect there were several different benefit systems: one for lone parents on IS, one for jobseekers and one for lone parent jobseekers. They felt that front line staff could sometimes struggle to move between supporting customers on these different benefits regimes.

There were isolated examples of a lack of, or no, understanding of the JSA flexibilities for parents on the JSA regime. For example, one Labour Market Decision Maker (LMDM) described how cases had been escalated to decision making level, which they felt should have had the flexibilities applied to them at an earlier stage. An adviser illustrated that there was some confusion about how to support parents who were not willing or unable to work full time. They explained that a lone parent would have to return to IS if they could not fulfil the conditions attached to receiving JSA:

'You would explain obviously the implications of claiming JSA and what needs to be achieved to claim JSA...now if for any reason they cannot meet those obligations then really they should be on IS right? So our advice would be, certain my advice would be then either speak to an LPA about it or indeed change your claim from JSA to IS.'

(PA)

Several staff mentioned that increasing the awareness of parent issues and the parent flexibilities among all staff working with this customer group was a challenge. One FJR felt that there were gaps in awareness and understanding of the flexibilities among their colleagues which could lead to instances of parents not receiving the flexibility and tailoring of the JSA regime that they are entitled to and therefore a lack of consistency in applications across all parents:

'The only situation might be someone might come in and ask for something and be told that it's not possible, when it is actually possible...Trying to make everyone on the FJR section aware of that...that should more or less ensure that no one's missing out on any opportunity or any kind of flexibilities they have available.'

(FJR)

When it came to applying the flexibilities it was generally noted that application of them to date had been limited because of the small number of lone parents affected by LPO at the time the staff interviews took place. This meant that some staff had no experience of applying the flexibilities. Those staff that had needed to apply the flexibilities reported that the LPAs had sound knowledge and provided support to them about the issues lone parents could face when looking for work and the specialist support that is available to them. For example, one FJR in the London case study said that although they were aware a parent's JSAg could be amended to hours that are appropriate to the individual, rather than 40 hours a week, they did not personally feel confident about tailoring the agreement. Where they had identified that a lone parent customer's JSA claim required flexibilities, they said they would refer the customer to an LPA because they had more specialist

and in-depth knowledge and would be better placed to tailor the flexibilities. Alongside colleagues, the written Jobcentre Plus guidance about the flexibilities was also a reference source for some staff and was reported to be used on an ad-hoc basis to guide staff through the application of the lone parent flexibilities. In some instances it was used as a reference to see if there was anything in them that could be applied to specific customer needs that had been identified:

'I wouldn't say I know all about it [the flexibilities], but...if there's something that the customer required in terms of their LPO, then we would look into flexibility to see if there's anything we could do to help that customer.'

(FJR)

One new and repeat JSA customer, who had the flexibilities applied to her job search requirements, described how her adviser was unsure about how and whether she could limit the hours she was willing to work, but after checking with colleagues applied the flexibilities to her case:

'He had to go and check with his colleagues, to see if that was okay...he had to go and check to make sure it was correct that I worked the amount of hours per week. Well, I thought, it's on there for a reason. I've got commitments after school, and then I like to go to work as my child's leaving to go to school, and I want to come home as my child's coming home from school, so they put down 20 to 25.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

A small number of staff suggested that the JSA flexibilities introduced as part of LPO can be abused by customers who do not want to work and enable lone parents to effectively treat JSA as an inactive benefit. For example:

'...if they say to me they're not prepared to come in and sign during the school holidays I haven't got any right to make them come in and do it... those that know what they can get away with will use it every time...it's not everybody but it is abused.'

(LPA)

'If a lone parent was canny enough they could almost treat it like still being on IS...you've almost given them that many flexibilities that they could play the system quite well and not really be particularly looking for work.'

(LPA)

The sometimes patchy awareness and application of the parent flexibilities among (generalist) staff is supported by the customer experience. While some JSA customers reported they were looking for part-time work and described other flexibilities that had been applied to their job search, there were a handful of examples where customers felt that Jobcentre Plus advisers had not treated their job search flexibly enough or did not understand their requirements. All of the examples below are for new and repeat JSA customers who were supported by generalist staff in the case study areas.

'My adviser, he wants me to do 35 hours which I can't do because I've got a 12½ year old son, I could, there's no way I can get a job from like nine until five and my son coming here at half past four, who's going to be on my door, Social Services, you know...why am I being pushed to go do long hours? I've explained it to my adviser that I can only do 25 hours and I'm, he's still looking for 35 hours, telling me that I can negotiate with the employer. How can I?'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

'When I first went in, I had an appointment with a lady, and she asked me what I was looking for work-wise, and I said part-time retail. And she said that to get JSA I had to look for full-time work.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales)

'I said that I could only work around my son because, you know, he's 13, he's got learning difficulties and stuff. I couldn't leave him so I needed a job around him and all they wanted to do was put me into, you know, carers look after him and me go to work. There was no compromise on it. It was not good...You know they were treating me like a single person who had no commitment to home or to a child like but they were treating me like I should work 40 hours a week and put my child into some sort of care system while I was in work, which I didn't want to do.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales)

As LPO rolls out and more lone parents move from IS to JSA, an increasing number of front-line generalist staff should gain experience of working with this customer group and will be required to apply the parent flexibilities where necessary (however, some lone parent customers want to find full-time work). It would seem that, to date, awareness of the flexibilities among non-specialist Jobcentre Plus staff implementing the JSA regime for lone parents has been patchy and this has resulted in some inconsistency of their application. Further staff training may be required to increase awareness of the parent flexibilities in the JSA regime. This would be likely to result in the flexibilities being more consistently applied. Implementing the parent flexibilities, where they are required by the customers and are appropriate, should lead to an increased chance that the customer will find employment that is more practical for them to balance with family and caring responsibilities and that will, therefore, be more sustainable in the medium term.

5.4 Childcare to support the JSA regime

This section will discuss the availability and gaps in childcare provision for older children, for lone parents whose IS eligibility was shortly due to end at the time of interview, customers who have recently moved from IS to JSA, and new and repeat JSA claimants. It includes both staff and customers' perspectives focusing on how the issues raised relate to these customers' new requirements under the

JSA regime. These customers are those with a youngest child aged 12 or over. Perceptions of childcare availability and affordability for younger children were detailed in Section 3.3. It is important to note that childcare is devolved in Scotland and Wales and so childcare provision by government is different across the nations which will affect availability of childcare for lone parents. However, we have not found any differences in the key issues raised by interviewees between the case study areas.

5.4.1 Gaps in provision: 'limbo age' and seasonal barriers to work

Generally, there was greater alignment between staff and customer views on provision for children aged between 12 and 16 than those relating to younger children. This is discussed in Chapter 3. For example, both customers and staff commented that children in this age group were often too old to require intensive 'childcare', but also too young to be left entirely on their own before or after school hours if the parent was working or looking for work – a 'limbo age' for which provision was scarce. This was especially seen to be the case in terms of pre- and after-school clubs which, when they were available, could carry higher costs than clubs for younger children. The following staff views reflect this:

'I wouldn't say that there's a lot available in 11 up. So if you were talking to a parent who had concerns about leaving the child of the higher age bracket, then we might not be able to signpost them to appropriate organisations, or there's not going to be that provision in their school for them. And I think, you know, childminders are not always necessarily willing to take on older children: they're obviously looking at younger children.'

(ASM)

'...after-school clubs, obviously very paramount and very good in primary schools; once you get to secondary schools there's still stigma with all the kids at 12 or 13 that don't want to go there, too old for that, and yet their parent feels they're too young to be left on their own.'

(LPA)

In line with this, most of the parents interviewed in these two groups said they were not using any formal childcare and would not take any up in the future, largely because they felt their children were old enough to travel and be left at home independently, and also since older siblings would also be able to take on more responsibility. However, there was an underlying tension between this stance and the dilemma of leaving teenagers to their own devices:

'He's 16...me personally I would say yes, age is appropriate. But individually I couldn't leave my youngest one on her own. I mean, she would look after herself, but she would scrap with him or whatever. I would be stressing if my house was intact when I got home, do you know what I mean. I think they should be left a little bit on their own, but they are just not that age to look after themselves sufficiently, I don't think.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; South East Wales)

Many parents also expressed discomfort at the thought of their child becoming a 'latch-key kid', especially given perceived crime and gang problems. Lone parents in certain case study areas (e.g. Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth) perceived these problems to be particularly acute. The quality of after-school clubs was also a concern in some areas, as the following parent indicated:

'I don't think they want to go to tell you the truth, especially this one. The other one is 16 and he's going to go to college in September, but I don't think this one wants to go. Especially here in this area the children feel scared to tell you the truth. They don't even want to go out. They only go to school and come back. That's it. Because they had a shooting here. A boy was here just by my house a couple of weeks ago. The children are really scared to go anywhere.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Echoing similar concerns, staff in urban areas with a higher rate of youth crime commented that it was potentially dangerous to leave teenagers on their own as they may fall prey to gang culture and anti-social behaviour:

'We're really worried, particularly in Area [X]. Area [Y] in particular, with the crime rate being so hard with, high, with youngsters, and parents were very concerned that there wasn't a sufficient formal provision available for the 11 to 14 year olds. And we're not really talking about childcare, but mainly sort of structured provision.'

(CPM)

Looking at the effects of the age of their child(ren) on lone parents' views on paid employment, there was generally agreement that working was more practical with an older child:

'...the practical reasons being in the sense that I haven't got to rely on babysitters, I don't need to look for outside help to come in and help me with my kids.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales)

However, the flexibilities in place in the JSA regime mean that these parents could look for work that would fit around school hours and therefore, should they wish, be at home when their children return from school (see Section 5.3 for more about the flexibilities in the JSA regime).

In contrast, in less urban areas such as rural parts of South East Wales, and North and East Yorkshire, and The Humber, parents' social networks were reported to be very strong. Many had lived in the same area for a long time and had family also in the area meaning that, while formal childcare was not reported to be good, there was a network of friends/parents who took turns in using their house after school to look after children. As one parent commented:

'Everybody round here has got children, and we all get on really, really well so it's only a matter of saying to a neighbour, look, I'm out for an hour, do you think you could nip in and...you know, we all sort of look after each other's.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

Another lack in 'limbo age' provision was the widely noted gap in summer time/holiday activities for older children across all areas which, according to many members of staff, manifests itself as a seasonal, and costly, barrier to work for lone parents:

'There isn't anything, number one, for older children... There's nothing for those of that age that's free as well. If there is anything there's a cost...Even though there's 80 per cent towards the cost of that, it starts at nine thirty, ten and potentially finishes at three. If you've got to work full-time you're on your own. What are you going to do with your children? If they were in school, there was a Breakfast Club or something it will go till six. If there's a Summer time club it stops at three. So then they say, well, I can't do that because it's just me, and every time the children have a break, every term time, it's juggling for childcare. So every six weeks there's potentially a problem, and if there is anything at source that they can use it's oversubscribed, everybody wants it.'

(LPA)

Staff also stated that this may limit parents to certain types of work and, in turn, impact negatively on their finding work and, specifically, finding good quality jobs with progression opportunities – the same challenge as noted previously for parents of younger children. Customers corroborated this view from their perspective. While parents generally felt far more comfortable working once their children were 12 or 13 years old, they were keen to find work to fit around school hours/dates, thus potentially limiting job prospects by predisposing them to certain types of work, notably shift-work or part-time work:

'Well, I marked down on the offices, the jobcentre that I would be only willing to go back part time, because the simple fact is I like to leave after my son goes to school and I like to be home when he comes home...I can work between 20 and 30 hours a week, because I still have commitments with my 13 year old.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

'The problem it's the summer holidays and I wouldn't leave him for that length of time. An hour or so but to work from nine to five every day, and its summer holidays now, I wouldn't do that.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; South East Wales)

Considering how to fill this gap in provision for older children, some staff in Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber; and Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders highlighted that it may be problematic to encourage 'buy-in' from schools to provide more after-school club places, as teachers' resources and limited teacher time do not always link specifically with (lone) parents' needs:

'The recommendation has been made that there are after-school clubs, but I do know, and it's from personal, that...teachers at school will say that they're not there to provide after-school care. They're there just if the kids want to go along to an after-school club, then they're more than welcome to go along, but they're not there as a child-minding service.'

(LPA)

'I think the challenge is the extended school's agenda...Because the schools see childcare as something that's going to be benefiting the child; they don't see it that it's going to support parents back into work. So, for example, if the extended schools have, I don't know, a football club in the afternoon, and the PE teacher goes sick, often the class will be cancelled. There's no consideration given to the fact that the parent might be relying on that childcare. So think that's going to be a challenge over the next few months... the buy in from the schools that run these extended schools, to know the importance that they have in supporting parents.'

(CPM)

As a way of overcoming these challenges, some parents said they had previously taken their child(ren) to work with them. However, while many of them were sole carers of their children in the past when their children were younger, most commonly family, friends or neighbours were called on to help, with nursery also popularly used. Often the two were used in combination, particularly in terms of transporting very young children between nursery and home while the parent worked which was usually still tailored to fit nursery/school hours.

Other recent evidence also suggests that part-time work may not necessarily be a limiting option for lone parents but, rather, something that in itself is not available enough and for that reason creates barriers to work when combined with childcare challenges. Bell *et al.* (2007) argue that a wider availability of mini-jobs, combined with an increased earnings disregard for means-tested housing and Council Tax subsidies for working parents, would make coordinating and affording childcare less of a barrier.

5.4.2 Defining appropriate and affordable childcare

The work-search activities and type of work that lone parents on JSA agreed with their adviser (detailed in their JSAg) can have flexibilities applied in relation to what is deemed to be appropriate and affordable childcare. In translating their general observations relating to childcare for older children into customer-facing decisions, there was a sense of ambiguity emerging among staff, with various techniques employed to establish what appropriate and affordable childcare was. This ranged from personal identification to a more formal, calculated assessment.

Overall, defining what was appropriate childcare proved more problematic and subjective than defining affordable childcare, and in many cases staff said this was customer, rather than adviser, led. Alternatively, some staff related back to their own experiences of being a parent to help define this, while others sought help from the office's Childcare Champion (CC) or LPO guidance materials, still emphasising that the latter was open to interpretation. Staff roles were also seen as significant, with LPAs typically seen as better equipped to establish the parameters and those not in customer-facing roles feeling least able to ascertain what was appropriate. The following quotes illustrate this diversity of approaches and underlying uncertainties:

'Well, I mean, obviously, it's a very subjective matter, isn't it? You've got to check into the financial aspects of it; what costs are coming in, what costs are going out and, and is that side of it reasonable. But it's down to the individual parent to tell us why they don't think it's suitable. And then, again, I mean, it's a purely subjective matter to us. It's a very difficult question to answer, you know, yes or no; it's not a yes or no question. And, personally, as I said, because I haven't got children I would always ask colleagues who have children or who's had children whether or not they think it's reasonable. And so, it uses local knowledge, as well. And, of course, we will use the CC in the jobcentre.'

(LMDM)

'Well, we would have to rely on the advisers, now, if they don't know the information we would just have to accept what the customer said...I, personally, as a decision maker, we have no access to anything like that, it would be reliant on the Advisers in the jobcentre.'

(LMDM)

In contrast, the affordability of childcare was deemed far less ambiguous, with 'objective' measures such as the physical availability of places and Better Off Calculations (BOCs) popularly used to define this:

'I think that as far as affordable childcare is concerned, I mean, there is a lot of financial support available and, so, and, again, the advisers use BOCs.'

(CPM)

'Yeah, well, what we work on is the tax credits guidelines, so is it £175 for one child, £300 for two or more; we use that as a benchmark.'

(CPM)

Throughout their discussions of these approaches, staff expressed similar doubts that they related to parents of younger children in terms of affordability and suitability of childcare being real barriers to work (see Section 3.3.2). Conversely, when discussing childcare they had used in the past, many respondents were keen to emphasise that they had always wanted to stay at home and look after their children themselves not because they saw lack of childcare as a 'barrier' to work but, rather, because this was actively a choice they had made given their sense of responsibility and protectiveness, even if they perceived existing provision as good:

'I'm not giving my children just to anybody. I had them. That's my responsibility to be there and bring them up as a, you know, a mum.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Birmingham and Solihull)

'I haven't done work and that really until they've got older and I suppose that is because I just want to bring them up. I don't know. It's alright having them, all these after-school clubs and all that...but I don't know, I think you start to have this big gap between you both. You know, I just don't like that. I like to be there for them.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

However, customers who had recently moved to JSA from IS and new and repeat JSA customers with older children had more negative views about formal childcare than parents of younger children, emphasising that this was a major contributor to them not having worked in the past. A few customers explicitly said that this anxiety concerning formal childcare contributed to feeling unable to work and reinforced their isolation:

'I wouldn't trust anybody with my children. I think it's because the anxieties that I...For me, it was complete and total isolation and loneliness from adult company. I just had the children, my life revolved around the children, and I think I wasn't being mentally stimulated by adults, and by not being in the workforce. I would have loved for...to have had help like tax credits, which we didn't have back then...But, I just...I couldn't look beyond my own little world that I'd created: I couldn't, couldn't come out of that.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

As this indicated, these attitudes were also fostered by parents' perceptions of the high cost and inflexibility of professional childminding services to parents' working hours. In addition, a few parents mentioned the difficulty of finding a childminder to look after children with special needs, which consequently affected their decision to work – a gap in provision noted earlier (Section 3.3.1) by staff across all areas:

'There's loads of childminders out there, they will take my second son but they will not take my oldest son because he has got behavioural problems and there's not a lot of them qualified in the field to take him.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

5.4.3 Discussing childcare options

Many existing lone parent customers and new and repeat JSA customers said they had not discussed childcare options with advisers, either because they felt it was not needed or because staff (sometimes wrongly) assumed they did not need it:

'They didn't talk through options. They just asked who would be looking after my son. So, when I said, oh, it'll likely be my mother or it'll be my father, then it would, like, all right. And that, they just left it and never really said what the options were or anything like that; just, oh, well, you won't need childcare, then.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

Often, and similar to issues noted in Section 3.3.4 with parents of children aged six and under, when childcare options were discussed this was in the context of work alone rather than the specificity of available places:

'They don't really mention childcare; it's more to the point what have you been doing to look for work, that kind of thing, just to see if you are still entitled to your benefits.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

The evidence relating to childcare options for parents of older children aged 12-16 points to certain overlaps with parents of younger children, in terms of a lack of holiday provision, support for disabled children and suspicion of childminders. However, parents with older children perceive childcare as less of a barrier to work and overall demonstrate greater confidence in returning to or starting work.

From staff perspectives, the major issues relating to childcare for parents under the JSA regime were firstly that the need and meaning of childcare was disputed in this context given the children's older, 'limbo' age. This, by extension, created an empty niche of needed provision and contributed to the ambivalence surrounding the definition of appropriate childcare, while affordability was easier to ascertain. Different levels of familiarity with lone parents' situations, i.e. front-line versus more distanced staff roles, also had an impact on staff's certainty with determining these parameters.

5.5 Work-search and support from Jobcentre Plus

The findings presented in this section draw on customer experience at the start of the JSA regime. The group of new and repeat JSA customers affected by LPO consisted of customers who started a claim between the 24 November 2008 and March 2009. The fieldwork took place between April and early July 2009, therefore most of these customers were in the initial stages of the JSA regime: making a new claim, regular sign-on appointments and 13-week review meetings. By the time of the interviews no one reported reaching their 26-week review meeting.

The customers who had moved from IS to JSA tended to be at an even earlier stage of their JSA claim than new and repeat JSA customers. The customers we contacted to take part in the research were due to lose their entitlement to IS in March and April 2009 and had moved onto JSA before May 2009. Interviews took place in June and July 2009. Therefore, this group of customers were in the initial stages of their JSA claim and only a small number had reached their 13-week review meeting. The later studies of this evaluation with JSA customers affected by LPO will have a greater focus on the later stages of the JSA regime and will focus primarily on customer experience between three and nine months on the JSA regime.

This section will first look at the staff views on the support for lone parents as part of their job search on the JSA regime. Customer perspectives on the type of work they are seeking and how they look for work will then be explored, followed by customer's experiences of attending appointments as part of the JSA regime and customer's views on the usefulness of support from Jobcentre Plus in their search for work.

5.5.1 Staff views on the support for lone parents claiming JSA

As noted in Section 5.3, there are differences in the way staff work with lone parents on the JSA regime, both between and within the case study areas, and between the staff working with customers who have moved from IS to JSA and new and repeat JSA claimants in some instances.

Overall, when the number of customers affected by lone parent obligations is split by case study area and then by Jobcentre Plus office, it is not surprising that in some instances advisers could only recall working with three or four lone parent customers on the JSA regime since the change in regulations. In addition, the bulk of work to date in implementing LPO had been in identifying and moving customers from IS. The researchers also tended to be guided to staff that had been involved in this aspect of the process. It is also worth noting at this stage that there have always been some lone parents with a youngest child aged under 16 who have chosen to claim JSA and have been supported through the JSA regime to find work.

In areas where customers who had moved from IS to JSA were supported by generalist staff on the JSA regime, staff in these areas reported that relationships that had been developed over many years between LPAs and customers could be lost.

'As part of the FND customers will see different advisers at each stage – so there won't be the same level of continuity that IS customers have been used to as they tend to see the same adviser each time.'

(ASM)

For some customers, the experience of changing the adviser they met with is reflected in their views of the support and service they have received from Jobcentre Plus. Where LPAs were continuing to see their IS customers when they moved to JSA there could be a different level of service for these customers compared to new and repeat customers on the JSA regime. For example, some LPAs were reported to keep in touch with IS customers now receiving JSA to let them know as and when relevant job vacancies arose. This degree of support is more intensive and personalised than would ordinarily be received by JSA customers at an early stage of their claim. One LPA described this support for IS customers now on JSA:

'You get to know your caseload and then when vacancies come in you might be doing a search for somebody else, you might be browsing the vacancies in the morning, then you see a vacancy, the hours, the type of job, the location seems ideal for and so you can get on the telephone or send them details on the job.'

(LPA)

Staff acknowledged that a lot of ground was covered in the initial JSA interview at which customers made a claim. One member of staff questioned how much of this information was retained by the customer, although as noted earlier in this chapter, customers generally had a good awareness of the conditionality and requirements of the JSA regime.

'There's a lot of discussion needed around JSAG and the impact of what they're signing up to, how they sign up, when they come in, their responsibilities. That is hard work and you don't know if everything's going through because you cover so much.'

(LPA)

In addition to explaining the JSA process and expectations and requirements of claiming JSA, the initial claim meeting and subsequent sign-on and review meetings could be used to inform customers of the specific support available to lone parents, such as In-Work Credit (IWC). One ASM stated the importance of increasing the awareness of front-line JSA regime staff about the support available to lone parents so that customers do not miss out on what they are entitled to:

'What concerns me is that people aren't aware of what customers are entitled to, you know, the benefits, with IWC, and all the different In-Work Emergency Fund, the In-Work Advisory Service. We've got quite a lot of things that we can offer as support, and it's that type of things that sort of dwindles, it's diluted as you get further away from the Lone Parent Team.'

(ASM)

In two of the case study areas staff explicitly mentioned that they anticipated changes to their team structures as LPO rolled out and LPAs' caseload decreased. LPAs were reported to be a source of knowledge about the support available to lone parents and about the flexibilities that could be applied to parents on the JSA regime. If this restructuring takes place, the later stages of the evaluation need to capture whether and how this affects the available support for generalist advisers to work with lone parents on the JSA regime to ensure they receive all the help and support that exists to help them find and retain work.

Staff are able to fast-track lone parents to later stages of the JSA regime if they need more support. One ASM highlighted how lone parents on JSA can access support from New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) or can be fast-tracked:

'If they don't want to do the NDLP programme that we've got, we could actually move them to the stage three jobseeker regime programme, which is similar to NDLP. It's a six-month supportive case loading with an adviser... So what you'll most likely see is we'll refer a lot of customers, maybe, or lone parents, to what we call, like, a programme centre, which is an opportunity for them to get up-to-date skills, experience, and what current employers are looking for, application methods, interview skills, getting a current CV up and running and stuff like that.'

(ASM)

Of the JSA customers we interviewed none had been fast-tracked (see Section 5.5.5).

We asked staff about take-up of NDLP and how this had been affected by LPO. In particular, they were asked about use of NDLP by lone parents on JSA. In the run up to their eligibility ending LPAs were marketing the benefits of NDLP to lone parents, including the advantage of seeing an LPA alongside signing on. Once customers are claiming JSA, NDLP should also be marketed to them through FJR. In general staff said that they felt that NDLP should still meet the needs of lone parents while they were on JSA although lone parents would no longer be able to access longer courses through NDLP. However, staff said they had expected a greater level of take-up of NDLP from lone parents on JSA than there had been, and they were unsure about the reasons for this. One suggestion was that there was insufficient time in signing appointments to discuss NDLP, however, one ASM pointed out that NDLP take-up had also decreased amongst lone parents on IS over the same time period. There were no instances of the JSA customers we interviewed accessing support through NDLP.

Staff also gave their views on the impact that the recession was having on lone parents on JSA. Some staff felt that the increased number of customers claiming JSA might mean that lone parents had less support on JSA than they might have had when the economy was more buoyant, largely due to the higher number of claimants creating additional pressures on adviser workload. Advisers reported that some lone parents felt that they should not be asked to look for work at a time when less jobs were available, but that they were trying to keep lone parents focused on the fact that there 'are still jobs out there.' However, staff acknowledged that it was a very competitive market and that lone parents' job goals may, therefore, need to change. In Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth advisers said that they had explained to lone parent customers that their JSA benefit would not be cut if they were unable to find a job due to the recession.

5.5.2 The type of work customers are seeking

New and repeat JSA customers were looking for a range of work, including office-based work, retail positions, catering, scaffolding, bar work and managerial positions. Most had one or two preferred types of work. For those that had recent work experience their preference tended to be to return to the same type of work, although a small number reported that they were broadening their job search to types of work where they had no previous experience. For some customers increasing the range of work they were looking for was in response to discussions with Jobcentre Plus advisers and the length of time they had been claiming JSA.

In general, JSA customers felt that due to the recession fewer jobs were now available, with fewer jobs being advertised in local papers and in Jobcentre Plus. JSA customers also reported increased competition, with hundreds of applicants for some vacancies, and having to compete with people with more experience and qualifications who were applying for jobs they were over-qualified for just because they needed a job. Some lone parents had found that they were unable to get jobs in the sectors that they used to work in as a result of the recession (e.g. Human Resources and construction). One customer described how they had never had problems finding work before:

'That's what made it such a total shock and I suppose in a way I was cocky because I've always walked out of one job and, you know, picked up another one.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

The experiences below illustrate that increasing the types of work sought could be in response to the recession and withdrawing from work areas where there was perceived to be a decline in vacancies.

'This is your speciality that would allow you personally to go ahead and look for it yourself, but because I haven't been successful we'll try and broaden your horizon, and this is what we've got to do. It doesn't really bother me in that sense because I do want to find a job.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

'I've got to broaden my horizons. With lots of shops shutting these days it's not like the easiest market to get into like it used to be. There was always shop work going wasn't there? But they're suffering at the moment, so I find it exceptionally hard.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Where claimants were looking to change career direction, and in some instances to retrain to enable them to do this, simultaneously complying with the JSA regime could present customers with challenges as they also needed to demonstrate that they were actively looking for work. One such customer, who had previously worked in an office, had a long-term career goal to retrain to be a midwife. She had applied for six lower-level positions at the National Health Service (NHS) to try to get a foot in the door and in anticipation that once in the organisation training and promotion opportunities might become available to her. She was currently restricting her job search to this field. She described how making this type of career change was difficult and under the current JSA regime as the length of her claim increases she may find herself under increasing pressure to broaden her job search criteria. The quote below illustrates the tension between a work-first approach and training for long-term career goals that can present itself for JSA customers.

'Because I've got no experience, not in caring, anything at all, any of them fields; it's difficult to start to get into it...it's something I've always wanted to do, and it's sort of now or never.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales)

New and repeat JSA customers were most likely to report that they were looking for full-time positions, but some expressed a preference for part-time work in order to balance work and caring responsibilities. For example, one customer who was looking for retail work at a soon-to-open new retail development in the Cardiff area said:

'It would be part time, with the children. I'd need to have some time still to be able to see my kids.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales)

Overall, looking for part-time work was more common among the group of JSA claimants we interviewed that had recently moved from IS. In particular, many described how they were looking for working hours that would fit around school so that they could be at home for their children both before they left for and after they returned from school. JSA customers who had recently moved from IS also looked for a range of work, including retail and cleaning work, but were less likely to be looking for more highly skilled or managerial roles than new and repeat JSA claimants. Again, most interviewees were looking for work in sectors where they had some previous work experience, but a few had no recent work experience and tended to be less sure what type of work they would be suited to. A small number of customers who were uncertain of the work they would be suited for

reported applying for jobs that they felt they were unsuited to or that they were not qualified to do in order to meet the work-search requirements of the JSA regime. This raises the question of the sustainability of these work options, should the customer be successful at finding work in these areas.

5.5.3 How customers look for work

All the interviewees claiming JSA described how they looked for work in a variety of ways. Interviewees were presented with a list of a number of ways in which people could look for and be supported to find work. The list included: Work Focused Interviews; putting together a CV; voluntary work; NDLP; training/ doing a course; internet; attending job interviews; doing work trials; working less than 16 hours a week (mini-job); job adverts in the newspaper; job fairs; attending appointments at Jobcentre Plus; family and friends (see Appendix B).

New and repeat JSA customers tended to favour the internet as a method for job searching and found this the most useful way to seek work and apply for positions. For example:

'I don't need to go to the jobcentre, 'cos I'm lucky enough to have internet at home...but every day I try to find at least one job that I can apply for that I haven't applied for previously.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

'The internet is very good isn't it, because with the internet it is sort of like your own time, at your own pace.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

For a small number though the cost of internet access at home was reported to be a barrier to job searching in this way.

New and repeat JSA customers were more likely to report having attended job interviews than customers who had recently moved onto JSA from IS. Although new and repeat customers were more likely to have been receiving JSA for longer, so this could have been an influence here. One new and repeat customer reported that they had attended four job interviews since January when they started their claim, but were finding it a very competitive process due to the recession:

'I've had tremendous feedback, but unfortunately what I'm up against is people who are losing their jobs with a lot more experience than myself.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Overall new and repeat customers felt that self-motivation and perseverance were central to seeking work. There was a general perception that JSA customers needed to help themselves and that there was limited support available from Jobcentre Plus to help them find work. This is explored in more detail in Section 5.5.5.

JSA customers who had recently switched from claiming IS tended to rely more on 'low-tech' methods of job search than new and repeat JSA customers. There seemed to be more reliance on seeking work through the job sections of newspapers and calling into shops to ask if they had any work.

'I've just been going to the local shops, you know, Tesco, Asda, because they're not far from me.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

A number of JSA customers who had previously been on IS said that they did not use the internet to look for work, either because they did not have access to a computer at home, or because they did not have the skills to use it. Where this group of interviewees did report that they used the internet for job search they frequently said this was with help and support from friends and family. For example:

'I did one [CV] on the computer, Word and Desktop and all that. There's one on there so I got a friend to help me.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; South East Wales)

'Even my daughter is helping me try and get stuff on her computer and they've told me at the jobcentre, all they say is go to the library, go to learndirect. I'm not computer literate and they're telling me to go there.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Those customers who had switched from IS to JSA and were confident and proficient at using the internet, similarly to new and repeat JSA customers, they felt that the internet was the most useful way of looking for work.

'There's Gumtree, there's the Jobseekers, there's so many and if you're like going into retail you can just, for instance, you want to work for John Lewis, you just type up John Lewis or Marks and Spencer and look on the job sections where they may be advertising for staff.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Some JSA customers who had recently been receiving IS seemed to lack experience of how to search for work. For example, some did not have a CV and said they were unsure as to how to develop one. A small number said they did not understand how to look for a job and found the language of job titles, person specifications and how they might relate to their skills confusing. For some interviewees without recent work experience providing references was also reported to be difficult.

'I've been to loads and loads of job interviews, but as soon as they know I haven't worked for 12 years and my age, and I can't provide references, so four of my firms have closed down anyway, so they just don't want to know.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

'I do need help with completing a CV because again without computer access, and also with the references I really need advice with that...and probably I could do with some help doing job applications as well, just some mock applications so I would have the ideas.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

Customers who had moved from IS to JSA seemed to be less confident at using the internet and computer for job searching and applications. This may affect the usefulness of the support they receive as part of the JSA regime and ultimately their chances of finding work. For example:

'You do feel pressured into looking for work, because sometimes you know that you're just applying for a job and you know you're not going to get it, but you feel pressured to find something...so a lot of the jobs I've applied for aren't actually work I could do...I think they're asking too much. I don't feel it's realistic. It's not realistic what they're asking.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

It is apparent there were differences between the confidence and capability of customers who had moved from IS to JSA to look for work compared with new and repeat JSA customers we interviewed. Some customers who have moved from IS to JSA due to LPO may need more in-depth support to look for work successfully. In the current JSA regime, some customers can be fast-tracked to later stages or on to NDLP to get more support earlier in their claim. It seems that a proportion of lone parents on JSA could benefit from more in-depth support earlier in their JSA claim.

5.5.4 Attending appointments at Jobcentre Plus

This section looks at customer experiences of the sign-on appointments, followed by 13-week review meetings, and later explores their assessment of the usefulness of the support provided by Jobcentre Plus.

Signing appointments

New and repeat JSA customers described their sign-on appointments as short, typically lasting five minutes and with a different adviser each time they signed on. Many reported that they would have liked more support and help with their job search from Jobcentre Plus advisers and felt that they were left to find work

through their own motivation and determination. As previously discussed, most customers included in this research were in Phase 1 of the JSA regime – the self-help phase, so this finding is perhaps to be expected. These customer views were typical of the signing appointment:

'I have found them not very helpful at all, I walk in and he always says to me we'll have to make this a quick one. It's basically sign here, you know, what have you done to find work? The only feedback I've received is to continue doing that.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

'You get the impression that they want to move on to the next one all the time you know? Because they're under a tight schedule I suppose in terms of appointments. I mean I'm literally there five minutes, you know, if that... there's no discussion about it [their job search].'

(New and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales)

There were some occasions where customers said they had had more support in these sign-on meetings. Several customers felt the time they had with advisers was determined by adviser time and by the approach and style of the adviser that they were signing on with. For example:

'Occasionally I'll get somebody asking what have you been doing to look for work? And then the other time they'll just say, sign there, I sign my name and walk out and that's it. So it's intermittent really.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

A handful of JSA customers also felt that in order to get the most support from their signing-on appointments they had to be proactive and to ask questions of the Jobcentre Plus staff as there may be additional support available if they requested it.

There were several customer experiences of signing appointments running late, and a handful of customers reported that they had, at times, had to notify staff that they had not been called and had waited for several hours to be seen and sign-on. Where appointments were running late, this could on occasion create difficulties for lone parents, for example, if they wanted to be back at home for when their child returned from school. For example, one customer said:

'2:45pm I used to sign-on and I had to be here for my son at half past three so when they were messing me about it was always, I was, you know, worried if I was going to get back here on time to let him in and stuff.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales)

New and repeat JSA customers generally reported that they had no childcare or travel issues raised by attending signing on appointments. The costs of travelling to sign-on were reported as an issue by some customers in rural areas, and then

particularly where they had moved from fortnightly to weekly signing following a 13-week review meeting. By contrast customers who had moved to JSA after their IS eligibility ended more frequently reported that the costs of travel to attend meetings was an issue. This group previously attended WFI appointments at Jobcentre Plus on a quarterly basis and the costs of travel were reimbursed for these, so moving to fortnightly signing is likely to have a financial impact on the household budget for those customers who are unable to walk to the jobcentre.

Some customers living in rural areas struggled with the increased transport costs related to having to attend fortnightly signing-on sessions. One such customer reported paying between six and seven pounds a fortnight to make the trip to her nearest jobcentre and commented that *'...at the end of the day, closing down all the local offices was a big mistake'* (customer who has moved from IS to JSA; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber).

In areas where lone parents who moved to JSA were no longer supported by LPAs, some customers reported that moving from the IS regime to sign-on as part of the JSA regime, and using a different part of the jobcentre, had been difficult for them. Some customers seemed to lack confidence and found moving from a relationship with one adviser to seeing several different advisers difficult. For example:

'And I go the following week ready to sign-on, and I'm panicking because I can't see the lady I've seen the week previously...So, I'm stressing now because this woman is not here, and this woman then goes you should be downstairs, and I goes well I was told to be here and this is where I'm going to be...it's like chill, you know, I'm new to this. She said I'll be back in a minute, she took my name, and she came back a few seconds later, took me downstairs and it all got sorted, but it was a stressful like half an hour. I thought they'd gone and mislaid my files or something like that because I didn't know what was going on.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; South East Wales)

The experience of signing appointments among customers who had moved from IS to JSA was in the main common to the experience of new and repeat customers, with most finding them of little help to their job search:

'She'll get on the computer and then print it out for me...They're not that helpful on my CV, because I've got really nothing to put on my CV, and I'm really nervous of doing that, and I don't know what to do, and they're not very helpful like that...I don't do it just because I think what can I put on it, my name and that's it.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Birmingham and Solihull)

'I mean if you see the same person at least you get to know them, and you can see that you can talk to them. But if it's a different person every time it's always strange.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

In areas where customers continued to be supported by LPAs, for example, in Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders, customers who had recently moved from IS to JSA generally seemed more supported and positive about the signing appointments. For example, one customer said:

'They sort of give you that pick me up when you've had a let-down that week, you know, if you've been for an interview or whatever, and you haven't got the job, and I mean obviously the constant applying and constant knock-backs doesn't do you any favours.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

13-week review meetings

After claiming JSA for 13 weeks, customers move to the second stage of the JSA regime and are required to attend a review meeting with a PA. There are a number of tasks that advisers and customers need to complete during this session and this has led to the meeting being described as process driven (Bellis *et al.*, 2009). At this meeting, customer's review their job goals and the adviser will check (and challenge) any restrictions placed on their availability to work. There tend to be a number of tasks to complete at this review meeting and these include:

- a review of the JSAg;
- a discussion of job goals;
- completing the Customer Assessment Tool. This is used by advisers to assess the barriers to work of customers in order to best meet their needs;
- carrying out an in-work BOC;
- identifying skills needs;
- submitting customers for jobs;
- informing customers about what will happen next with their claim.

In addition, after this meeting some customers are required to change from a fortnightly to a weekly sign-on for up to six weeks.

As noted in Section 5.1, several new and repeat JSA customers recalled having their 13-week review meeting and since then having to sign-on weekly. They understood that they had to do this in order to continue to receive JSA, but they were unsure as to why they were being required to sign-on weekly and could not see the benefit because, as noted earlier, in the main customers did not find the sign-on appointments particularly useful.

The new and repeat JSA customers we interviewed were more likely to have reached Stage 2 of the JSA regime, whereas customers who had recently moved from IS onto JSA were most likely to be in Stage 1 of the JSA regime, so there is more data in this section from the first group of customers. The 13-week review meeting tended to allow customers more one-to-one time with an adviser. Most customers said that the 13-week review meeting lasted about 20 minutes, although this did vary by customer, with a small number saying it was no longer than their regular sign-on appointment, and no more useful:

'No help with my CV. No interview skills, no nothing. It was basically just an extended part of when you sign-on.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

Other new and repeat JSA customers had had a more positive experience at their 13-week review meeting and were signposted to websites they have not heard of or discussed other job options. For example:

'After the 13-week interview I had a very good chat to the person there then, I think that was 20 minutes, half an hour.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales)

'On my 13-week interview the adviser said to me we actually run courses at this jobcentre on how to fill out NHS application forms correctly 'cos there's certain things that they look for. I said well I'd love to go on that.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

One customer in North and East Yorkshire, and The Humber described how at their 13-week review meeting the adviser had told them about the Local Employment Partnership (LEP), via which local companies seek to recruit unemployed people. This customer thought this was really positive and of real benefit because they understood that these jobs were not advertised on the internet or in other places, and therefore this might increase their chance of finding work.

'It's this LEP something, so you're more or less guaranteed an interview because they take so many from the jobcentre, so she [13-week review adviser] knows of jobs that aren't on the internet and aren't advertised anywhere.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

Several customers said that they had raised the possibility of training courses with their adviser at this meeting, but were told that they were not able to receive this sort of support until six months into their JSA claim. Several customers would have liked this type of support sooner:

'Some of the courses I think you have to be on [benefits] for six months to do some of the courses that they would want...then you've had six months of wasted time, of losing your confidence.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

In Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth, staff said that some 13-week review meetings were held in group sessions, due to staff shortages. One new and repeat customer from this area described attending one of these sessions which they felt did not allow them to access the personalised support or job search advice they would have liked:

'After 13 weeks on JSA we were invited to a meeting with an adviser, and it was a group meeting, and we didn't get an awful lot of time to talk to anybody.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

This customer, along with several others, said they were hoping to receive a greater amount of personalised support from Jobcentre Plus staff if they were unemployed for six months. They said: *'I'm under the impression that after six months, that's when I'll start getting a lot of help from them'*. This is Stage 3 of the JSA regime: supported job search.

Very few customers who had moved from IS to JSA because of LPO had reached their 13-week review meeting by the time they were interviewed. Of those that had, as with new and repeat JSA customers, the experience of these meetings was mixed.

'The idea was to have a work-focused interview...it wasn't quite what I was anticipating, and it was about three or four minutes, and then what was explained was that for the next six weeks I would have to go in and sign-on once a week.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; South East Wales)

It was also apparent that one customer was being required to increase the geography of their work-search area to up to one and a half hours travel time following the meeting. As discussed in Section 5.3, there are flexibilities for parents in the JSA regime that mean that parents do not have to be required to fulfil this condition if they feel it is inappropriate to their circumstances.

'Now I've got to look for work that's up to an hour and a half's travel, because obviously I've been claiming for three months now. I've got to go and sign-on every week, but there's a bit of a backlog at the moment so I've got to wait.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Birmingham and Solihull)

This is further evidence of the need to increase the knowledge of the parent flexibilities among JSA staff.

5.5.5 The usefulness of Jobcentre Plus support

In the main, new and repeat JSA customers felt that they were searching for work using their own initiative, rather than with the support of Jobcentre Plus. This is to be expected as these customers tended to be in Phase 1 of the JSA regime: the self-help phase. Some described the approach of Jobcentre Plus staff as checking they were looking for work rather than supporting them to do so.

Nevertheless, some new and repeat JSA customers were happy with the support they received from Jobcentre Plus staff and had found the advice they had offered to be useful and informative. The examples below illustrate one customer's experience of the BOC and another's experience of informing staff about how they looked for work:

'She showed me like 'cos before I did 16 hours, but somebody told me that if you did more than that you didn't get as much money: it wasn't worth you doing more than 16 hours. So I wanted to know more about that and she did, and she proved to me that you are better off by the more hours you do, so yeah, that was useful.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

'It's nice to sort of touch base with somebody and tell them how it's been going for the last fortnight and you know what I've applied for and what they've got to say. I like going to them [fortnightly sign-on meetings].'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

However, other new and repeat JSA customers felt that in many instances Jobcentre Plus staff were too busy, particularly because of the recession, and that this limited the amount of time they could spend with individual customers. A few customers commented on the fact that jobcentres were now very busy, one describing their local jobcentre as a 'cattle market'. This could lead to a service that was not as personalised and individually tailored as customers had hoped for. For example:

'No, I mean, really I think the only thing is if the, the staff can be more aware of what they are doing it would be a great help, you know. If they can look at someone as an individual instead of as a body...I find there was no personal customer service, no personal help there. You were just, like, a body, like, come in, sign and go.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

Other new and repeat JSA customers had asked advisers about how they could access more support and training to help them with their job search, but were told that they had to wait until they had been receiving JSA for six months, and at this stage in their claim the level of support they would like was not available. Customers who had asked for additional support or training and been refused could be left feeling frustrated and wondered why they had to wait for six months over which time they felt their skills and the currency of their work experience (where they had it) would deteriorate. For example:

'We should get a lot of help from them. I'm not getting it, because if we're signing on, how come the IS people are allowed to go to Work Directions and agencies and stuff...What about JSA people, why can't they have an option to go to Work Direction or some kind of agent for them to help? Because I asked for one and they refused me.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

'It was like they're keeping you out of work, and I do know that they have got funds where they do help people. So why couldn't they help me? You know, one of them said I believe, well when you've been unemployed for six months, then maybe we can help. Well why do I need to be unemployed for six months? For me personally, the longer you're out of work the less chance you've got.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

There were a small number of customers who had received training through Jobcentre Plus to support them in their job search. One new and repeat JSA customer had been enrolled on a food hygiene course so that they could gain this certificate and then apply for vacancies as a kitchen assistant. Another new and repeat JSA customer had been on a course in preparation for applying to work at a large new retail development opening in the area. One new and repeat customer had a long work history as a scaffolder but lacked a gold card that would enable him to take up work that he had been offered if he had this qualification. He recalled that his Jobcentre Plus adviser said they would look into whether the jobcentre would be able to fund him undertaking such a qualification, but at the time of the interview the customer had not yet heard whether or not this would be possible. Finally, another new and repeat JSA customer had enquired about working towards a qualification at college, but had been told by the Jobcentre Plus staff that they would have to continue to look for work and be prepared to give up the course part way through if they found work and it was necessary to do so.

JSA customers who had recently moved from IS due to LPO seemed to be more positive about the support they received from Jobcentre Plus staff. However, many of these customers felt that they were not getting as much support through the JSA regime compared to when they were claiming IS; before they had seen the same LPA for WFIs, but on the JSA regime they tended to see a different person each time they went to sign-on. As noted earlier, in some areas this group of customers continued to be supported by LPAs rather than generalist JSA staff, so had a continuity of relationship and in many cases it seemed longer sign-on appointments and other meetings. Other customers who had moved from IS to JSA overall viewed the usefulness of the support from Jobcentre Plus in a similar way to new and repeat JSA customers and were also able to make comparisons between the support they were able to access under JSA and the support they received when they were claiming IS. For example:

'She was amazing [the LPA] and she stuck with me until I went onto JSA and then you don't have that do you...it's really frustrating because they're just not helping.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; South East Wales)

'I usually try to speak to my own adviser rather than somebody else that I don't know and don't know nothing about me like...she's pretty good. She gives me plenty of information rather than some you go in and they don't give you much information at all. But the one I've got is very nice and you can ask virtually anything of her in the way of job searches or anything.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; South East Wales)

Similarly to new and repeat JSA customers, some customers who had moved from IS to JSA also found the JSA regime to lack personalisation. For example, one customer discussed their experiences of feeling stereotyped by advisers working with JSA customers:

'Stop assuming that everybody who walks through the door fits into one little pigeonhole, and understand that you are dealing with individuals, and maybe there need to be people within each jobcentre that work, specifically with people with qualifications, instead of the assumption that, as a lone parent, then you must be no qualifications, illiterate, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. Because it is so frustrating.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; South East Wales)

Overall there are mixed views about the usefulness of support that customers received from Jobcentre Plus. Many wanted more support earlier into their JSA claim, but often also recognised that staff were very busy. Customers anticipated that there would be more support available once they had been out of work for longer and the extent to which customers feel more supported during the later stages of the JSA regime will be covered in the next phase of LPO evaluation. There are indications that increasing staff knowledge and understanding of the parent flexibilities and other support, such as fast-tracking to Stage 3 of the JSA regime and NDLP, might make more customers feel better supported in their work-search and better placed to find work.

In addition to the work motivations already described in Section 2.3.1, for those customers on JSA a key area was the experience of attending the jobcentre to sign-on. Both new and repeat JSA customers, and customers who have moved from IS to JSA, mentioned the fact that being in work would mean they were not required to sign-on as a significant positive. As one customer commented: *'...it's made me more and more keen, and I'm sick and tired of going every fortnight to sign-on, that's even getting me down more...'* (new and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull). Another talked about the impact her experience of claiming JSA has had on her likelihood to seek work:

'...it's had a big one. I'd like to find work because of the way that they treat you. You, you, you're not encouraged to continue benefits which is a good thing I suppose, but in the same way you, you don't feel good about going in and asking them for help.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

The effects of the JSA regime on lone parents and their work-search activity are further explored in Section 5.7.

5.5.6 IWC

IWC is one aspect of support lone parents may be eligible for when they return to work and is a key policy aimed at ensuring that work pays for lone parents. IWC is a weekly payment of £40 (£60 in London) made for up to one year, for lone parents who start work after being in receipt of one or more of the qualifying benefits for a continuous period of at least 52 weeks, prior to moving into work. The qualifying benefits are IS, JSA and Employment Support Allowance or a combination of these benefits. In London the qualifying benefits also include Incapacity Benefit, Carers Allowance and Severe Disability Allowance. For example, a customer will still qualify for IWC if they move from IS to JSA following 52 weeks on either benefit. Customers are allowed breaks totalling up to five days for any reason within the 52 week qualifying period; though these five days cannot be at the end of the 52-week period as the customer must be moving immediately from one of the eligible benefits into work. Therefore, customers affected by LPO may be eligible for IWC if they have been claiming benefit for a sufficiently long period of time. It is aimed that IWC will be an incentive to look for work and that it will ease the financial transition back to work for lone parents who receive it.

Among new and repeat JSA customers there was varying awareness of IWC. A small number of this group had heard of it, all of which had received it in the past. This meant that they demonstrated a good understanding of the conditions and remit of IWC. For example:

'If you're working 16 hours a week or more you'll come off benefits and then IWC is up to £60 a week for up to a year, which doesn't affect anything else. That's like your congratulations sort of money.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

The rest of the new and repeat JSA customers did not recall having heard of IWC, although it should be noted that these customers would not have been eligible for it at this stage in their benefit claim.

Customers who had moved from IS to JSA were more likely to recall having heard of IWC, although again it is not clear what proportion of these customers that would have been eligible to receive it as they may not have been receiving benefits for a continuous 52-week period. Only two customers who had moved from IS to JSA reported that they had actually received IWC, which perhaps reflects the

less recent work history among this group; IWC was rolled out nationally from April 2008.

Among those customers, both new and repeat JSA customers and those who had recently moved from IS to JSA, IWC was seen as an incentive to find work and that it helped to make work pay. It was perceived to enable lone parents undertaking low-waged work to make ends meet and to make essential utility and other payments. For example:

'If you're on low wages and you're getting help, you know, they pay you monthly so at the end of the month, you go there's my food, my bill money, it helps because there was no way I would have been able to go back to work just on wages no way, and live, it would have been worse than benefits.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

'It's beneficial to the likes of me so I thought that was actually a good idea, and it does give you a wee bit more incentive to go out and look for a job.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

One customer who had received IWC for a job she undertook in the recent past described how it had changed her work-search behaviour. She lowered the level of the wages of the jobs she was applying for, because IWC would act as a top-up payment.

'I'd set myself a limit of £16,000 at the time, although I'd go to £14,000 now, because I realised how much help I could get.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Interviewees who were claiming IS and were as yet unaffected by LPO, as well as customers whose IS eligibility was coming to an end, were also asked whether they had heard of IWC, spontaneously and then, if necessary, prompted with some detail of the financial benefit and what it entailed. Most of the IS customers unaffected by LPO we interviewed said they had not heard of IWC. This may be because these customers were not entitled to receive it, and therefore had not been made aware of it, or because they were not yet required by the jobcentre to be actively looking for work or doing so themselves.

Customers whose IS claim was due to shortly come to an end were more likely to be aware of IWC and several demonstrated that they understood the conditions of receiving it. There were a number of customers in this group that reported if they did receive IWC, they felt they would struggle financially when it came to an end after a year in work. While it may be an incentive to find work in the short term, they felt that in the longer term losing the payment could mean that work might no longer make financial sense. For example:

'Five pounds extra is always a help isn't it, but like I say, when you're a single parent looking after children, every penny counts and to be dependent on £160 a month to get taken off you straight away, I don't like the idea of that at all because you've obviously been relying on that. You live within your means and like I say, you budget and that, but that's a lot of money to have to try and find on your own.'

(Customer whose IS eligibility was due to end; Birmingham and Solihull)

'I think it's good, but it doesn't last forever though so your wages are still going to be low after that £40 a week is gone.'

(Customer whose IS eligibility was due to end; Birmingham and Solihull)

In the short term, among lone parents with awareness of the benefit, IWC is seen as helping to make work pay and easing the financial transition back to work for lone parents. The IWC evaluation will explore the effects of the end of IWC payments on lone parent families and the extent to which these lone parents are able to sustain paid employment in the longer term.

5.6 JSA conditionality, benefit disallowance and sanctions

Conditionality is a key feature of the JSA regime and lone parents claiming JSA are subject to the same requirements as other jobseekers. However, the additional JSA flexibilities discussed in Section 5.3 exist for all parents who have genuine limitations in meeting the requirements of the JSA regime. Notwithstanding the application of these flexibilities, there are circumstances where a lone parent claiming JSA can lose benefit and these are discussed in more detail below.

A lone parent will lose entitlement to JSA, i.e. have their claim disallowed, if they fail to attend their FJR appointment without demonstrating good cause (a judgement on good cause will involve consideration of the additional flexibilities). Under the LPO changes, Jobcentre Plus have introduced a process similar to that available under IS which requires Jobcentre Plus staff to try to contact any parent, including lone parents, by phone or letter to ascertain whether they have good cause for non-attendance. At least one attempt to contact the lone parent should be made by phone on the day they fail to attend their FJR appointment. If contact is not made by phone, a letter will be sent to their home address informing them that if they do not contact Jobcentre Plus within five working days their entitlement to JSA will cease.

Jobcentre Plus staff do not have an exhaustive list of what constitutes good cause for non-attendance, as this could restrict their ability to take into account individual circumstances. However, when considering good cause, staff will take into account any evidence supplied by the lone parent. As an example, if a customer had a domestic emergency, they may have a contractor's report or bill to confirm this.

A lone parent can also have their JSA claim disallowed if they fail to meet the basic labour market conditions of the benefit. These include being available for work, actively seeking work and having a signed and up-to-date JSAG.

In addition to disallowance, a benefit sanction may also be applied to a lone parent for a number of reasons, for example, where they have contributed to their unemployment; left a job voluntarily or refused employment. The duration of such sanctions is variable between one and 26 weeks and is determined at the discretion of an LMDM.

A sanction may also be applied where a lone parent has failed to carry out an activity designed to improve their employability, such as to attend an appropriate training course, or has refused to carry out a Jobseeker's Direction. However, if appropriate childcare is not available this may then be considered as good cause for the non-compliance. Such sanctions are for fixed periods of two, four and 26 weeks dependent on previous non-compliance.

Front-line Jobcentre Plus staff identify cases that may require referral to Decision Making and Appeals (DMA) for disallowance or sanctioning decisions. As with judgments regarding the application of JSA flexibilities, an internal jobcentre escalation process is in place to ensure staff have access to appropriate advice and support when considering a disallowance or sanction for lone parents. In the first instance, the FJR officer will refer cases to their Team Leader or an adviser, who in turn can refer to an ASM before the case is referred to an LMDM.

Once the referral is made, the LMDM will assess the evidence, including the customer's view of the events, against case law and regulations. If the LMDM decides to uphold the sanction or disallowance then benefit is suspended. As with all jobseekers, a lone parent can ask for decisions to be reconsidered or appeal against them if they feel they can provide extra information to show good cause.

When the issues of disallowance and benefit sanctions were discussed during the interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff and customers, both groups used the term 'sanction' to describe these two aspects of the JSA regime. Therefore, the term sanction has been adopted below to cover both issues, unless there is a clear need to differentiate between these (e.g. when reporting specific cases). While the next wave of the LPO evaluation may consider these two issues separately, from a customer perspective their experience of JSA disallowance or a JSA sanction is similar, i.e. a loss of benefit. However, the process for re-engagement will differ, for example, a disallowance will require a new benefit claim and a sanction may involve an appeal and/or application for a hardship payment: a reduced award of benefit to give a minimum level of financial support.

This section now looks at staff views and experience of applying sanctions for lone parents on JSA, including some suggestions for potential improvements to the supporting processes. Following this customer awareness, understanding and experience of disentitlements and sanctions on JSA are explored.

5.6.1 Staff views and experience of disallowance and sanctions for lone parents on JSA

In general, the staff interviewed reported very few difficulties with regard to the disallowance or sanctions process for lone parents affected by LPO. However, most of them stated that thus far they had no direct experience of this process and generally, as the roll-out of LPO was still at a very early stage, it was too early to offer opinions on either the process or its impact.

The majority of staff interviewed indicated that they were aware of JSA conditionality and situations where a lone parent claiming JSA may be sanctioned or have their claim disallowed. A number of these described the application of parent flexibilities and the way in which they would seek advice and guidance from colleagues before referring lone parents to DMA for a decision on the implementation of a sanction. For example, both FJR officers and JSA advisers stated they would initially speak with an LPA if they were uncertain about the application of parent flexibilities when dealing with a lone parent. Other advisers stated they would seek guidance from an ASM. A number of ASMs reported the process for the escalation of decisions about the application of flexibilities and referrals to DMA were working well within their districts. Other staff reported that they did not have a detailed knowledge of the sanctions process but said they were aware of the written guidance and would refer to this if required.

However, a large number of staff also stated that the implementation of LPO was still at an early stage and they had no direct experience of the sanctions process for lone parents affected by LPO so it was difficult to comment on how the process was working in practice.

Most staff reported that they felt the majority of lone parent customers affected by LPO were aware of JSA conditionality as they were informed about this on a number of occasions, and reminded at FJR appointments. However, there was some indication that, while staff were informing lone parents about the requirements of the JSA regime, they did not always fully inform them about the implications of not meeting those requirements, i.e. a benefit sanction. If the sanctions process is not discussed there is also no opportunity to inform customers about the re-engagement process following a sanction. Some advisers interviewed in a number of the case study districts stated that while they explained JSA conditionality to lone parent customers, and the necessity to attend signing appointments, they did not specifically mention sanctions.

Staff were asked for their views on the effect of JSA conditionality and potential sanctions on the lone parents they work with. Very few were prepared to offer an opinion about this as they felt it was too early in the implementation to LPO to discern the effect of the changes on customer behaviour. A few stated that they felt sanctions had potential to be an effective way of ensuring customer compliance with the conditions of the benefit. One adviser also suggested that lone parents were moving from IS into work in order to avoid moving onto the JSA regime. Others were less certain about the longer term impact and one suggested that lone parents would make use of crisis loans to negate the impact of a sanction.

Only one member of staff who was interviewed reported any direct involvement in sanctioning the benefit claim of a lone parent affected by LPO, and a small number of staff expressed apprehension about potential future involvement in sanctioning this customer group.

'No Adviser Manager wants to be the first to sanction a lone parent and have the press on your doorstep.'

(ASM)

Although not directly involved in either case, one ASM reported the referral to DMA and subsequent implementation of a sanction for two lone parents who had recently moved to JSA. Both customers had refused to comply with their JSAG and one of these was refusing to look for work on the basis that they were home educating their child. An LMDM who covered the same district reported that they had recently disallowed the JSA claim of a lone parent who stated that they had done nothing to look for work. The LMDM had written to the customer to ask if they had taken any steps to find childcare which would enable them to work. When the customer did not reply their claim was closed.

This LMDM also noted two areas of potential difficulty that they experienced when dealing with referrals for lone parent customers. The first was that it was not always clear from the referral documentation that the customer is a lone parent. Where the case is a referral for a decision about a sanction, the LMDM would access the Jobcentre Plus Legacy System, which would give an indication that the customer is a lone parent. However, if the case referred was a disallowance, they stated that an LMDM may not need to use the Legacy System, and therefore may not be aware that the customer is a lone parent.

The second area of difficulty noted by this LMDM was where decisions involved the application of JSA flexibilities related to appropriate and affordable childcare. The office where this LMDM was based is geographically remote from the district they covered and they felt they had limited knowledge or information on childcare provision in the district. They also felt that, in more general terms, it was difficult to assess what can be considered as the reasonable steps a parent must demonstrate they have taken to secure appropriate and affordable childcare.

As reported above, one LMDM who had been directly involved in the process noted some difficulties related to:

- the identification of the customer's status as a lone parent;
- access to information on appropriate and affordable childcare;
- guidance on what can be considered reasonable steps to secure childcare.

This LMDM felt that improvements in these areas would be helpful to support decision making and the appropriate application of disallowances and sanctions. In addition to this, as noted above, LMDMs assess the evidence in cases referred to them against case law and regulations. Given the relatively early stage of LPO

implementation it is unlikely that case law to support decision making will be available for some time. In order to assess if the issues reported by this LMDM are more prevalent they will be explored further in later stages of the evaluation.

One other issue which may require review is the decision by some LPAs not to mention sanctions when discussing the JSA regime with lone parent customers. One of the issues raised by the small number of lone parents who reported a loss of benefit due to missing an FJR appointment was that they were not aware of this possibility until it actually happened. This may have contributed to the feelings of stress and uncertainty about how to address the situation which a number of them described. This is discussed further in the section on customer experiences within this chapter.

5.6.2 Customer views and experience of sanctions on the JSA regime

Most of the lone parent JSA customers interviewed appeared to be aware of the requirements of the JSA regime and the consequences of not adhering to these, i.e. a potential loss of benefit.

'It's included in the title isn't it...it's the Jobseeker's Allowance...if you're not seeking work you're not getting your allowance.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales)

'If you don't sign-on, you don't get your money.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

A small number stated that they were aware of JSA requirements but felt their adviser had not explained this aspect of the JSA regime thoroughly enough. They reported having gained some of their knowledge through sources other than Jobcentre Plus (e.g. from friends or acquaintances). This may reflect findings from staff interviews, reported above, where some LPAs stated that while they did inform lone parents affected by LPO about the JSA regime, they did not discuss sanctions. However, only a very small number of customers appeared to have no knowledge that they could lose benefit if they did not adhere to the conditions required, and a similar number stated that they only became aware of the potential to lose benefit when they found themselves in that situation.

Although levels of awareness of benefit sanctions were high there were lower levels of awareness about what action customers needed to take for their benefit to be reinstated after any loss. This lack of knowledge was also apparent in the experience of customers who had found themselves in this situation and is discussed further below. Where lone parent JSA customers were aware of benefit sanctions, most said that this had a positive impact on their adherence to the conditions of the JSA regime. A small number also suggested that it acted as an incentive to find work.

A small number of customers stated that the possibility of benefit sanctions had no impact on their behaviour, but in these cases this was due to their pre-existing desire to find work. These customers seemed to be suggesting the existence of sanctions did not offer any additional incentive to find work, as they were already determined to do so.

When customers were asked about the consequences of not adhering to JSA regime requirements (i.e. sanctions), they were also asked in more general terms how they felt about the use of sanctions. Similarly to the responses from customers on IS (see Section 3.3.5), customer responses to this were fairly evenly divided between those who were generally in favour of the use of sanctions and those opposed to them. Those who were in favour felt sanctions were useful to stop people abusing the benefits system and others indicated that they felt it was reasonable to expect people to have to adhere to certain conditions to receive benefit.

'It's the same as work...if you don't turn up for work you don't get paid.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber)

A very small number in the group, who articulated support for sanctions, also stated that while they were in favour of the use of sanctions they did not feel that sanctions were an incentive to get people back to work. This may suggest that they perceived sanctions more as a tool to prevent abuse of the benefits system than as an incentive to find work.

A number of those who were opposed to the use of sanctions stated their concern quite strongly. Some described their own fears of having a benefit sanction applied and the impact that any loss of income would have on their children. Others thought it was unfair to frighten or threaten people who were already vulnerable and had very little money. One customer stated that the thought of benefit sanctions made her very nervous whenever she attends the jobcentre.

There was, however, some degree of ambivalence in the responses of a small number of this second group. These customers indicated that they could see a need for benefit sanctions for those who were abusing the benefit system, but not for those that they regarded as having a genuine need for support.

Overall there was very little difference between the awareness of, or attitudes to, benefit sanctions between lone parent customers who had made a new claim and those who had moved to JSA from IS. Of the 100 JSA customers interviewed, ten reported that they had experienced a loss of benefit due to missing an FJR appointment (i.e. their claims were disallowed although customers tended to use the term sanctioned). It should, however, be noted that this study is qualitative in nature and the group are not representative of all lone parent customers affected by LPO.

The reasons why these customers missed their appointments varied. Around half stated they had simply forgotten or become confused about their appointment dates, others stated that either they or one of their children was ill, and one customer had to stay at home while urgent domestic repairs were carried out.

In general, the customers who had forgotten their appointments tended to regard the situation as something that they had brought upon themselves, while those who had missed their FJR appointment for other reasons were more inclined to be critical of the action taken by Jobcentre Plus. Some customers from both of these groups described the process of losing benefit as stressful and this view was often linked to their understanding and experience of the re-engagement process.

While some of the customers reporting disallowance felt that the reinstatement of benefit was straightforward and fairly speedy, others appeared to find re-engagement difficult. Some reported a sense of panic; that they did not know what they needed to do and some described the Jobcentre Plus staff they dealt with after their disallowance as unhelpful or unsympathetic. For example, one customer stated that they made a rapid reclaim but when they went back to the jobcentre for their next appointment they were told their claim had not been re-established. When enquiring about when this would be resolved they were directed to speak to three different Jobcentre Plus staff who gave conflicting information.

Where the financial implications of the benefit loss were discussed, most customers reported that they had lost benefit for a fairly short time and that they had been able to manage financially by relying on Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit payments during this period. One customer who had their payment stopped for two weeks reported that they were appealing against this decision because they felt that they should only have lost benefit for one week.

5.7 Customers views of the effects of the JSA regime on themselves

At this stage of the evaluation lone parents claiming JSA have been in the early parts of the JSA regime, and typically Phase 1, the self-help phase. This section explores customers' perceptions of the effects that claiming JSA has had on them. It includes detail of lone parent's attitudes to work and the extent to which they would be financially better off in work; those that had found work, or were working less than 16 hours a week and claiming JSA; and their perceptions of the likelihood of increased pay, promotion and access to training opportunities. Although there were some fears, as described earlier in Section 5.4, about children being 'latch-key kids' it is too early in the evaluation process to provide evidence of any effects that being on JSA had on children and family life.

5.7.1 New and repeat JSA customers

For many of the JSA new and repeat customers interviewed, the main financial transition they had managed in the last year had been moving from work onto benefits. Some had lived off redundancy money or savings before making a JSA claim and a few still had savings from their period in work.

Although this was not directly related to LPO, those who were working prior to claiming JSA had struggled to manage financially since moving onto JSA and had often been carefully budgeting to try and live within reduced means. They had been cutting back on all but essentials making efficiencies across the board, but were finding it difficult to get used to having less money than when they were in work. They were also getting used to receiving piecemeal benefit payments as opposed to their in-work income which arrived in one lump sum every week or month. Some customers expressed a desire for more support during this difficult financial transition:

'I think there should be a training course when you're coming off of working for over a year, or something, where they should say: look, okay, you do not have that big budget anymore; this is realistic now. Can you please make sure you've only got £20 for food and you've got £10 for electricity and you've got £10 for gas, just something; but there's nothing and you just... you learn the hard way.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Some JSA new and repeat customers had got into debt since they stopped work, although overall they had less debt than other customer groups, some had protection plans on debt from when they had been in work, and in general, their levels of debt were not putting them off going back to work. Some had borrowed money from friends and family. Other debt among this group included crisis loans, social fund loans, car purchase loans, student loans, rent arrears, credit cards, overdrafts and catalogue debt. In a couple of cases individuals had lost their car or had their house repossessed when they could not keep up with loan or mortgage payments. Most felt that they were making regular payments and that their debt was decreasing, but a few felt that their debt levels were getting worse. Some had been to the Citizens Advice Bureau or to a law centre for debt advice and one had an Individual Voluntary Arrangement in place.

It is important to note that many new and repeat JSA lone parent customers had been on IS in the past so were able to compare their experience of JSA with previous experiences of the IS regime despite being a new or repeat JSA claimant. Some customers felt that the JSA regime was not acting as an incentive to work as they were already motivated, but others felt that it was impacting on their attitude to work and acting as an incentive to find work. Many did not like claiming and did not like signing on fortnightly and said that they would really try and avoid it in future. The pressure to find work under the JSA regime was felt by many to be giving them more of a push to go out to work and had made them more

determined to find work. The following three quotes are from customers who had claimed IS in the past and make comparisons between their experiences of claiming IS and JSA:

'Interviewer: Has JSA had any influence on your likelihood to claim benefits in the future?'

'Interviewee: Yes, I think it has really put me off much more than even before. I would really, really like to get off it and not have to do it again to tell you the truth. Not because the experience has been negative; I think claiming JSA is much more demoralising for me than IS for some strange reason. I think it is because it is so monitored.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

'Interviewer: What has been your experience of claiming JSA?'

'Interviewee: Hate it. Absolutely hate it. You get embarrassed, the fact that you're having to go down to the jobcentre. I just don't like it at all. I don't like being out of work.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales)

'I felt it was a matter of going down and signing on, whereas before it was IS, so it was just didn't mind it. It was the books that we used to get, so you didn't have to go near the place. Then, it got paid into your account, so nobody knew what you were doing, you know. So, the embarrassment bit wasn't...but actually having to go down, I'll never do that again.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

Although not an effect of LPO, when asked about the effects of claiming JSA on them and their family, a few lone parents raised the issue of having less money than when they had been working which worried their children. This group had often worked recently and so had a more realistic view than other customer groups of whether they would be financially better off in work. Many felt that they would be, although not always by much. Some of these customers had received a BOC in the past but had not always trusted the results of the BOC. They felt that being financially better off in work would very much depend on the type of job and level of pay they were able to get.

At the time of the interviews there were six new and repeat JSA customers who had moved into work of 16 hours or more since being included in the research (all were working between 16 and 24 hours a week). The type of work they were doing included work in a café, driving disabled children, cleaning, catering and care work. Some lone parents reported that they wanted to progress in their current job and to increase their hours (and therefore pay), but felt that they did not have the opportunity to do this in the near future. These lone parents also reported that there were no training opportunities available to them at work. Four of the new and repeat JSA customers were working in mini-jobs of less than

16 hours a week at the time of the interview, alongside claiming JSA. These jobs included a position in a local college, self-employment as a trainer, work in a local school and bar work.

5.7.2 Customers who have moved from IS to JSA

It was clear from the interviews that customers felt very differently about claiming benefits as a lone parent (IS) and claiming as a jobseeker (JSA). There was evidence that for many customers, the move from IS to JSA has impacted negatively on their sense of identity and attitudes towards claiming benefits. Customers talked of feeling *'tarred...with the same brush'* (new and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales); *'as if I'm in the category of a no-hoper'* (new and repeat JSA customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth); and not wanting *'to be classed as somebody that's a lowlife...everybody thinks that you're all the same and you're not, you know'* (customer who has moved from IS to JSA; North and East Yorkshire, and the Humber).

Furthermore, the JSA customer group as a whole also cited the experience of signing on and/or attending the jobcentre itself as a key negative aspect of claiming benefits, particularly when compared to earning money through work:

'It's not so much what they do, it's just the stigma of having to go and sign-on. You think of...I don't mean to be rude but you think of people that are lazy that just can't be bothered to get job, that like living on the system. Do you understand what I mean?... Your basic scumbags and you feel they're... I'm surrounded by them and I'm thinking...and I get the card and I put it in my pocket because I won't be seen walking from car with it in my hand. I just don't want that, I find it really degrading; it's quite upsetting to be honest. I don't like doing it at all.'

(New and repeat JSA customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

Many customers who had moved from IS to JSA reported that claiming JSA and the JSA regime was affecting their attitude to work, and was an incentive to find work. The JSA regime was an incentive primarily because lone parents who had recently moved from IS did not enjoy the experience of being a JSA customer. This included not liking the experience of signing on, not wanting to have to go to the jobcentre every fortnight, feeling stigmatised by being on JSA, not liking the pressure and struggling with the costs of transport in rural areas to sign-on every fortnight. Some felt that this expectation to find work was often unrealistic.

'I think they are asking too much. I don't feel it's realistic. It's not realistic what they're asking.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

'It's a bad pressure... Okay, give a bit of a push, you know, but if I've said I'm trying my best, but if I can't get replies from the employers then I can't do anything, I can't just walk into a job can I?'

(New and repeat JSA customer; South East Wales)

All of these issues meant many customers felt that being on JSA gave them a push to look for work and had made them more actively look for work than before. While some did say that they were looking for work before the move to JSA, they acknowledged that claiming JSA had made them more determined in this regard. While the JSA regime had affected some lone parents' attitudes to work, not all of them felt that they were getting the support they needed through the JSA regime to actually find a job. A few lone parents also raised negative effects of being on JSA, which included feeling under pressure and a few felt this affected their mental health. Below are examples of four lone parents' experiences of the JSA regime and its effects on their attitudes to work.

The experience of claiming JSA for customers who had moved from IS:

'Jobseeker's makes you look for work. When you're on IS, as a lone parent, it's not giving you the incentive to look for work.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Birmingham and Solihull)

'The only difference is that instead of quarterly, you're fortnightly but you lose the ability to have a constructive chat about what you're doing and what you're not doing. I think presently you haven't got that.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders)

'I just feel sick at the thought of going there every fortnight.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Birmingham and Solihull)

'You just assume, because it's a jobcentre, they're going to help you to find work. I don't mean push you into a horrible job, I mean help you to find work. Find out what your skills are and then help you find the right employment. But that's not the case. I don't go to the jobcentre to help me find work, I go to the jobcentre to sign-on. That's it.'

(Customer who has moved from IS to JSA; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Lone parents on JSA who had recently lost their entitlement to IS were in the main unsure about whether they would be financially better off in work. Whether they would be better off in work, and the extent of any financial gain, was reported by lone parents to be influenced by the level of pay of work they could find. Some JSA lone parent customers felt that they would be better off in work, but not by much, whereas others felt that they would not be better off in work after

the extra costs of work (including paying for prescriptions) had been taken into account. BOCs were not always seen as useful as they were an estimate until a specific job had been found.

As with the other customer groups, these lone parents had a range of debts. In general, this group felt that their debt levels were staying the same and while they knew that they would have to start paying off more debt when they had gone back to work few had sought debt advice. In one extreme case a lone parent had accumulated £150,000 of debt before going bankrupt.

A group of customers who had recently moved from IS to JSA were working in mini-jobs of less than 16 hours a week while claiming JSA. These included work in shops, cleaning, lunchtime assistant in schools and school crossing patrol officer. A small number of customers had moved off JSA and into work of 16 hours a week or more by the time of the interview. For example, one of these customers was working in a restaurant and one as a domestic in a hospital. Working customers were asked if they had accessed any in-work support from Jobcentre Plus or other organisations. None of the interviewees had used such support. Later parts of the LPO evaluation will focus specifically on customers that have been affected by LPO and who have moved from benefits to work. The quality of this work, and opportunities for promotion and progression, as well as any use of in-work support will be explored in more depth then.

5.8 Summary

- The job role of staff that worked with lone parents on the JSA regime, and who therefore applied the parent flexibilities, varied between the case study areas. In some it was LPAs and in others it was generalist JSA regime staff. This affected the customer experience. Customers who were able to continue to see the same LPA when they were claiming IS and JSA tended to report more support and appeared to benefit from the continuity of relationships.
- Although staff had limited experience of applying the JSA parent flexibilities at the time of the research they generally demonstrated a good awareness of them, although there were exceptions.
- Within the parent flexibilities, staff described difficulty in defining appropriate childcare. This was seen as subjective and customer-led, whereas what would constitute affordable childcare was easier to calculate, for example, with the help of BOCs.
- Both customers and staff highlighted some gaps in childcare and after-school provision to support the JSA regime and working parents. Some lone parents had concerns about leaving their children on their own after school and feared that they might become involved in anti-social behaviour. In some instances this limited the type of work they sought.

- Generally, customers had a good awareness of the requirements and conditionality of the JSA regime. New and repeat JSA customers were more likely to be looking for full-time work than customers who had recently moved from IS, who tended to want to work part time and within school hours. Where JSA claimants wanted to change career direction, they thought there was a tension between them complying with the JSA regime and searching for work – a 'work first' approach – versus a longer-term approach that might have produced a better job-match.
- The internet was a key way interviewees searched for work. Some lone parents, most commonly those who had recently moved from IS, reported that they did not have access to the internet or the skills to use it. It was apparent that there were differences between the confidence and capability of JSA customers to 'self-help' during the first stage of the JSA regime.
- Signing appointments were felt by customers to be of little use to them, and of more use to the jobcentre to check they had been looking for work. Experience of the 13-week review was mixed. Some customers said it was no longer or more useful than their regular signing appointment, but others had found it useful to discuss their job search and work options in more depth. Where customers had raised the possibility of training with advisers, they were told at this stage in their claim they were unable to access support. Several customers would have liked to receive this type of support earlier.
- Staff are able to fast-track lone parents to later stages of the JSA regime if they need more support. However, there were no instances of JSA customers we interviewed having been fast-tracked. Staff had expected a greater level of take-up of NDLP from lone parents on JSA than there had been, and they were unsure about the reasons for this. There were no instances of JSA customers we interviewed accessing support through NDLP.
- At the time of the first wave of the evaluation the transition of customers from IS to JSA was still in its infancy. Of the staff interviewed only one member of staff (an LMDM) had any direct experience of involvement in disallowance or sanctioning under LPO. There were some indications from the interviews with lone parent JSA customers who reported a loss of benefit, and from staff, that it may be beneficial to review the provision of information to customers about disallowance and sanctions when discussing the JSA regime. There was a lack of awareness about how to re-engage and comply with the regime. This added to customer difficulties and anxiety if they found themselves in this situation.
- Being on JSA seems to have had a positive effect on lone parent's attitudes to work. Many reported that they were more likely to look for work as a result, in part because of a dislike of having to sign-on fortnightly. There were some lone parents who by the time of the interview had found work and were no longer claiming JSA, and others who were working less than 16 hours a week alongside claiming JSA.

6 Conclusions and interim recommendations

The overall aim of this evaluation is to explore how lone parent employment interventions provide an effective incentive to look for paid employment, alongside an effective package of support for workless lone parents to enable them to find, enter and sustain paid employment. This report has focused on:

- the effectiveness of the Income Support (IS) regime for lone parents with a youngest child aged six and under who will represent the steady state of lone parents on IS once the roll-out of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) has completed (Chapter 3);
- the ending of IS eligibility for lone parents with a youngest child aged 12-15 (the first group to be affected by the roll-out of LPO) (Chapter 4);
- early findings from the first of three waves of qualitative work evaluating the Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) regime for lone parents. This study has focused on the first three months on JSA for lone parents who have moved from IS, or who are new and repeat claimants, to see how lone parent customers with a youngest child aged 12-15 are adapting to the JSA regime requirements (Chapter 5).

It is too early to make any conclusions about the effect of LPO on lone parents, so we focus here on examining the effectiveness of the implementation of LPO to date; what has worked well and recommendations for improvement for the next phases of roll-out (which have fed into policy and implementation prior to the publication of this report). We also return to the research aims and provide some early findings and evidence to help answer them.

It is important to note that this research was conducted during the very early phases of LPO roll-out and so may well pick up on 'teething problems' which have since been resolved. In general, implementation has gone well and many of the recommendations below are, therefore, suggestions to ensure that implementation continues to go smoothly.

6.1 The effectiveness of the IS regime for lone parents with a youngest child aged six and under

Chapter 3 outlines what the IS regime entails for lone parents. Lone parents with a youngest child aged six and under on IS represent the steady state of lone parents on IS once the roll-out of LPO has completed. It is therefore important to examine whether the IS regime provides an effective package of support for workless lone parents to enable them to find, enter and sustain paid employment.

The Work Focused Interview (WFI) is a key means by which lone parents engage with Jobcentre Plus services. It performs multiple functions for lone parent customers on IS including access to work-search advice, benefit entitlement information and guidance, and a range of personal support through a Lone Parent Adviser (LPA). Customers valued the flexible and individualised support on offer, and staff placed an emphasis on building rapport with customers in order to establish positive relationships. This was helped by seeing the same adviser for each WFI, which customers also preferred to seeing a different adviser at each appointment. Many customers felt happy with the support received from their LPAs and reported that they had good relationships with their advisers and found them approachable, easy to talk to, helpful and understanding of their situations.

A small number of staff and customers suggested that further flexibility in Lone Parent Work Focused Interview (LPWFI) frequency could be useful for customers in certain circumstances, such as when their child reached school age or when they started to look for work.

There was limited evidence, however, that an increased LPWFI frequency provided a greater focus on work. Interviews with both staff and customers suggested low levels of engagement with the action planning process. Despite the fact that some staff reported reasonable engagement rates with the action plan activities, customers did not focus on this element of IS conditionality at all during discussions.

Overall it was felt by staff that the effectiveness of the regime depended on the individual customer and their attitude to work. They felt that some customers told advisers what they wanted to hear and agreed to actions that they did not then carry out, while other customers responded well to the WFI regime. The effectiveness of the increased frequency of the LPWFI regime to support lone parents to become more job-ready and to find and enter work is therefore likely to vary by customer and to depend on several other factors and influences, such as customer work orientation (which can change over time) and their attitudes to the use of formal childcare for example.

6.2 Lone parents' awareness and understanding of the LPO changes

The process designed to ensure that lone parents are aware of and understand the LPO changes is outlined in Chapter 4. Front-line jobcentre staff, and LPAs in particular, saw the promotion of LPO to lone parent IS customers as an important part of their role and they described a number of methods used to raise customer awareness of the changes and effects on them. These included discussions in LPWFIs and Options and Choices Events, and printed materials such as letters and leaflets. A number of staff across districts reported low attendance levels at Options and Choices Events. This was supported by the customer interviews, where most said that they had neither heard of, nor attended an Options and Choices Event. Staff felt that LPWFIs were particularly useful for getting customers to focus on the changes, and suggested that the increased frequency of these to quarterly in the final year of IS eligibility was beneficial in promoting customer awareness and understanding of LPO.

Most staff felt that the LPO processes had provided customers with good levels of awareness about the LPO changes and the implications it had for them. Most of the interviewed customers whose IS eligibility was due to end in the near future were aware of the forthcoming changes to lone parent benefits and they generally displayed a reasonable level of understanding of the basic changes involved. Many customers whose IS eligibility was due to end were aware that individual IS eligibility was dependent on the age of their youngest child, and that this age threshold was reducing over time. Most appeared to understand that once they became ineligible for IS they could claim another benefit should they need to and, if they claimed JSA, they would be expected to actively seek work.

While customer awareness of the changes was good, few customers yet to change benefits understood what the process of switching benefits would involve or when it was due to happen. As might be expected, as customers move through the LPO changes and from IS onto other benefits, their awareness and understanding of the processes increased. For example, by the time customers were claiming JSA (having moved from IS) they generally had a good understanding of the requirements and conditionality of the JSA regime. Overall, from both the customer and staff perspective, the LPO communications strategy and processes supporting this seem to have been effective at ensuring the customers are aware of the change in their benefit entitlement.

6.3 The effectiveness of the IS-ending process

Chapter 4 outlines the IS-ending process. All staff interviewed were aware of LPO and the three roll-out phases for ending IS eligibility. They were also aware of the existence of exemptions and transitional protection, and there were no examples from the customer interviews of lone parents who, it appeared, were eligible to be exempt from LPO or that could have transitional protection applied.

Most of the Advisory Services Managers, LPAs and Benefit Delivery Centre staff interviewed across all districts felt that uptake of lone parent transition loans (LPTLs) by customers had been relatively low. Many lone parents that were interviewed (across all customer groups) were in debt and had previous or ongoing negative experiences with debt. Most customers who had moved from IS to JSA did not take out an LPTL, some because they had not been told about it, but mostly because they did not want to incur (more) debt.

At the time of the interviews, the staff interviewed felt the implementation of processes for ending IS had gone well or very well. Staff interviewed identified a number of factors which they felt contributed to the perceived success of the roll-out. These were thorough guidance and training, successful partnership working, effective organisation and management of the changes, and good customer communications.

6.4 The effectiveness of the JSA regime for lone parents

Chapter 5 outlines the JSA regime for lone parents. It is important to note that when examining the JSA regime this research has focused on the first stage of the JSA regime which is by design a 'self-help' stage where lone parents receive less support than they would if they were claiming JSA for longer. It was apparent that there were differences between the confidence and capability of JSA customers to 'self-help' during the first stage of the JSA regime and several customers would have liked to receive more support in their first three months on JSA. These customers would perhaps have benefited from being fast-tracked to later stages of the JSA regime or referred to New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP).

Customers felt that signing appointments were of little help to them in their job search, but were helpful for the jobcentre to check they had been looking for work. Among those customers who had reached the 13-week review meeting the experience of this meeting was mixed. Some customers said it was no longer or more useful than their regular signing appointment, but others had found it helpful to discuss their job search and work options in more depth.

The job role of staff that work with lone parents on the JSA regime, and who therefore apply the parent flexibilities, varied between the research case study areas. In some it was LPAs and in others it was generalist JSA regime staff. This seemed to have affected the customer experience. Those customers who were able to continue to see the same LPA when they were claiming IS and JSA tended to report they had received more support and appeared to benefit from the continuity of relationships. LPAs were also reported by some of the staff interviewed to be more aware than generalist JSA regime staff of the range of (financial) support lone parents can access, whereas LPAs were less confident at working within, and applying, the JSA regime.

Although individual staff had limited experience of applying the JSA parent flexibilities at the time of the research, they generally demonstrated a good awareness of them, although there were exceptions. This was mirrored by customer experience where it was clear that flexibilities had been applied to some customers, but there were other cases where flexibilities could have been applied, but had not been. Overall, most lone parents on JSA were often not aware of the parent flexibilities that could be (or had been) applied to their JSA claim.

We would recommend, based on these early findings, that in implementing the JSA regime for lone parents the following are considered:

- **Recommendation 1:** Make greater use of fast-tracking to Stage 3 of the JSA regime, and increase signposting to other support, including NDLP, for lone parents who need more support than is provided by Stage 1 of the JSA regime.
- **Recommendation 2:** Provide staff who have not worked with lone parent customers as frequently with more training on the (financial) support available to this customer group.
- **Recommendation 3:** Provide LPAs working with lone parents in the JSA regime with more information about the JSA regime.
- **Recommendation 4:** Increase the awareness and understanding of the JSA parent flexibilities among all staff supporting customers on the JSA regime.

6.5 Benefit disallowance and sanctioning lone parent customers

Chapter 3 explains the benefit disallowance and sanctions process for lone parents on IS while Chapter 5 does so for lone parents on JSA. For lone parents on IS with a youngest child aged six and under, staff and customer views of attendance at LPWFIs differed. Few customers reported missing appointments, but staff in certain jobcentre districts felt this was an issue that warranted action. The threat of benefit sanctions was generally seen by customers as a key reason to attend LPWFIs. However, in a small number of cases, the interviews with staff and customers confirmed low levels of awareness amongst some customers of the fact that failure to attend LPWFIs may result in a cut in their benefits.

Lone parents on JSA may have their claim disallowed or be subject to a benefit sanction if they fail to comply with the JSA regime. At the time of this research the transition of customers from IS to JSA was still in its infancy and there was limited occurrence of these issues. Disallowance and sanctions will have an increased focus in later stages of this evaluation. Of the staff interviewed only one (a Labour Market Decision Maker (LMDM)) had any direct experience of disallowance or sanctioning under LPO, although some staff were aware of specific cases within their jobcentre. The LMDM reported experiencing some difficulties with the level of information and guidance to support their role under LPO. This issue will be explored further in the next stages of fieldwork.

There were indications from the interviews with lone parent JSA customers who reported a loss of benefit, and from staff, that it would be beneficial to review the provision of information to customers about disallowance and sanctions when discussing the JSA regime. Some staff reported that they do not directly discuss how to re-engage and comply with the regime when informing lone parent customers about sanctioning and disallowance. A lack of awareness, particularly about how to re-engage and comply with the regime, appeared to add to customer difficulties and anxiety if they found themselves in this situation.

We would recommend, based on these early findings, that the following is considered to improve benefits sanctioning and disallowance for lone parents:

- **Recommendation 5:** Make the process of how to re-engage after a JSA disallowance or sanction clear to all customers at the start of their claim.

6.6 Childcare and its provision to support lone parents into work

Many lone parents we interviewed described themselves as carers by choice: parental childcare was held as the ideal, and as such, some customers were strongly resistant to using formal childcare. Where alternatives to parental care were considered, they tended to focus on childcare that could be provided by close family members and friends. For this group of parents these views suggest that even where appropriate and affordable formal childcare is in place, their preference would still be for parental care or informal childcare.

Some discrepancy emerged between parents and staff views of whether childcare was a real barrier to work. Some staff felt the barrier was more to do with parents' negative perceptions of formal childcare, while some parents clearly viewed these concerns as valid, for example, expressing a distrust of childminders. Within the parent flexibilities (see Chapter 5) staff described difficulty in defining appropriate childcare. This was seen as subjective and customer-led, whereas what would constitute affordable childcare was easier to calculate, for example, with the help of Better Off Calculations (BOCs). Childcare Partnership Managers and local Family Information Services will have a role in helping both staff and customers to understand actual and perceived childcare barriers. The effectiveness of overcoming childcare barriers will influence the extent to which the JSA regime supports lone parents to address barriers and enter and sustain paid employment.

Staff observed a gap in specialised childcare provision for children with disabilities. Both staff and customers also highlighted the challenge of the high cost of childcare in urban areas and the lack of transport/work-home connections in more rural areas. Staff thought that finding sufficient funded childcare places would be an increasing challenge as LPO rolled out and affected families with younger children over time.

Both customers and staff highlighted some gaps in childcare and afterschool provision for children aged 12-15 to support those currently in the JSA regime and working parents with children of this age. Some lone parents had concerns about leaving their children on their own after school and feared that they might become involved in anti-social behaviour.

We would recommend that in relation to childcare the following are considered:

- **Recommendation 6:** Further work with partner organisations to increase childcare provision for children with disabilities, provision for children aged 11-14, provision outside of normal school/nursery hours and seasonal/holiday provision.
- **Recommendation 7:** Give more clarity to help staff define affordable and appropriate childcare for lone parents on JSA.

6.7 Effect of LPO on lone parents' attitudes to work and propensity to work

In Chapter 2 we discussed the positives and negatives of working. Key motivating factors for lone parents to gain paid employment included: financial benefits and/or financial independence; personal independence and the social element of work; and the opportunity to set a good example to their children. The negative aspects of moving into work included concerns that they would miss their child if they worked; the perceived difficulty of juggling work and domestic commitments; a general reluctance to use formal childcare; and a feeling that they would not be (financially) better off in work. Several customers also expressed an apprehension at a possible move from the financial stability of benefits into work. Many feared the financial transition from benefits into work and viewed it as uncertain and risky.

Generally, lone parents on IS whose eligibility was due to end thought that they would be financially better off in work, and many had had BOCs. However, some did think that they would be worse off in work due to the extra costs of prescriptions, dentists and opticians, travel to work and childcare, which they were not sure whether the BOC had taken into account. Many of the interviewees who had debt reported that if they returned to work the payments to service their debt would increase. In some cases this could reduce the financial incentive for them to return to work.

There was a general consensus amongst staff that lone parent customers with younger children tend to be more open-minded and receptive to the idea of work. Many were more likely to have some (recent) work history and to want to work in the future, whereas lone parents on IS with older children (such as those now moving to JSA) are more likely to have been on benefit for a longer period of time and have a more distant work history and so find the idea of entering or returning to work more daunting.

Apart from work orientation, several factors that limited the likelihood lone parents would work were identified by the customers we interviewed. These included the cost and availability transport, as well as concerns about the amount of travel time getting to and from work might require. Most lone parents were reliant on public transport to access non-local employment and in some rural areas the public transport on offer was impractical, for example, with only two buses a day and the cost of public transport (particularly for longer commutes) made taking up low-paid work less financially attractive.

Staff and customers discussed that in some instances a lack of childcare provision, or parents attitudes to and willingness to use the available provision, limited the hours of work that many lone parents sought. Most favoured part-time work, within school hours. While limiting work hours in this way may help lone parents to balance work and family responsibilities, the availability and quality of the work that is available during these working hours will be critical to ensuring that the policy intentions of LPO, particularly around reducing child poverty, are met.

Relating to this, customers were also concerned about the availability of part-time and flexible work. Many lone parents were seeking to work within school hours and were also concerned about how 'family friendly' employers would be in accommodating everyday domestic responsibilities and domestic emergencies.

Turning to the effectiveness of support from Jobcentre Plus at encouraging and supporting lone parents to enter and sustain paid employment, many customers on IS with a youngest child aged six and under view a future move from benefits into work as a positive one (see Chapter 3). Indeed a number of customers said that they were looking forward to moving off IS. Overall, it was felt by staff that six-monthly WFIs helped move people in the right direction and could change their attitudes towards work over time. Customers with a youngest child aged six and under felt the most appropriate frequency of LPWFIs was twice yearly.

Staff felt that the ending of IS entitlement, and subsequent JSA conditionality for those who move onto that benefit, would help to encourage lone parents to look for work. At this point in the evaluation lone parents claiming JSA have been in the early stages of the JSA regime (see Chapter 5). Being on JSA seems to have had a positive effect on their attitudes to work and job search behaviour, with many lone parents reporting that they were more likely to look for work on JSA than IS. In part, this was because they disliked having to attend signing appointments and for some because of the stigma they perceived was attached to claiming JSA. As outlined in the recommendations in Section 6.4, there are aspects of the JSA regime for lone parents that could be improved to support and encourage, particularly those who are furthest from the labour market, to seek work most effectively and to find employment.

We would recommend, based on these early findings, that the following are considered to encourage more lone parents to move into work:

- **Recommendation 8:** Make BOCs more comprehensive so that they take into account all outgoings and therefore give a more accurate picture of the extent to which customers would be financially better off in work.
- **Recommendation 9:** Provide further explanation of the financial support available to customers who make the transition from benefits to work, such as In-Work Credit and support with rent, to help to allay fears about this transition.
- **Recommendation 10:** Broker local transport solutions to enable lone parents in rural areas to access jobs.
- **Recommendation 11:** Work with employers to promote part-time working and family-friendly working arrangements.

6.8 Effects of the recession on LPO

As the roll-out of LPO has taken place to date within the context of a recession, both staff and customers were asked whether and how the recession had affected the availability of work and the Jobcentre Plus service (as Jobcentre Plus dealt with increased volumes of benefit claimants).

Staff said that the recession had not greatly affected their capacity to implement the LPO changes, although some offices had become much busier than before (Chapter 4). It was felt by some staff that it was bad timing to implement LPO during a recession and that the increased number of people claiming JSA might mean that lone parents had less support on JSA than they might have had otherwise.

The effects of the recession on the lone parents we interviewed have been mixed. Customers who were on IS (with a youngest child aged six and under or whose IS eligibility was due to end) were least likely to express an opinion on what influence the recession had had on job availability in their area, in part because they had not been actively looking for work before the recession. New and repeat JSA customers were most likely to note that there was less job availability as they had often been working until recently. In general, JSA customers reported there were fewer jobs available and that there was increased competition for jobs that were advertised. It was also reported by some customers to be more difficult to find work in the types of roles they used to work in, such as retail, which had been making redundancies or had recruitment freezes following the recession. Advisers acknowledged that it was a very competitive job market and that lone parents' job goals may, therefore, need to change, but were trying to keep lone parents focused on the fact that there were 'still jobs out there'.

Appendix A

Sampling and opt out

The samples for the two groups of customers contained five times the number of customer records to the interviews required. The two groups were customers receiving Income Support (IS) and unaffected by Lone Parent Obligations (LPO), and customers whose IS eligibility was due to end. A proportion of these samples (83 leads, or 17 per cent) did not contain a phone number, making recruitment of these customers impossible. Customers without a phone number were removed from the sample and following an opt-out process (via which 14 customers opted out), recruitment proved difficult due to the accuracy of the customer contact details. One hundred and eighty-three customers had inaccurate contact details and this left 220 leads from which to recruit 100 customers. These difficulties led to a lower number of achieved interviews than planned at the first wave of fieldwork undertaken between April-July 2009. Twenty-two interviews with IS customers with younger children were achieved and 27 interviews with customers who were shortly due to lose their IS entitlement.

The low number of interviews initially achieved resulted in additional customer records being drawn and fieldwork undertaken in September 2009 to reach the target number of 50 interviews with each customer group. This later sample was specified to include a greater extent of over-sampling (up to 15 times where this was possible) and also included a different source of customer phone numbers which proved to be more accurate. By the end of September 2009, 52 interviews with IS customers and 51 interviews with customers whose IS was shortly due to end had been achieved.

The sample of new and repeat Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers affected by LPO contained the contact details of everyone that had been affected in the case study areas since the implementation of the LPOs. The total number of leads varied by case study area and was influenced by the number of new JSA claims. It ranged from 132 leads in Birmingham and Solihull to 62 leads in South East Wales. Eleven opt-outs were received from this customer group, and the remaining sample provided sufficient leads to achieve 51 interviews.

The sample of customers who had recently lost their IS entitlement was checked against Jobcentre Plus live systems to capture those that had since signed onto JSA. The number of customers affected by LPO in this way between their roll-out and the fieldwork period varied by case study area. For example, in Birmingham and Solihull there were 217 leads in the sample, and in Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders there were 74, and in South East Wales only 62. During the opt-out process, 11 opt-outs were received from these customers. The variation in the number of useable leads explains why in some areas the sample was exhausted before the required number of interviews was reached (see Table A.1). However, overall, 49 interviews were carried out with customers in this group.

The number of completed interviews by case study area and customer group are detailed in the table below. It was aimed that ten interviews with each of the customer groups would be carried out in each case study area.

Table A.1 Achieved interviews by customer group and case study area

	Birmingham and Solihull	South East Wales	Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth	Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders	North and East Yorkshire	Total
IS customers	10	11	11	10	10	52
IS-ending	10	11	9	11	10	51
JSA new and repeat	11	10	10	10	10	51
JSA from IS	11	9	10	9	10	49
<i>Total</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>203</i>

Appendix B

Key characteristics of the customer interviews

Some of the key characteristics of the four customer groups are detailed in the tables below. Overall, of the 203 interviews completed, 14 were with male lone parents (seven per cent).

Table B.1 Gender of lone parents interviewed by customer group

	Female	Male	Total
IS customers	50	2	52
IS ending	46	4	50
JSA new and repeat	48	4	52
JSA from IS	45	4	49
<i>Total</i>	<i>189</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>203</i>
<i>%</i>	<i>93%</i>	<i>7%</i>	<i>100%</i>

As shown in Table B.2, 59 interviews were with customers who described themselves as being from a black or minority ethnic group (29 per cent of the sample).

Table B.2 Achieved interviews by customer type and ethnic group

	White	Asian	Black	Mixed/ other	Unknown/ not specified	Total
IS customers	29	3	10	5	5	52
IS ending	30	2	2	5	11	50
JSA new and repeat	33	2	7	7	0	49
JSA from IS	34	3	8	5	2	52
<i>Total</i>	<i>126</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>203</i>
%	62%	5%	13%	11%	9%	100%

Table B.3 shows the achieved interviews by customer type and customer age. As might be expected, those customer groups with younger children, specifically IS customers whose youngest child was aged one to six, tended also to be younger. Table B.4 shows that the highest number of interviewed customers had one child (64 interviewees), but 76 out of the 203 customers interviewed had a family with three or more children.

Table B.3 Achieved interviews by customer type and customer age

	<20	20-29	30-39	40-49	50+	Unknown	Total
IS customers	1	25	14	8	0	4	52
IS ending	0	0	16	21	8	5	50
JSA new and repeat	0	0	14	29	5	1	49
JSA from IS	0	0	17	27	5	3	52
<i>Total</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>61</i>	<i>85</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>203</i>
%	0%	12%	30%	42%	9%	6%	100%

Table B.4 Achieved interviews by customer type and number of children

	1	2	3	4+	Unknown	Total
IS customers	21	6	12	10	3	52
IS ending	17	11	10	7	5	50
JSA new and repeat	12	13	13	10	1	49
JSA from IS	14	19	10	4	5	52
<i>Total</i>	<i>64</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>203</i>
%	32%	24%	22%	15%	7%	100%

Forty-nine customers (24 per cent of the sample) described themselves as having a health problem or disability, and 45 customers (22 per cent of the sample) described their child(ren) as having a health issue or disability.

Table B.5 Achieved interviews by customer type, and customer and child(ren) health issue or disability

	Customer health issue/disability			Child health issue/disability		
	Yes	No	Unknown	Yes	No	Total
IS customers	7	41	4	13	35	4
IS ending	15	29	6	9	33	8
JSA new and repeat	17	31	1	12	35	2
JSA from IS	10	41	1	11	40	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>142</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>143</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>%</i>	<i>24%</i>	<i>70%</i>	<i>6%</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>70%</i>	<i>7%</i>

The table below details the approximate qualifications level of the interviewees in each of the four customer groups included in this study.

Table B.6 Achieved interviews by customer type and qualification level

	No qualifications	<Level 2	Level 2	Level 3+	Other	Unknown	Total
IS customers	10	19	11	6	5	1	52
IS ending	12	13	10	9	3	3	50
JSA new and repeat	13	13	6	9	7	1	49
JSA from IS	12	7	18	9	3	3	52
<i>Total</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>203</i>
<i>%</i>	<i>23%</i>	<i>26%</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>16%</i>	<i>9%</i>	<i>4%</i>	<i>100%</i>

Table B.7 Achieved interviews by customer type and work status

	Not in work	In work < 16 hour a week	In work 16-29 hours a week	Total
IS customers	46	6	0	52
IS ending	46	4	1	51
JSA new and repeat	42	4	5	51
JSA from IS	40	7	2	49
<i>Total</i>	<i>174</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>203</i>

Appendix C

Timeline sticker options

The list within Table C.1 was presented to all the customers interviewed for the research. It is based on the Families and Children's Study attitudes and constraints to work model, which will also feature in the quantitative element of the Lone Parent Obligations evaluation. This list includes a range of things that can affect people who are looking for work/or considering looking for work. Respondents were also encouraged to add anything that was not on the list but that was an issue for them.

Table C.1 Constraints to work

Health condition/disability	Caring for someone else with a health condition or disability	Childcare cost
Availability of childcare	My confidence is low at the moment	Child(ren) too young
Cost of transport to and from work	Low wages	Lack of training/skills
Lack of qualifications or work experience	Lack of jobs in local area	Available work not flexible enough
No information about what work is available	No support to find work	Motivation to find work
I wouldn't be financially better off in work than on benefits	I am unsure about the move from benefits to work	I want to look after my children myself
My family wouldn't like it if I worked	Employers aren't very family friendly	My child(ren) wouldn't like me to work
Too little time to spend with my children	My (ex) partner/husband wouldn't like me working	Too stressful combining work and family life
Personal or family troubles	Availability of transport	

When discussing work search activities with interviewees, they were also presented with a list of different options (see Table C.2). As with the list shown in Table C.1, interviewees were also encouraged to add anything else they had been doing to the discussion (indicated by blank).

Table C.2 Work-search and other activities

Help from friends/family	Training/a work-related course	Employment Zone
Jobcentre Plus adviser	Attending job interviews	Social Fund loan
Career adviser	Assessing my skills	Attended voluntary interview
Job ads in a newspaper	Any language training	Applied for a lone parent transition loan (LPTL)
New Deal for Lone Parents	Doing job applications	Help managing a health condition
Options and Choices Events	Courses	Help with housing problems
Work-Focused interviews	Completing a CV	Attending a Children's Centre
Jobs fairs	Help with job search	Discussing or sorting out any debts or money problems
Undertaking voluntary work	Assessing childcare options	Part-time working – mini jobs
Doing a work-trial		

Appendix D

Staff roles within Lone Parent Obligations

Jobcentre Plus office staff

Diary Administrative Support Officers (DASO)

- Receive schedules (scans) identifying lone parents with children in the relevant age groups for action.
- Using the scans:
 - check Child Tax Credit (CTC) position and deem a claim if necessary by completing form TC600 to make a claim for CTC for lone parents for whom it is not already in payment;
 - identify the date of the last work focused interview and calculate the date on which Income Support (IS) will end using the ready reckoner and prioritise the scan. Check for exemptions and transitional protection cases;
 - invite the customer to attend a voluntary interview 6-8 weeks before IS is due to end. Attempt to contact lone parent 24 hours prior to remind of appointment;
 - make at least one attempt to contact the lone parent on the date they failed to attend the voluntary interview to arrange a new appointment. If the lone parent cannot be contacted, refer the claim for a compliance check by a Compliance Officer;
 - send a proforma to the Benefit Delivery Centre to indicate when IS should be ended.

Customer Engagement Team Leaders

Responsible for overseeing the work of the DASOs in general and, in relation to Lone Parent Obligations, responsible for overseeing the prioritisation process undertaken by DASOs on the scans. Carry out ten per cent assurance checks and report back to the project team. Need to ensure staff are prioritising appropriately, ensuring the security of the data and keeping on top of volumes and not allowing backlogs. Responsible for dealing with discrepancies with the scan, for example, customers working with other offices.

Lone Parent Advisers (LPA)

Conduct voluntary interviews prior to IS ending, at which they:

- discuss how changes will affect the lone parent;
- discuss transitional arrangements;
- discuss support available;
- explain entitlement conditions of Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance;
- explain when the first payment of the new benefit will be paid;
- offer the lone parent transition loan (LPTL) and complete an electronic form for this if required;
- make a CTC claim if appropriate;
- update Labour Market System.

Advisory Services Managers (ASMs)

Responsible for overseeing the work of the LPAs and Personal Advisers (PAs). Make decisions on the flexibilities if referred by an LPA or a PA, referring to the Labour Market Decision Maker (LMDM) if they are not straightforward or if there is doubt. Refer potential sanction decisions to the LMDM.

Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviewers

Carry out fortnightly benefits sign-ons with customers. Apply the flexibilities. Refer decisions on the flexibilities to LPAs (or to Team Leaders once trained) where doubt cannot be resolved. Refer potential sanction decisions to the LMDM.

Benefit Delivery Centre staff

Labour Market Decision Makers

Make decisions on the flexibilities if referred by ASM. Always make decisions on any good cause (for refusing to carry out a job seeking direction or taking up an employment offer) or just cause (for leaving employment) cases. Make decisions on all potential sanctions.

Benefit Delivery Officers (BDO)

End IS entitlement and carry out benefit switching. Process LPTLs.

Benefit Delivery Team Leaders

Responsible for overseeing the work of the BDOs.

Other staff

Childcare Partnership Managers

Works with partners about childcare. Duty to report back to local authority the results of the 'childcare conversation' advisers have with parents to inform the local authority of any gaps in childcare provision and childcare issues for benefit claimants. May also be responsible for briefing staff about childcare in the local area and the National Child Poverty policy.

Appendix E

Forthcoming outputs from the evaluation of Lone Parent Obligations

The qualitative work consists of three studies, each focusing on a separate phase of LPO:

- The Income Support (IS) regime for lone parents with a youngest child aged six and under and ending IS eligibility for lone parents with a youngest child aged 12-15 (the first roll-out group).
- The Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) regime for lone parents (including sanctioning and application of the parent flexibilities) with a youngest child aged 12-15 (the first roll-out group) and with a youngest child aged seven to nine (the third roll-out group).
- Other destinations of lone parents (including Employment Support Allowance, unknown destinations, lone parents exempt from the LPOs and those who start work with a youngest child aged 12-15 (the first roll-out group)).

Findings from the first study (about the IS regime for lone parents and IS eligibility ending) are presented in this report, alongside the early findings from the first of three waves of qualitative work evaluating the JSA regime for lone parents.

There will also be a longitudinal cohort quantitative survey of lone parents affected by LPO. This will take place over four years and track the destinations and experiences of lone parents with a youngest child aged seven to nine (the third roll-out group). A feasibility study for an impact assessment has been undertaken and the decision on whether a full impact assessment of LPO proceeds will be taken in mid-2010. Two synthesis reports will draw together the findings from the various aspects of the LPO evaluation.

In summary, the further research outputs planned as part of this research are:

- a joint report of qualitative work on JSA/sanctions focusing on months three to nine of the JSA regime and other destinations of lone parents with a youngest child aged 12-15 – autumn 2010;
- an interim synthesis report in December 2010. This will draw on the admin analysis, the literature review and all of the qualitative work except for the final wave of the JSA/sanctions study – December 2010;
- quantitative survey: Wave 1, including administrative data analysis – January 2011;
- quantitative survey: Wave 2, including administrative data analysis – January 2012;
- a report of the final wave of qualitative work on JSA/sanctions wave with lone parents with a youngest child aged seven to nine – summer 2012;
- quantitative survey: Wave 3, including administrative data analysis – January 2013;
- quantitative survey: Wave 4, including administrative data analysis – January 2014;
- reports on impact assessment – dates to be confirmed;
- a final synthesis report covering the administrative data analysis, all of the qualitative research, all of the quantitative findings and findings from the impact assessment – 2014.

Appendix F

Themes covered by the topic guides

Listed below are the primary topics covered by the staff and customer discussion guides. For further information, or copies of the discussion guides, please contact Karen Elsmore at the Department for Work and Pensions.

Jobcentre Plus customers

There were four topic guides for customers. Each topic guide had areas that were specific to the circumstances and stage of the Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) customer journey relevant to the interview (detailed below). However, they all included questions about the following topics:

- personal, household and family characteristics;
- education and training;
- benefits and work history;
- use of childcare;
- work-search activity and support from Jobcentre Plus;
- attitudes and constraints to working;
- current employment (if relevant);
- household finance and money management;
- effects of recent LPO policy changes on them and their families.

In addition customers who were receiving Income Support (IS) were asked about:

- the IS regime.

Customers whose IS eligibility was due to end in six to eight weeks were also asked about:

- the communications they had received about their IS eligibility ending;
- their awareness and understanding of IS ending.

New and repeat Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers were also asked about:

- making a JSA claim;
- the JSA regime for lone parents (including flexibilities and sanctions).

Customers who had recently moved from IS to JSA were asked about:

- the communications they had received about their IS eligibility ending;
- the JSA regime for lone parents (including flexibilities and sanctions).

Jobcentre Plus staff

The staff topic guides were used flexibly and the focus was dependent on the interviewee's job role and expertise. The following topics were included:

- job role and background;
- understanding of the LPO changes (and changes to their job role);
- LPO communications, guidance and training;
- childcare provision;
- preparing for the end of IS (including relevant processes and customer communications);
- ending IS (including relevant processes and customer communications);
- implementing the JSA regime for lone parents (including the flexibilities);
- JSA sanctions and disentitlements;
- effects of LPO on Jobcentre Plus;
- effects of LPO on Jobcentre Plus customers.

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