Research report

Lone Parent Obligations: destinations of lone parents after Income Support eligibility ends

by Jo Casebourne, Malen Davies, Sarah Foster, Pippa Lane, Ann Purvis and Danielle Whitehurst

DWP Department for Work and Pensions

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A report of research carried out by the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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Work and Welfare Central Analysis Division, 3rd Floor, Caxton House, Tothill Street, London SW1H 9NA

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The Authors

Dr. 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 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.

Malen Davies is a Research Assistant at *Inclusion*. She has carried out qualitative research, including recruitment, conducting interviews and analysis for the lone parent obligations project, as well as the evaluation of In Work Credit for DWP. Her research interests are lone parents and young people who are not in employment, education or training.

Sarah Foster (née 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.

Dr. Pippa Lane joined *Inclusion* as a Researcher in January 2010. Prior to this she worked for the Barrow Cadbury Trust, developing the trust's research activities across its project areas of poverty and inclusion, criminal justice and migration. Her research interests include working parents and childcare use.

Ann Purvis is Associate Director of Research at *Inclusion*. She started 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 National Health Service (NHS) Trust Executive Director.

Danielle Whitehurst is a Researcher at *Inclusion*. Danielle has been involved in a number of research projects, commissioned by organisations such as Save the Children UK, DWP and the National Audit Office, during her time at *Inclusion*. Danielle has been involved in the recruitment, interviewing and analysis stages of the Lone Parent Obligations project. Her research interests are lone parents and welfare to work.

Abbreviations

ASM	Adviser Service Manager
BDC	Benefit Delivery Centre
BOC	Better Off Calculation
BtWS	Back to Work Session
CA	Carer's Allowance
ChB	Child Benefit
CAT	Customer Assessment Tool
CPM	Childcare Partnership Manager
CTB	Council Tax Benefit
CTC	Child Tax Credit
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DEA	Disability Employment Adviser
DJ	Disc Jockey
DLA	Disability Living Allowance
DMA	Decision Making and Appeals
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FJR	Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviewer
FND	Flexible New Deal
FTA	Failure to Attend
HB	Housing Benefit
HMRC	Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs
IB	Incapacity Benefit
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IS	Income Support
ISDP	Income Support with Disability Premium
IWC	In Work Credit

JRFND	Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
JSAg	Jobseeker's Allowance Agreement
LMDM	Labour Market Decision Maker
LMS	Labour Market System
LPA	Lone Parent Adviser
LPO	Lone Parent Obligations
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
NHS	National Health Service
NJI	New Jobseeker Interview
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PA	Personal Adviser
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
WCA	Work Capability Assessment
WFHRA	Work Focused Health Related Assessment
WFI	Work Focused Interview
WRAG	Work Related Activity Group
WTC	Working Tax Credit

Glossary of terms

Child (for Income Support eligibility)	A person aged under 16 years for whom an adult claims Child Benefit.
Child (for Child Benefit 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 Child Benefit 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 poverty	There is no single, universally accepted definition of poverty. In the UK, three measures of poverty are used: (1) Absolute low income: this indicator measures whether the poorest families are seeing their income rise in real terms.(2) 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. (3) Material deprivation and low income combined: this indicator provides a wider measure of people's living standards.
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.
Disallowance	Prior to April 2010 a lone parent would lose entitlement to Jobseeker's Allowance that is, have their claim disallowed, if they fail to attend their fortnightly job search review appointment without demonstrating good cause (subsequent to this date they would receive a fixed sanction in these circumstances). Lone parents can also have their claim disallowed if they fail to meet the basic labour market conditions of the benefit such as being available for work, actively seeking work and having a signed and up-to-date jobseeker's agreement.
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 are 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 fewer than 16 hours of work per week.
Employment part-time	A job of 16 to 29 hours of work per week.

Employment full-time	A job of 30 hours or more of work per week.
Employment and Support Allowance	From 27 October 2008, Employment and Support Allowance replaced Incapacity Benefit and Income Support paid on incapacity grounds for new customers. Employment and Support Allowance 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.
Formal childcare	Ofsted-registered childcare, including day nurseries, out-of-school clubs, pre-school play groups and childminders.
Income Support	Income Support 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 or are exempt from them.
Informal childcare	Unregistered childcare. This includes parent and toddler groups and unregistered family members providing childcare.
In Work Credit	In Work Credit is a payment of £40 per week (£60 in London) for lone parents who have been receiving out of work benefits for at least 52 weeks, and who are starting a job of at least 16 hours per week.
JSA 16-hour rule	An adult is ineligible for Jobseeker's Allowance if they participate in an activity of more than 16 hours per 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 Jobseeker's Allowance.
Jobseeker's Allowance	Jobseeker's Allowance is the main benefit for people of working age who are out of work, work fewer than 16 hours per week on average and are available for and actively seeking work.
Jobseeker's Allowance agreement	An agreement that sets out the customer's availability to work and the ways in which they will search for a job. The Jobseeker's Allowance agreement usually include details on area and hours that customers are available for employment, as well as any restrictions, a description of the type of work that is being sought, and planned action.

Lone parent – generic definition	Parent or guardian with a dependent child under 16 who is not in a co-habiting relationship.
Lone parent on Jobseeker's Allowance	A claimant who has their marital status recorded as single, widowed, divorced or separated, and has an open Child Benefit claim for at least one child under 16.
Lone parent on Income Support	A claimant who has dependent children and no partner.
Lone parent obligations	Changes to entitlement conditions for lone parents claiming Income Support (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 Jobseeker's Allowance 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 Employment and Support Allowance. 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 parents' entitlement to Income Support is also phased in line with the above timescales.
Lone parent obligations (LPO) flexibilities	Additional flexibilities have been incorporated in the Jobseeker's Allowance 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.
New Deal for Lone Parents	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 fewer than 16 hours per week.

New Deal Plus for Lone Parents	This was delivered through a number of pilot areas from April 2005. The pilot tested 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 New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) or New Deal for Partners participation and outcome rates. Some elements tested in the earlier phase of the pilots have now 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. New Deal Plus for Lone Parents ran as a pilot until July 2010.
Options and Choices Event	These are events organised for lone parents affected by lone parent obligations. The purpose of the events is to let lone parents know about changes to Income Support 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.
Final year quarterly work focused interview	From November 2008, final year quarterly work focused interviews were introduced for lone parents in the last year before their child reached the relevant age where they may lose entitlement to Income Support under Lone parent obligations (LPO). The interviews enable advisers to provide advance notice of the changes and explain the differences in benefits and responsibilities when claiming Jobseeker's Allowance. 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 Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support 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 aim is to simplify the reclaiming process and encourage clients to take up employment, including short-term periods of full-time work, and ease concerns about reclaiming benefits if a job ends unexpectedly.
Sanction	This is a penalty imposed by a decision maker. It is the removal of all or a proportion of benefit payment due to a customer's non-compliance with conditions placed on benefit receipt.
Self-employed	Those 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 per 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. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) comparative definition, measured through the Labour Force Survey and adopted in this report, unemployed people are: 1) those who are without a job, want a job and have actively sought work in the past four weeks, and are available to start work in the next two weeks and 2) those out of work who 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 New Deal for Lone Parents programme, and for those who have moved on to Jobseeker's Allowance, 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 provides financial support on top of earnings. This is payable in addition to Child Benefit. Child support maintenance is wholly disregarded when calculating Working Tax Credit.

Summary

Introduction

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. As part of the Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) changes, from November 2008 lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over were no longer entitled to receive Income Support (IS) solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. Since then, the age of the youngest child has reduced to ten and over from October 2009 and seven and over from October 2010.[1] Lone parents who are no longer eligible for IS have been able to move to other benefits as appropriate, including Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). The JSA regime has been amended to include flexibilities for parents, for example, in the hours of work they 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.

The findings presented in this report are based on qualitative fieldwork with 55 Jobcentre Plus staff and 202 customers across five case study areas. The findings focus on the destinations and journeys experienced by lone parents after their youngest child reached the LPO threshold of 12. It looks at the effect on them of any change in benefit entitlement/conditionality and the services they receive.

The interviews on which the findings in this report are based were conducted prior to the change in government in May 2010 and so were not directly affected by it. However, the findings are relevant to, and can help inform the further roll out of LPO to lone parent customers with a youngest child aged five, due to be implemented by the new government. The findings are also of relevance to the coalition government's approach to the design and timing of eligibility for the new Work Programme for lone parents, its future approach to work incentives, and making work pay for those receiving benefits.

Lone parent customer journeys

Following the ending of IS eligibility on the basis of being a lone parent, the majority of the lone parents interviewed moved onto either JSA or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) or into work. Smaller numbers of lone parents re-partnered, moved into a 'not working and not claiming' destination, moved onto Incapacity Benefit (IB) or remained on IS.

[1] In May 2010 a coalition government was formed between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, following a general election. The new coalition United Kingdom (UK) government has outlined its plans to extend the scope of conditionality for lone parents on benefits. Under measures announced in June's Emergency Budget, lone parents will lose their eligibility to IS when their youngest child reaches five.

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative data show that, as of February 2010, 83 per cent of lone parents on IS affected by phase 1 of the roll-out of LPO (with a youngest child aged 12 to 15) had left IS. Of those who left IS:

- 16 per cent moved straight into work of 16 hours per week or more;
- 56 per cent moved onto JSA;
- 18 per cent moved onto ESA;
- two per cent had re-partnered;
- two per cent moved to another benefit or had some other known outcome;
- six per cent had an unknown immediate destination from IS.

While some lone parent customers interviewed had only experienced a single destination since their youngest child reached the LPO age threshold, others had experienced two or more destinations in the period since leaving IS and being interviewed for this research, and the journeys between different benefits, or between benefits and work, that lone parent customers interviewed had experienced were wide-ranging and disparate.

Where benefit transitions were completed as a benefit switching process by Jobcentre Plus staff on behalf of lone parent customers (typically from IS to JSA or ESA), the transition was generally reported to have been smooth and benefit payments continuous. However, where lone parent customers were required to make a new benefit claim (often to JSA after an unsuccessful ESA claim, or where employment had ended) more problems were reported. There was evidence of some potentially unnecessary journeys (moves from one benefit to another and moves onto one particular benefit where another would be more suitable) and other examples of possible misadvice from Jobcentre Plus staff, which were most likely to be experienced by lone parent customers who were exempt from LPO. Complex and difficult journeys were most likely to be experienced by lone parent customers who had moved from IS to ESA. The research also found some groups of lone parent customers with similar circumstances who had experienced very disparate journeys. This was most apparent in the case of lone parent customers with medical conditions who could be on ESA, JSA (following being found Fit for Work following an ESA assessment) IB or IS (Section 7.1.1).

Experiences of lone parents in work

Lone parents typically tended to have had two routes into work from IS. One group, which often had more recent work experience than other lone parents, moved directly into work as LPO came to affect them. Some in this group had previously cycled between work and IS, and some were already working in mini-jobs and extended their hours. A second group, which was more diverse in work-readiness, moved from IS and into work via JSA (Section 2.1).

Lone parents used a variety of methods to look for work and moved into a range of jobs, which tended to be mainly low paid and low skilled. Lone parents had overwhelmingly chosen part-time jobs with hours to fit around looking after their children. Overall, lone parents in work in this study did not use formal childcare, not because of a lack of appropriate availability or affordability, but because they worked while their children were at school, preferred to use informal childcare or felt that they did not need childcare as their children were old enough not to require it (Section 2.2).

Lone parent customers reported mixed views on whether they felt financially better off in work than on benefits and these views seemed to correlate with hours worked. Those working more than 30 hours per week were very mixed about whether they were better off in work, whereas it was

common for those working between 16 and 29 hours per week to report that they were definitely better off in work, reflecting the fact that most of the lone parents were typically moving into low wage jobs and the effect of the tapers in the tax credit system (Section 2.5.4).

Generally, lone parents who had moved into work in this study felt that working had a positive effect on their lives. The main reasons given for feeling happier and more confident were: making friends at work, feeling self-reliant and feeling that they were a valued member of society. While working was in the main a positive experience for interviewees, lone parents could find it stressful combining work and family responsibilities, for example, when a child was sick. Positive effects of working on their children included: having the opportunity to go on school trips and having Christmas presents because of extra family income, observing the good example of a working parent and greater independence. However, lone parents who felt that their children were too old for childcare still had concerns about the effects of leaving their children at home alone when working in the evenings or in school holidays (Section 2.6).

Working in 'mini-jobs' of fewer than 16 hours per week while claiming benefits was often also felt by lone parents to be very beneficial, providing an experience of work that could help prepare them for moving into work of 16 hours per week or more. However, the complicated process of providing evidence on mini-jobs appeared to have put some lone parents off doing them, and there were examples given of payslips getting lost and of mini-jobs leading to benefit claims being closed (Section 3.5.2).

Experiences of JSA

In general, staff and lone parent customers demonstrated a good understanding of the JSA regime for lone parents, although some lone parent customers who were at later stages of the regime suggested it was more complex than they had anticipated and felt they could have been offered more detail of the full regime at the beginning of their claim (Section 3.4).

Experiences of making a claim for JSA varied. Lone parent customers who moved from IS to JSA generally experienced a smooth transition, while lone parent customers who had more complex journeys, such as those who moved from IS to ESA to JSA, experienced more difficulties, particularly during the move from ESA to JSA. Lone parent customers with mini-jobs also reported more difficulties with claiming JSA and with their fortnightly job search review appointments (Section 3.5).

Lone parents' views on, and experience of claiming JSA generally tended to vary according to their circumstances prior to claiming the benefit. For example, lone parent customers who had moved to JSA from work as a new or repeat lone parent customer tended to be more positive and more content with the 'self-help' approach of Stage 1 of the JSA regime, whereas lone parents who had been out of the labour market for a longer period reported more difficulties and tended to have a more negative view of the regime as a whole. These lone parent customers tended to compare their experience of JSA with the support that they received on IS and, in general, felt that there was less support offered, fewer training opportunities and a sense that they were offered a less personalised service. Many JSA lone parent claimants from all destinations expressed the view that claiming JSA could be an uncomfortable and/or demanding experience (Section 3.7).

Staff highlighted that the early stages of the JSA regime were not designed for customers who had been out of work for some time, and thus may not be suitable for lone parent customers moving from IS (or from ESA), that is, those who have been out of the labour market for an extended period. This viewpoint was supported in lone parent customer interviews, with some lone parents articulating a desire for more support from Jobcentre Plus at an earlier stage of the regime. Despite this, there was little evidence of fast-tracking lone parent customers to later stages of the JSA

regime or the use of New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) to offer extra support. At later stages of the JSA regime, lone parent customers appeared to particularly value the support offered via their interview with an adviser. These meetings offered an important opportunity for Jobcentre Plus staff to demonstrate the range of support available and to explain how Jobcentre Plus could help with customers' search for work (Section 3.10).

While staff were positive about the JSA regime for lone parents overall, some also raised a number of issues related to the operation and design of the regime where they felt there was potential for improvement. In particular, variation in staffing models (specialist versus generalist) appeared to have a significant effect on the delivery of JSA, both in terms of the lone parent customer experience and the effectiveness of regime delivery. In terms of the JSA regime the use of generalist or specialist staff was reflected in staff knowledge of the range of services or provision available to lone parents, staff's ability to deliver a more 'personalised' lone parent service and the effectiveness of the 'childcare conversations' with lone parents. Overall there were indications that the use of specialist staff offered a number of benefits, and there did appear to be a move to increase involvement of specialist staff across the case study areas. Another issue which had a significant impact on the operation of the JSA regime was that lone parent customers making a new and repeat claim for JSA were not always clearly identified as such. Where this was the case, lone parent customers were not always benefiting from JSA parent flexibilities, being offered relevant services or being dealt with by specialist staff even where the office structure was set up as such (Section 3.3).

A significant constraint on the effectiveness of the JSA regime in moving lone parents into work, which was referred to by Jobcentre Plus staff and lone parent customers in all case study districts, was the reduced availability of jobs due to the recession and its aftermath. The recession also appeared to have had an impact on delivery of the JSA regime, particularly in relation to the numbers of new staff and the overall capacity of staff (Section 3.5).

Whilst lone parent customers were generally aware of the principle of sanctions they appeared to have less understanding of the different aspects of conditionality and of the various consequences of not adhering to the eligibility requirements within the regime. They generally demonstrated an awareness of the need to actively seek work and attend appointments at Jobcentre Plus, or risk losing benefit, but had less understanding of other reasons why a sanction may be imposed. A number of participants in the research talked about their experience of a loss of benefit while claiming JSA. Whether this was due to a sanction/disallowance or another reason was not always clear, although where it was clear about the reason, this was generally due to a missed appointment.

Advisers mentioned that lone parents would be advised clearly about JSA conditionality and reminded regularly. In only a small number of cases did staff have experience of direct involvement in the sanctions or disallowance process. Some advisers described a reluctance to use the JSA sanctions regime with lone parents which was linked to a concern about undermining the relationships they had with customers, possible financial hardship for the lone parents and their children, and adverse publicity (Section 3.13).

In April 2010, immediately following the fieldwork conducted for this evaluation, a change to JSA sanctions was implemented, with non-attendance without good cause resulting in a fixed one-week sanction rather than a disallowance. Subsequent non-attendance will result in a fixed two-week sanction. This change will simplify the process by negating the need for customers to make a new claim but will result in a greater loss of JSA benefit income (Section 3.13.4).

Experiences of ESA

Advisers were using ESA as the default option to suggest to lone parents with health problems and/or disabilities whose IS eligibility is due to end. Interviewees who were on ESA at the time of the interview described their main barrier to work to be overcoming their health problems or disabilities, and did not feel able or well enough to work when interviewed. Lone parents on ESA also often had fewer qualifications than other lone parent customers and (along with some of those who moved from IS to JSA) had often spent long periods of time on benefits. Interviewees did tend to have aspirations to work in the future, but had not given much thought recently to the type of work they would like to do and were not actively seeking work (Section 4.1).

While it was common for lone parent customers to recall being told the basics of the ESA regime before they moved off IS (including having to send in sick notes and having 'a medical') this was not always the case. Lone parents were not aware of the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG) and support groups or the details of the different assessments involved (the Work Capability Assessment, or WCA, and Work Focused Health Related Assessment (WFHRA)) and what they were called. Understanding did not seem to improve once lone parent customers' claim for ESA began. Some lone parent customers described having gaps in their payment of ESA, as they had not realised that they had to keep sending in sick notes as a condition of receiving the benefit. Unlike lone parents on JSA, who understood the purpose of JSA and its focus on requiring them to actively seek work, those lone parents on ESA were far less clear about how ESA related to future employment. ESA was not experienced as a clear and structured regime in the way that IS or JSA was and contact was not regular and understandable to lone parents (Section 4.3).

Those who had been deemed Fit for Work after the WCA usually appealed, although there were a few cases of lone parent customers who were not appealing and who had moved onto JSA. It was common for lone parent customers to feel shocked and upset, particularly at scoring zero points,[2] and to feel that their result meant that they had not been listened to during the face-to-face stage of the WCA. Lone parent customers were being advised by doctors, Jobcentre Plus staff and social workers to appeal. Lone parent customer journeys off ESA were often more difficult than the journey onto ESA. It was common for lone parent customers deemed Fit for Work to end up appealing the decision. It was also common for interviewees not to understand **initially** what to do at this point – that they needed to appeal to reinstate their ESA claim or to make a claim for JSA – often leading to gaps between benefit claims. Those that moved onto JSA continued to face the same issues with their health or disability but felt they received a very different level of support when they moved on to the JSA regime as a 'new and repeat' lone parent customer. They moved from monthly Work Focused Interviews (WFIs), on ESA to discuss their health and work, to fortnightly brief sign-on appointments (Section 4.5).

In this research only a handful of lone parents had been allocated to the WRAG after undergoing a WCA and being found to have limited capability for work. However, it was common for lone parent customers to have experienced Pathways to Work because they often began the WFI regime while waiting for their WCA, waiting for the outcome of their WCA or appealing a WCA decision that they were Fit for Work. Support provided through Pathways to Work, including: work search activities, talking about how to manage work with a health condition or disability and referrals to specialist support for people with health problems, was felt to be helpful by lone parents and could increase

[2] Descriptors in the WCA carry zero, six, nine or 15 points, which relate to the degree of difficulty a person has in carrying out each task. A person has to score at least 15 points to be found to have limited capability for work. Scoring less than 15 means being found Fit for Work and no longer eligible to claim ESA.

their motivation to work. There were no cases of lone parents in this research who had been allocated to the support group, either before or after undergoing the WCA (Section 4.6).

This research, therefore, suggests that it is lone parents who are furthest from the labour market that may end up on the ESA regime after their IS eligibility ends. But, the research also raises a number of issues about how the regime operates for these customers. Although those claiming ESA appreciated elements of the support on offer, such as that provided by WFIs, the effect of WFIs was curtailed by lone parent customers' having their ESA claim terminated when deemed Fit for Work or if they lost their appeal against the WCA. Lone parents on ESA also tended to be unclear about how ESA related to future employment and it may be useful to make this link more explicit if lone parent customers are to be motivated to work.

Experiences of other destinations

Evidence from the United States of America (USA), following the introduction of policies aimed at increasing the numbers of lone parents moving off benefit and into work, shows that a significant group of lone parents have become 'disconnected', reporting no income from employment or from welfare, with some experiencing this status for a prolonged period (Finn and Gloster, 2010). DWP administrative data, as of February 2010, show that only ten per cent of lone parents move from IS to an immediate destination that is 'other' (known) or 'unknown'. This research found that lone parents reported as going to an 'other' or 'unknown' destination were either not 'disconnected' or, if so, experienced this only for a short period or had, in fact, re-partnered (Chapter 5).

The circumstances of the lone parent customers who could be classified as at an 'other' destination at the time of interview were extremely varied: some had re-partnered or reconciled with their former partner and so were no longer lone parents (Section 5.1), some were not working and not claiming (Section 5.2), and, less commonly, some were claiming IB due to a personal disability or health issue (Section 5.3).

Experiences of remaining on IS

DWP administrative data show that, as of February 2010, 27,400 lone parents with children aged 12 to 15 remained on IS. Nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of those remaining on IS were exempt from LPO due to claiming Carer's Allowance. Less than one per cent were exempt because they were a foster parent or because their child received middle or higher rate Disability Living Allowance (DLA). The remainder were on IS for reasons other than an exemption: because they had a health condition or disability (five per cent), they are scheduled to lose their IS eligibility during phase 2 of LPO (18 per cent) or because of some other or an unknown reason (13 per cent) (Chapter 6)

There were no indications among interviewees that they had chosen to care for a relative to gain exemption from IS (Section 6.1.3). Some staff expressed a concern that lone parent customers may be having children to avoid LPO but there was no evidence of this among those interviewed. None were pregnant at the time of the interview and the one person who had had a child was pregnant before the relevant change (Section 6.2.3).

The effect of LPO on lone parents' attitudes to work

LPO appears to have had the greatest impact on attitudes to work among lone parent customers who have moved onto JSA directly from IS. JSA lone parent customers who were new and repeat claimants, following a period of employment, generally suggested that the effect on them had been

minimal as they were already motivated to find work. There was, though, some evidence that JSA lone parent customers who had transferred from IS did not like the JSA regime compared with IS, which in turn gave them a 'push' towards work. This finding reflects the active nature of this benefit. Positively changing attitudes towards work among JSA lone parent customers may be a product, not just of the increased conditionality of LPO and the JSA regime bring, but also of the fact that their children are older, making them more likely to consider work as an option.

JSA lone parent customers who had moved onto JSA following an unsuccessful ESA claim tended to display attitudes to work more akin with those claiming a health-related benefit or IS due to exemption than those claiming JSA following IS or work. Interviewees with a significant medical condition or an LPO exemption were generally found to be furthest away from the labour market. For lone parent customers on IS or IB, LPO did not appear to have affected their individual attitudes to work, reflecting the inactive nature of these benefits. For those on ESA, the WCA process and its outcome did not appear to motivate lone parent customers to work, and the stress and pressure that they felt resulted from the ESA regime did not have the effect of 'pushing' them into work as the JSA regime more often did.

Lone parent customers held varying opinions across all benefit destinations about whether they would be better off in work. However, many of those lone parent customers who felt work would bring benefits felt they would be far wider ranging than just financial (Section 7.1.2).

Childcare and its provision to support lone parents into work

Two main issues were raised in this research regarding childcare: childcare provision and attitudes to using formal childcare. In terms of provision, issues were raised about the availability and affordability of childcare. Gaps were identified in provision for children with special needs (that is, those with a disability and/or behavioural difficulties) and older children who were seen by their parents as too old for formal childcare but too young to leave unsupervised.

There was also concern that falls in demand for childcare locally caused by the recession could undermine the viability of childcare provision. In high-cost areas, such as London, the costs of childcare could not always be met by the existing financial support for them and, in some rural areas, availability was generally limited.

In terms of attitudes to childcare, in the main, lone parent customers did not want to use formal childcare when they moved into work, in line with other research on lone parents. It was felt by staff that Lone Parent Advisers (LPAs) were better equipped than mainstream advisers to handle childcare discussions, to challenge lone parent customers' often negative attitudes to using formal childcare and to inform them about what formal childcare was available. This suggests staff might need longer interviews than the existing appointment system allowed in order to have childcare conversations that challenge lone parent customers' attitudes to childcare (Section 7.4).

Implications of this research for future LPO roll-out

There are a number of key implications from this research in relation to the further roll-out of LPO to lone parents with a youngest child aged seven, and to five in early 2012.

The preference demonstrated by lone parents in this research for part-time work during school hours is likely to increase as the transition of those with younger children progresses. In addition, the extension of the JSA parent flexibilities in April 2010 supports such attitudes by allowing lone parent customers with a youngest child of 12 or under to restrict their availability for work to their child's

normal school hours. Increased numbers of lone parent (and other) jobseekers will be competing for a limited number of part-time school-hour jobs. This will not only exacerbate the job availability issue raised in this research for lone parents who want to move into work, but will also potentially undermine the ability of advisers to work with and challenge those who do not want to move into work.

Lowering the age of the children of lone parents affected by LPO will also result in changing requirements for childcare. The reducing age will mean more lone parents will need to access formal childcare if they are to consider work outside school hours. However, the research indicated a general reluctance to use formal childcare among lone parents, and time limitations on advisers to conduct childcare conversations to challenge such attitudes. As LPO is rolled out further, therefore, the need to increase expertise and time spent encouraging consideration of formal childcare will become more pressing.

Staff willingness to challenge lone parent customer viewpoints on working outside school hours and/or the use of formal childcare may also be an issue as the age reduces. Some advisers indicated that they felt it would be extremely challenging to 'sell' LPO to parents with younger children, and some Adviser Service Managers also indicated that they felt some LPAs themselves might have difficulties in accepting the further age reductions.

The research also showed that those who had been on benefits for long periods of time were more likely to have become institutionalised to a life of claiming benefits and these lone parent customers displayed more anxiety about moving into work. The reducing age will mean lone parents are likely to have spent a shorter period of time on inactive benefits, and the requirement to start to look for work sooner will mean they are more likely to have more recent work history and be more aware, therefore, of the advantages of working.

Some front-line managers and advisers raised a concern that lone parents may have more children in order to remain on IS. While this was not the case among the lone parents interviewed as part of this research, the concern was raised by staff in more than one case study area who suggested they had seen a number of examples of this in their caseloads. This potential consequence of LPO needs to be investigated further to ascertain the true extent of the issue and any impact of the further roll out of LPO.

There are also implications from this research in relation to the design and timing of eligibility for the Work Programme for lone parents. This research found that the JSA regime was most effective for lone parent customers where they were identified as lone parents, and the support they received was personalised to their specific needs as lone parents. Therefore, where lone parents enter the Work Programme, it will be critical to ensure the support they receive is tailored to their needs as lone parents (Section 7.5).

Recommendations

It is recommended that, to encourage more lone parents to move into work, the following is considered:

- Encourage lone parents to work in mini-jobs as a stepping stone to work of 16 hours per week or more by improving the process by which they provide evidence of their employment.

It is recommended that in the operation of the JSA regime for lone parents the following are considered:

- Promote and facilitate the increased use of specialist staff in the delivery of the JSA regime for lone parents within Jobcentre Plus.
- Improve the use of referral to NDLP and consider the appropriateness of Optional Early Entry to Stage 3 for lone parent customers who have greater support needs.
- Improve the process for the identification of lone parents making new and repeat claims to JSA and ensure all staff are prompted to check lone parent customer status in this regard when delivering all aspects of the JSA regime.
- Improve the provision of clear and comprehensive information on the JSA sanctions regime (to include the process for claiming hardship payments) to lone parents.
- Review the effect of the change to JSA sanctions (implemented in April 2010 to mean non-attendance without good cause will result in a fixed sanction rather than a disallowance) on lone parent customers in the next wave of LPO research.

It is recommended that, in the operation of the ESA regime for lone parents, the following are considered:

- Improve lone parents' understanding of ESA and provide appropriate one-to-one support to lone parents on ESA by enabling lone parents to continue to see their LPA or a specialist disability adviser while moving onto ESA and going through the WCA process.
- Consider automatic NDLP referral or Optional Early Entry to Stage 3 for lone parents who move from ESA onto JSA, rather than treating them as 'new and repeat' JSA customers, to address their need for more intensive support.

It is recommended that, in relation to childcare for lone parents, the following are considered:

- Undertake further work with partner organisations to increase childcare provision, as more lone parent customers become affected by LPO, including provision for children with disabilities, provision outside of normal school/nursery hours and seasonal/holiday provision, and provision for children aged 11 to 14.
- Review potential best practice examples of advisers' challenging lone parent customer attitudes to childcare (such as the solution-focused interview and questioning-techniques pilot detailed in Section 3.15) and disseminate appropriate techniques to advisers.
- Ensure that appointment times are sufficient to enable adequate childcare conversations to take place.

It is recommended that, in the further roll out of LPO, the following are considered:

- Monitor the impact of new JSA parent flexibility, allowing restriction of availability to work to school hours, on the movement of lone parents with younger children into work.
- Ensure the new Work Programme makes consideration of the specific support needs of lone parent customers.

1 Introduction

This chapter presents the background to the research, an overview of the evaluation aims and methodological approach, and details of the report structure.

1.1 Background and policy context

1.1.1 Lone parents in the UK

There are an estimated 1.8 million lone parents in Britain today caring for three million children. Lone parents now make up one-quarter of all families, and the United Kingdom (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 or minority ethnic communities and around ten per cent of lone parents are fathers (One Parent Families, 2008).

The social composition of lone parent families has changed over the past 30 years. Hasluck and Green (2007) noted a diversity of circumstances among lone parents (including those who had never had a permanent partner and those who were separated, divorced or widowed), 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, and an increase in the rate of divorce and in births outside 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).

1.1.2 Lone parents and employment

The employment rate for lone parents is currently 57 per cent. This rate has been increasing steadily over the years, with the increase owing to a combination of policy initiatives, to change in characteristics of lone parents over time, and to improvements in employment rates across the board. There is, however, a group of lone parents who claim benefits for long periods of time. Marsh and Vegeris (2004) reported that just over one-third of lone parents (36 per cent) remained on Income Support (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.

1.1.3 Child poverty in lone parent households

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 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 one year after moving into work, 70 per cent of families (both lone parent and coupled families) had moved out of income poverty.

Increasing parental employment is one of the key means of reducing poverty. A series of welfare to work policies and programmes have been implemented over recent years to increase parental employment. Specific measures include: the introduction of mandatory Work Focused Interviews

(WFIs) for lone parents claiming IS; New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) to support the transition from benefits to work; changes to the tax and benefits system, to support work and help make it pay; and Lone Parent Obligations (LPO).

1.1.4 Lone Parent Obligations

LPO was introduced from November 2008 and meant that lone parent customers 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, those with a youngest child aged seven and over would lose entitlement. The new coalition government announced in the June 2010 emergency budget that these obligations would now be extended so that lone parents will lose their eligibility to IS when their youngest child reaches five.

Those able to work will instead be eligible to claim Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and will be required to be available for and actively seeking employment. Lone parents with health problems or disabilities may, if eligible, claim the new Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). ESA is a way of helping people with an illness or disability move into work rather than stay on benefits and, from 27 October 2008, ESA has applied to new customers, replacing Incapacity Benefit (IB) and IS with disability premium (that is, IS paid on incapacity grounds).

Some lone parent customers who have another reason for being entitled to IS, such as receipt of Carer's Allowance or foster caring, are exempt from LPO and will continue to be eligible to claim IS. In addition, some groups of lone parent customers 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, 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.

The LPO changes are being implemented for both existing and new lone parent customers. They were anticipated to affect around 300,000 existing lone parent customers (those with a youngest child aged seven or over) who claim IS because they are lone parents. The 2010 budget estimates that a further 75,000 lone parents will be affected when the age is reduced to five, following the transfer of those currently claiming IS (HM Treasury, 2010). Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative data show that, during phase 1 of the roll-out of LPO (affecting lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15 who are the subject of this report), 107,000 lone parents would potentially have their IS eligibility removed.

The process for ending IS commences approximately twelve months before a customer's entitlement to IS is expected to end. At this stage a lone parent customer is brought into the final year quarterly WFIs regime, which helps prepare them for the changes and they will also be invited to an Options and Choices Event providing them with further information. Eight weeks before their IS entitlement is due to end, the lone parent customer will receive a letter from Jobcentre Plus which lets them know when their last payment is due and invites them to a voluntary interview six weeks before the end of their eligibility. During the interview the adviser will discuss the LPO changes with the customer, how they will affect them and offer a range of support. Four weeks before IS is due to end, the lone parent customer will receive a letter from the Benefit Delivery Centre 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. All lone parent customers interviewed as part of this research (who have not remained on IS) will have experienced this IS ending process.

DWP administrative data show that, as of February 2010, 83 per cent of lone parents on IS affected by phase 1 of the roll-out of LPO (with a youngest child aged 12 to 15) had left IS. Of those who left IS:

- sixteen per cent moved straight into work of 16 hours per week or more;
- fifty-six per cent moved onto JSA;
- eighteen per cent moved onto ESA;
- two per cent had re-partnered;
- two per cent moved to another benefit or had some other known outcome;
- six per cent had an unknown immediate destination from IS.

1.1.5 Other contextual changes

Economic recession

The introduction of LPO in November 2008 was against a backdrop of recession. From the second quarter of 2008, the recession was beginning to have an impact on the UK labour market, with an increasing claimant count, falling vacancy levels and increasing redundancy levels (Office for National Statistics, 2009).

In response to the recession, additional front line advisers and other staff were recruited to Jobcentre Plus offices to help deal with the increased JSA register size and corresponding footfall.

Change of government

In May 2010 a coalition government was formed between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, following a general election. The new coalition UK government has outlined its plans to extend the scope of conditionality for lone parents on benefits. Under measures announced in June's Emergency Budget, lone parents will lose their eligibility to IS when their youngest child reaches five. The government estimates that this could move up to 15,000 lone parents into employment, and argues that such labour market activation policies, alongside in-work financial support, will help reduce child poverty. The budget measures represent an extension of LPO introduced by the previous administration. DWP has also published a command paper *21st Century Welfare* that outlines proposed reforms to the benefit system (DWP, 2010b).

The change of government will also see wider changes to the JSA regime which will affect all claimants including lone parents. By summer 2011 the existing welfare to work provision, including Flexible New Deal and Pathways to Work, will be replaced by a single integrated Work Programme. The Work Programme will assume the task of supporting workless lone parents into employment, alongside other workless people, using an outcome-based, staged entry point model. Other changes are also likely, with the Work and Pensions Secretary, Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith, and the Minister for Welfare Reform, Lord David Freud, expressing a commitment to improve work incentives for those receiving benefits.

The interviews on which the findings in this report are based were conducted prior to the change in government and so were not directly affected by it. However, the findings from this stage of the LPO research are relevant to the changes and will help inform the further roll-out of LPO to lone parent customers with a youngest child aged five. The findings are also of relevance to the coalition government's approach to the design and timing of eligibility for the 'core' Work Programme and its future approach to work incentives, and to making work pay for those receiving benefits. The concluding chapter of this report (Chapter 7) considers what implications the findings may have in light of the coalition government's future plans for welfare to work policy.

1.2 Evaluating Lone Parent Obligations

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 New Deal Plus for Lone Parents, In Work Credit and LPO. The aim of the consortium is to achieve consistent reporting and analysis across evaluations and to facilitate a strategic approach to research outputs.

The evaluation, as a whole, will examine the LPO 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 lone parent 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 to 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 (four and under from early 2012). The evaluation comprises both qualitative (see Gloster *et al.*, 2010) and quantitative studies, in addition to a review of international evidence (Finn and Gloster, 2010).

The qualitative work currently 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 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 to 15 (the first roll-out group). The first aspect of this study examines the IS regime for lone parents with a youngest child aged one to six. 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. This study is now completed and is reported in Gloster *et al.* (2010).
- The JSA regime as it affects lone parents (including sanctioning and application of the parent flexibilities) with a youngest child aged 12 to 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 lone parent customers who have recently been moved from IS to JSA because of LPO). It examines the effectiveness of the JSA regime for these groups of lone parent customers as it is anticipated that, because of LPO, increased numbers of lone parents will claim JSA.
- Other destinations of lone parents (including ESA, unknown destinations, lone parents exempt from LPO and those who start work) with a youngest child aged 12 to 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 (besides JSA) once they lose their IS entitlement.

Findings from the first phase of qualitative research were published in 2010 in what is referred to within this report as the Early Findings report (Gloster *et al*., 2010), which focused on the IS regime for lone parents with a youngest child aged one to six, as well as IS ending and the first three months of the JSA regime for lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15.

This report presents findings from the second of the three waves of qualitative work evaluating the JSA regime for lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15, focusing on months three to 11 of the JSA regime, alongside findings from the qualitative evaluation of other destinations of lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15.

1.2.1 Research aims and objectives

The primary aim of the evaluation of LPO and new services for lone parents 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 stage of the research explores the:

- effectiveness of Jobcentre Plus and other support to implement the changes;
- effectiveness of the benefits regimes for lone parent customers;
- effect on lone parent customers' work and life choices;
- effect on lone parent customers who move into work;
- overall effectiveness and outcomes of the regime.

More specifically, the aims of this wave of the qualitative research focused on lone parent customers with a youngest child aged 12 to 15 (the first group to be affected by the roll-out of LPO), examining the destinations of these lone parent customers after their IS eligibility on the basis of their being a lone parent has ended. It examines months three to 11 of the JSA regime as it affects lone parents, as well as other destinations of lone parents; including remaining on IS, ESA, moving into work of 16 hours per week or more, and those who were at an 'other' destination at the time of interview.[3] Lone parents' experiences of each destination are examined, as is the role of Jobcentre Plus in supporting them.

1.3 Methodology

The data presented in this report are based on qualitative fieldwork with Jobcentre Plus staff and lone parent customers. Qualitative research is useful for understanding how and why things happen or people respond to changes in certain ways but is not statistically representative of lone parents more generally.

The evaluation used a case study methodology to allow the opportunity to triangulate lone parent 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 was undertaken in five case study areas mapped to Jobcentre Plus district boundaries. The five case study areas were chosen to include one Welsh and one Scottish district, and to include both urban and rural areas. All case study areas chosen had high proportions of lone parent customers to ensure there were sufficient volumes from which to recruit individuals for interview. The five case study areas were: Birmingham and Solihull; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders; South East Wales; Lambeth, Southwark

[3] Those not either claiming IS, JSA or ESA as a lone parent or working 16 hours or more per week at the time of interview.

and Wandsworth; and North and East Yorkshire and the Humber. Further information on the case study areas can be found in the Appendix.

1.3.1 Lone parent customer fieldwork

Interviews were completed from January to March 2010 with 202 lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15 who were in a range of destinations at the time of the interview:

- Forty-nine interviews with lone parents who were **in work for 16 hours or more** per week.
- Seventy-three interviews with lone parents who were on **JSA**: broken down into 36 interviews with lone parents who had moved from IS to JSA and 37 interviews with lone parents who were JSA new and repeat customers.
- Thirty-six interviews with lone parents who were **ESA** customers.
- Sixteen interviews with lone parents who were at **other destinations**.
- Twenty-eight interviews with lone parents who **remained on IS** (often because they were exempt from LPO).

Further information on lone parent customer sampling and recruitment can be found in the Appendix and detail on the key characteristics of the lone parent customers interviewed can be found in the Appendix.

1.3.2 Staff fieldwork

Across the five case study areas, staff in a range of roles who had varying levels of involvement with lone parent customers on the JSA regime were interviewed. A total of 55 staff were involved in the evaluation research during the period February to April 2010:

- Five interviews (one per district) with the District LPO Roll-Out Lead.
- Five interviews (one per district) with an Adviser Service Manager.
- Five interviews (one per district) with a Jobcentre Manager.
- Five interviews (one per district) with a Childcare Partnership Manager.
- Five interviews (one per district) with a Labour Market Decision Maker.
- Five focus groups (one per district) with a total of 30 Personal Advisers (both lone parent and mainstream) working with lone parent customers on JSA.

Further information on these staff roles and their involvement with lone parent customers is contained in the Appendix.

1.3.3 Interviewing approach and discussion guides

Three lone parent customer discussion guides were used. While each focused on different lone parent customer destinations and journeys (JSA from IS, JSA new and repeat, and 'other' destinations besides JSA) and thus included some questions specific to those circumstances, all were united by common themes and question areas, which enabled comparisons in circumstances and attitudes to be made between lone parent customers in different destinations. These core areas included questions about lone parent customers' finances, money management and household budgets, education and training, work and benefits history, attitudes to work and benefits and an exploration of any constraints they felt held them back from looking for or securing work. This latter

aspect of the methodology was built on earlier work into the choices and constraints of lone parents (Collins *et al*., 2006) and is integrated into all waves of the qualitative evaluation. Themes covered by the lone parent customer discussion guides are detailed in the Appendix.

The concept of time and changes over time periods were critical to understanding lone parent customers' experiences of LPO, and whether attitudes to work and childcare changed over time and on different benefit regimes. For this reason, and as a tool to engage the interviewees, researchers used a timeline and stickers to aid the discussion about changes over time for key areas of the discussion guide. This timeline approach was also used in the Early Findings qualitative research conducted last year (see Gloster *et al*., 2010). However, the timeline stickers were amended and rationalised for this wave of the research following researcher feedback. Details of the timeline sticker options are provided in the Appendix.

For the staff research, separate discussion guides were developed for each staff role to reflect the different ways in which they were involved with lone parent customers affected by LPO. As with the lone parent customer discussion guides, however, all were united by common themes and question areas, which enabled comparisons to be made, both between staff interviews and between staff and lone parent customer interviews. Themes covered by the staff discussion guides are detailed in the Appendix.

1.3.4 Analysis process

Both the lone parent customer and staff interviews were recorded (where the interviewee gave permission) and then transcribed. If a recording had not been made, notes were made and written up. A fieldwork debrief meeting was held with the researchers that had conducted the fieldwork for the project, during which common themes from the interviews were drawn out and interviewers' perspectives on the main messages were gathered.

The transcriptions and notes from each interview were uploaded into a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software package 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. Content was analysed by the status of lone parent customers at the point of interview, though where a lone parent customer had experienced multiple destinations since LPO, the analysis process ensured that their experiences of each destination were captured, despite the transient nature of some destinations, alongside experiences of the transition between destinations.

1.4 Report structure

This report seeks to present findings on the journeys, and changing services and entitlements experienced by lone parent customers after their youngest child reached the LPO age threshold. Each chapter considers in turn, therefore, the different benefit regimes and other destinations lone parents moved to, starting with work followed by the most common benefit regime destinations (JSA and ESA) and finishing with less common (benefit and other) destinations.

In the remainder of the report:

- Chapter 2 reports findings in relation to lone parent customers who had moved off IS and into work of 16 hours or more per week
- Chapter 3 explores both staff and lone parent customer views and experiences of the JSA regime for lone parents. A greater number of lone parent interviewees were either claiming JSA at the time of interview or had experienced making a JSA claim since their IS eligibility ended than any of the other destinations considered in this report. In addition, the JSA regime for lone parents was the main focus of the staff interviews conducted.

- Chapter 4 reports findings from lone parent customers who moved off IS and made a claim for ESA.
- Chapter 5 considers the experiences of lone parents who were at other destinations (that is, not claiming IS, JSA or ESA as a lone parent or working 16 hours or more per week) at the time of interview.
- Chapter 6 considers the experiences of lone parent customers who remained on IS at the time of interview. This was often (but not exclusively) because of exemption from LPO.
- Chapter 7 draws out the main conclusions and recommendations from the research.
- The Appendix provides further detail on the case study areas, lone parent customer sampling and recruitment, key characteristics of the lone parent customers interviewed, themes covered by the discussion guides, timeline sticker options and the roles of staff interviewed.

2 Experiences of lone parents in work

This chapter reports findings for lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15 who moved into work of 16 hours or more per week after their Income Support (IS) eligibility ended under the Lone Parent Obligations (LPO). Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative data show that, as of February 2010, of those lone parents on IS affected by phase 1 of the roll-out of LPO, who left IS, 16 per cent moved straight into work (although others may have then moved into work subsequently). A total of 49 interviews were conducted with lone parents in work at the time of interview and it is their experiences that form the basis of this chapter. The experiences of lone parent customers who moved into work after LPO came into effect and subsequently stopped working are discussed in the chapter on Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA).

This chapter of the report explores:

- lone parent customer journeys into work;
- looking for work;
- types of work lone parent customers move into;
- use of childcare when in work;
- effects of work on lone parent customers' financial situations;
- effects of work on lone parent customers and their children.

2.1 Lone parent customer journeys into work

Those who were in work at the time of interview had overcome the constraints to work that they had faced in the past. For example, personal or family troubles were behind them (for example, dealing with the aftermath of a relationship breakdown or bereavement), they had learned to manage with their child's disability (for example, in the case of autism), or their own health condition had improved with the help of medication (for example, by taking anti-depressants). These lone parents often felt ready to work now that their children were older, in line with other research that has shown that attitudes to work and parenting can change, often in relation to the age of children (Collins *et al*., 2006). These lone parents were also more likely to be qualified at NVQ Level 2 or equivalent and above than the other lone parent customer groups in this research (see Appendix).

Typically lone parents tended to have had two routes into work from IS. One group moved directly into work as LPO came to affect them. This group often had more recent work experience than other lone parents. Some had cycled between work and IS and some of this group were already working in mini-jobs then extended their hours to 16 hour or more, often as a result of LPO.

Case Study 1: A lone parent customer journey from IS plus a mini-job to work

'Elizabeth' is a 50 year old lone parent. She had claimed IS since her only son was born 13 years ago. For the past 18 years she had worked for a local company driving a mini-bus. While she was claiming IS, she worked two 20 minute shifts each day, taking children to school in the morning and taking them home in the afternoon. She had earned £20 per week and was aware that this was within the earnings disregard threshold. Elizabeth received a letter informing her of the upcoming changes to her benefits that would mean she had to seek work. She was able to increase the hours at her existing job (and so never had to move onto JSA). She said:

> *'I mean, I had the job anyway. As it happened, we had a big contract come up which served the purpose of going in. Well, we had more work, so that was fine.'*

At the time of interview, Elizabeth was working 16 hours per week. She believed that her employer would be flexible if she needed to change her hours because of her parenting responsibilities – *'he works around me.'* Elizabeth said that she was financially better off now that she had increased her hours at work and moved off IS.

(In work lone parent; South East Wales)

A second group moved from IS and into work via JSA. This group was more diverse in work readiness than those who moved directly into work.

Case Study 2: A lone parent customer journey from IS to JSA to work

'Jennifer' is a 42 year old lone parent. She lived in privately rented accommodation with her youngest daughter who was 14 at the time of interview. Jennifer became a lone parent 22 years ago. While claiming IS she did some voluntary work as a First Aider for the Red Cross and had a mini-job for six hours per week as a retail assistant in 2000. She left her mini-job because she didn't like leaving her youngest daughter with her mother, as her daughter got upset when she went to work. During her time on IS, her Lone Parent Adviser (LPA) told her about a five-week course at the Healthcare Academy. Her adviser thought that it would be something that she might be interested in because of her voluntary work. After Jennifer completed the course she began applying for jobs in the National Health Service (NHS). After four months of unsuccessful applications, she received a letter informing her that she would need to move onto JSA because of the age of her youngest daughter. When she made her claim for JSA, her LPA put her onto the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). She received support with her job search and after seven more months of searching and applying for jobs she was offered a full-time job as a Clinical Support Worker at a hospital. Her mother looked after her youngest daughter when she worked out of school hours. Jennifer was planning to take her Level 2 SVQ in social care in September and her Level 3 the following year. If she was successful in those she planned to take her Access to Nursing course, as her ambition was to become a nurse.

(In work lone parent; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Less typical journeys also occurred. Two more journeys into work are described below. One is from a lone parent customer who was exempt from LPO and yet moved into work of more than 16 hours per week, the other from a lone parent customer who became a lone parent through a bereavement, applied for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), then moved onto JSA when she felt well enough to look for work, and then moved into work.

Case Study 3: A lone parent customer journey from IS (LPO exempt) to work

'Helen' is a 33 year old lone parent who lives with her 12 year old daughter who has autism. Helen was exempt from LPO as she received Carer's Allowance for caring for her daughter, who received the higher rate of Disability Living Allowance (DLA). She became a lone parent when her daughter was two. Helen worked part-time for a charity that ran recreational activities for children. The charity ran classes for special needs children and she had taken her own daughter there for several years. The manager of the centre approached Helen and asked her whether she would like to be trained as a coach. She said:

> *'I was always sort of...all the parents would stand around gossiping, but I was always the one who was in the corner with the kids sat down playing games, or reading a story. I guess over time she was sort of watching this, and one day she said "I've hurt my ankle, can you come on and just..." I think she was sussing me out with it to see if I would be any good. And then after a few weeks of doing that, and I kept going on and doing parachutes and playing games with them...She said "I'm looking for a coach; I really want to train up a coach, would you be interested?" And I was thinking "I don't know. Can I work? I don't know". And it started from there really.'*

After completing the training, the manager offered Helen a job for 17 hours per week. She then spoke to her LPA, who encouraged her to take up the offer. The LPA produced a Better Off Calculation (BOC) and told Helen about In Work Credit (IWC).

Helen received training in her role and, at the time of interview, had become a Grade 4 coach but had plans to progress and wanted to become a Grade 6 or 7. She hoped that in future she would be able to work primarily during school hours, as finding appropriate childcare for her daughter had been very difficult. She felt that moving into work had a positive impact on her life, raising her ambitions and spending time doing something that she loved:

> *'Now I'm just much more ambitious I think. I always was a bit like that but it's just having the opportunity to do something about it. I love my job and I think that massively helps this whole thing of me working. I love my job so much and I'm so into it and I'm so passionate about it that that's probably what's driving me rather than just going to work, you know. I've just been very lucky in that I am really into what I do.'*
>
> (In work lone parent; South East Wales)

Case Study 4: A lone parent customer journey from ESA to JSA to work

'Anna' is a 42 year old lone parent living in socially rented accommodation, which she had moved to with her two teenage children after the breakdown of her relationship. Prior to leaving her partner she had been working 21 hours for a marketing company. During the process of moving, it was arranged for her to claim ESA and her doctor provided a certificate saying that she was too stressed to look for work. She claimed ESA for the three months that it took to find secure and stable housing. She was given an appointment for a Work Capability Assessment (WCA) but had found housing and moved onto JSA before the date arrived. She claimed JSA for several months and had four unsuccessful interviews before successfully moving into work. Anna found her job on the internet and was working 17 hours per week in a shop. She was financially better off in work and felt that it had a positive impact on her life. Moreover, Anna and her children had a new life in a new town.

(In work lone parent; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

2.2 Looking for work

Lone parent customers were asked what they had done to find work and whether they received support in finding it. In keeping with other studies, finding a job through informal contacts was a key method. As these studies note, however, this method of job search can – for those in deprived communities, and particularly for women and minority ethnic groups – encourage poor quality work (see, for example, Rankin, 2003). Lone parents often reported finding their jobs through friends or neighbours. One lone parent customer, for example, reported that she:

> *'Asked a friend who's another lunch time supervisor – she works at another school...and I just happened to ask her, "If there's any jobs going can you just put my name down?" And, luckily, somebody had left there. So I phoned them up, had an interview and they asked me to start the following week.'*
>
> (In work lone parent; Birmingham and Solihull)

As well as through informal searches, some lone parent customers were seeking work through ethnic based networks. In one case, this limited the range of jobs that the lone parent could apply for. One lone parent customer reported:

> *'I talked to friends. Jobcentre can't help for me. I found myself...Yes, I look in the newspapers, Turkish newspapers, and every week I go to the Jobcentre. You know the machine in the Jobcentre? I look down there, but normally all because lots of Turkish people living in North London, so lots of jobs in North London...and I can't find in this area.'*
>
> (In work lone parent; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Another common method of finding work was through Jobcentre Plus or private or voluntary sector providers delivering NDLP. Lone parent customers who found work through Jobcentre Plus reported that their Personal Advisers had found the jobs for them. Some lone parent customers had further help, including Curriculum Vitae (CV) writing and money for clothes for the interview. Two lone parent customers also reported that they had help from Jobcentre Plus with managing their tax credits and benefits as they made the transition into work. A lone parent customer, for example, said:

> *'It was this lovely girl at the Jobcentre...Because I went to the Jobcentre the once, and then the next day she sent me this job for the job I've got...She went through all different hours, and she printed everything off for me, so I could consider whether I went full-time, part-time, when I'd be better off or worse off. And then she was working all this tax thing out.'*
>
> (In work lone parent; Birmingham and Solihull)

Those that found their jobs through private or voluntary sector providers reported that they had been well supported and found the help they received useful. They typically reported help with writing a CV as well as being put forward for specific jobs.

One lone parent customer who found her job through a NDLP provider while on IS said:

> *'I did a new CV and they talked about, expand your options. They kind of made you feel like, let's get a job that's good for you and your family, not, let's just get a job. That was the difference. Much more friendly, you know, called you by your first name, was quite pleased to see you. That sort of thing. Much better.'*
>
> (In work lone parent; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

The LPO Early Findings report (Gloster *et al*., 2010) found that job search using the internet was common for those who were successful in finding work, and that this was particularly the case for JSA new and repeat lone parent customers. This wave of interviews with lone parent customers found that, while some lone parent customers did find their jobs through an internet search, these were not overwhelmingly JSA new and repeat lone parent customers. The research did, however, find it common that those who found their job through the internet had been through NDLP.

Other 'low tech' methods, such as looking in local newspapers, approaching employers directly, and responding to advertisements in shop windows, were also commonly used by successful jobseekers. The prominence of these methods is perhaps linked to the strong desire for work close to their homes expressed by this lone parent customer group. The LPO Early Findings report (Gloster *et al*., 2010), identified that lone parent customers felt that they needed help with the preparation of CVs. These findings were confirmed in this study where, certainly for some lone parent customers, help with preparing a CV was felt to be useful in their successful job search. Some had found it difficult to find work initially because of the lack of jobs available during the recession and its aftermath.

2.3 Types of work lone parent customers move into

Lone parent customers interviewed moved into a range of jobs, although they tended to be low-paid (often minimum wage), low-skilled work. Exceptions to this included a podiatrist and a hypnotherapist. Low-paid, low-skilled work also dominates in survey findings and has done consistently for the past 20 years. Bradshaw and Millar (1991) reported on the types of work sought by lone mothers on IS, particularly in clerical, retail and catering occupations. Other, more recent research has shown that the statistical profile of the lone-parent working population is associated with part-time work and lower-skilled occupations, particularly administration and secretarial work, and personal services (for example, social care occupations) (Philo *et al*., 2009). Typical jobs that lone parents in this research had moved into included: cleaning, caring, support work in hospitals – such as a ward hostess – and retail jobs.

Lone parents had overwhelmingly chosen jobs where their hours fitted with looking after their children and, where their children had health problems or disabilities, had often also tried to find flexible employers who would be understanding of their need to attend appointments or leave work at short notice. Suitable hours and flexibility have similarly been found in other research to be

key elements of being able to balance work and family life successfully (and therefore, sustaining employment) (Ridge and Millar, 2008). Most lone parents were working part-time and, of the lone parent customers we interviewed for this study, there were only a handful of lone parent customers who moved into full-time work. It was common for interviewees to be working between 16 and 29 hours per week. Another common feature of the jobs lone parent customers had moved into was their proximity to home. This was often seen as a key benefit by lone parent customers. For example, a lone parent customer who worked as a domestic assistant in a hospital ten minutes' walk from her home reported:

> *'It's so close to home; I've got no transport costs or nothing like that – it just fits in really good.'*
>
> (Other destination lone parent customer; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Several lone parent customers worked from home, having chosen self-employment as being more flexible to fit around their children, such as a lone parent self-employed as a tailor. She felt that this gave her greater flexibility to combine her work and parenting responsibilities:

> *'I can take the time off whenever I need and fill my hours. So, if I do...I normally do, like, from ten to one, three hours but if she's got an appointment within that time I can move that hour forward...My daughter is, like, underweight, she's sick and she's constantly in hospitals. No, it doesn't matter where you work, how good your boss is, they will not give that much time off. This way, for me, it's better for me and my children so that's why I went for that.'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

Lone parent customers were asked whether there was a possibility for progression in their jobs. Generally there was not, reflecting the types of jobs that lone parents were doing. Lone parents' feelings about this were mixed. Some reported that they were not unhappy with the lack of potential to progress, as they were happy doing the jobs they were doing. Others, however, were frustrated and felt that they were passed over for progression opportunities or wanted training and development but that their employers weren't offering this. One carer, for example, reported:

> 'I said when I started the job "I would like to do my Level 3 *[NVQ]" straight after and my boss keeps saying "Yes, all right, ask the next week".'*
>
> (In work lone parent; Birmingham and Solihull)

2.4 Use of childcare when in work

Lone parents in this study had a youngest child aged 12 to 15. Overall, lone parents who moved into work did not use formal childcare. This was not generally because of a lack of appropriate availability or affordability, but because they only worked while their children were at school, used informal childcare, or did not use childcare as their children were old enough not to need it. These reasons for not using formal childcare among lone parents have also been identified in other research (see Bell *et al*., 2005). In their longitudinal qualitative study of lone parents Ridge and Millar (2008) found that mothers of school age children tended to use informal childcare where possible and many worked part-time, and within school hours while their children were younger. The 2008 Families and Children Study also found that the use of informal childcare is common among the population of lone parents in work as a whole (Maplethorpe *et al*., 2010).

Lone parents who had moved into work in this study had often chosen to work part-time, in jobs where they could fit their working hours around their children's school hours. For example, one lone parent said:

> *'I don't need any childcare whatsoever, no. You know, because I try to be flexible. She's 12 years old, so she's at school from, you know...so it's from nine o'clock till quarter to four, sort of thing. So I can work within that time that she's at school, and then be flexible for the rest of the time. So no, I don't need childcare.'*
>
> (In work lone parent; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Others did work out of school hours and used informal childcare, usually the grandparents or older siblings of the children. For example, one lone parent customer reported:

> *'My eldest daughter...at some point she's in the house when the boys are coming in...there's always food left on the table for them and they know how to make it hot in the microwave.'*
>
> (In work lone parent; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

In addition, some lone parents suggested that friends and neighbours were nearby and could 'keep an eye' on their children while they were working, though this was not a formal arrangement. Others felt that they didn't require childcare because of the age of their children. One lone parent customer, for example, said:

> *'I mean...at their age now if I took them to a childminder they'd think I'd gone absolutely mad.'*
>
> (In work lone parent; South East Wales)

Just one working lone parent reported making regular use of formal childcare (an after-school club). However, use of formal childcare was slightly more common in the school holidays. One customer, for example, sent her son to a football-themed holiday camp and another was using a childminder in the school holidays.

Staff views in the Early Findings report (Gloster *et al.*, 2010) identified 'a significant lack of places for disabled children'. In keeping with this, one lone parent in this study who had moved into work and had a child with autism had found it very difficult to locate appropriate formal childcare. The lone parent customer phoned her LPA to get advice about childcare and, although she felt the service she received was supportive, she was nevertheless unable to find a formal childcare place for her child as she could not find one where a provider was trained in special needs. The interviewee used the six hours per week respite care from social services as childcare when she was working and was able to take her daughter to work during her other working hours as she worked at a special needs centre. She would have preferred to have used formal childcare so that the respite care could be used to give her a break.

2.5 Effects of work on lone parent customers' financial situations

2.5.1 The financial transition into work

The transition from benefits to work has been identified in previous studies as a constraint on employment (see, for example, Bell *et al.*, 2005). Lone parents in particular, it has been suggested, can find the potential financial 'gap' of the transition daunting. However, the range of support now on offer to help with the financial transition into work means that it was rare for lone parent customers in this study who had moved into work to have experienced financial trouble with the transition, and several reported that the process had been simpler than they had feared. As well as having benefit run-ons to prevent a gap waiting for a first pay cheque, Job Grants (where lone parents are given £250 when they start work) were also mentioned by some lone parent customers who had moved into work and had helped them adjust to work. One lone parent said:

'Your £250 that you get – that's fantastic because that does help you a hell of a lot.'

(In work lone parent; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Where problems did occur, these tended to be with Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit, and lone parent customers felt this was an issue linked with council processes rather than Jobcentre Plus. One lone parent customer had problems claiming HB that took three months to resolve. In that time she went into rent arrears and was threatened with eviction. She reflected:

'But it has been a nightmare. I found the benefit system okay, because all you had to do was phone numbers and they gave you all the information inside the Jobcentre. So, I found that they was very good and really helpful. But it was the other end. The Council end was the main problem.'

(In work lone parent; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Nonetheless, such problems with the transition were rare and, as found in the qualitative evaluation of IWC (Sims *et al.*, 2010), were more of a concern for those anticipating the transition than a reality for those who had successfully made it.

2.5.2 In Work Credit

The views on IWC by lone parent customers who had not moved into work are reported in Section 3.16. Generally, the lone parent customers interviewed, working more than 16 hours per week, were receiving IWC. For some who were not, this was because they were not eligible to claim it, for example, because they had not been claiming IS or JSA for long enough. In line with the qualitative evaluation of IWC (Sims *et al.*, 2010), some lone parent customers had not heard of IWC until after they had found a job, so it had not acted as an incentive to move into work. For example, one lone parent said:

'I didn't know, actually, until she'd told me. And I thought, "Oh, if it's a benefit I'm going to apply for it". And they, and they said that I could have it, so...'

(In work lone parent; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

However, others were clear that it had been an incentive to move into work. For example, one reported:

'If I'm honest I'll tell you what pushed me to do it was the £40 a week for the year....I think if it hadn't been for that I probably wouldn't have been overly [keen]. '

(In work lone parent; South East Wales)

For those receiving IWC, there was some apprehension about how they would manage when they stopped receiving it. For example:

'I think they should carry on because that £40 for me is a lot of money and [when] that £40's gone then I'm back to square one. And, I'm depending on that right now.'

(In work lone parent; Birmingham and Solihull)

However, this was not always the case and some lone parent customers said that they were not worried about the end of IWC and would look to increase their hours of work to make up the difference to their budgets. Others were saving their IWC money or were using it for 'extras' rather than general expenditure, as they knew it would not be there in the long-term. One lone parent customer who was saving the money in a separate bank account for her children in the future said:

> *'So I did that and I thought…because after a year I have to get used to not having it and I thought, "Do you know what? Don't touch it; don't touch it – this is a fresh start".'*
>
> (In work lone parent; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

There was one instance of a lone parent customer who was self-employed receiving Self-Employment Credit[4] rather than IWC. This was because she was not eligible for IWC and her adviser let her know that she was eligible for Self-Employment Credit.

2.5.3 Managing finances once in work

Lone parent customers were asked about how they managed their money once they had moved into work, including whether they had any savings or debt and whether there were any particular 'crunch times' each month. When talking about their income, lone parent customers all mentioned that they received their income from a variety of sources, namely Working Tax Credits (WTC), Child Tax Credits, IWC, Child Benefit and their wages. It was very rare for the lone parent customers interviewed to report receiving child maintenance payments.

Lone parents were also asked whether they were in debt. The types of debt reported included: credit cards, catalogues, bank loans, and rent and utility arrears. In line with findings in the IWC qualitative evaluation (Sims *et al*., 2010), debts were sometimes left over from previous relationships that had broken down, and rent arrears were sometimes from problems with HB claims during the transition to work. Nonetheless, most lone parent customers with debt reported that it was manageable and was decreasing, although lone parents sometimes struggled. It was rare for lone parent customers to have savings, and those who did were saving for a specific purpose, for example, for holidays or Christmas.

Many lone parent customers described their money management in terms of various 'pots' of income that were assigned to different expenditure, for example, benefits for bills, and wages for food shopping and 'luxuries' such as take-away meals, better quality groceries and Christmas presents. For example:

> *'Not afford more as in I could go out and buy a new telly, or something like that, but we go out, maybe go to the pictures or out for a meal with her cousins, or something like that, every couple of weeks. So, we couldn't have done that before, no. Because, literally, once my benefit come it paid the bills, got the shopping, I had no money to myself.'*
>
> (In work lone parent; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

This method of managing variable weekly income was also found in the IWC evaluation (Sims *et al*., 2010). Several lone parent customers described the process of settling into a new budget and that they had been cautious because of new outgoings as well as the new income from wages and WTCs:

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[4] Self-Employment Credit is for those who have been unemployed and claiming JSA for six months or more, and who move into self-employed work of at least 16 hours per week. It is payable for 16 weeks at £50 per week. Lone parents who have been on out-of-work benefits for a year or more who move into self-employment would be better off claiming IWC as it is payable for 52 weeks at a rate of £40 per week or £60 per week in London.

'I'd tell you what, I'd sit here with a pen and bits of paper, trying to work it all out, this much and that much, but it all worked out. In the end, I thought to myself, look, I'll just have to see at the end of the month, what's gone in, what I need to take out, and go from there, and it did take a good three months maybe, until it all settled down, and I knew what was going in and what was coming out, of my bank account, at the time, but it's all sorted out now...'

(In work lone parent; South East Wales)

Despite some lone parent customers feeling wary of new outgoings, in particular paying rent and Council Tax, some also reported that managing their budget was easier once they were working. For example, a lone parent reported:

'I'm probably a bit more relaxed now. I'm not thinking about what I'm spending as much as I was when I weren't working.'

(In work lone parent; Birmingham and Solihull)

Self-employed lone parents who were starting up their own businesses found it more difficult to manage financially than employed lone parents.

2.5.4 Better off in work?

Several lone parent customers remembered having had a BOC. Having moved into work, opinions of whether the calculation had proved to be accurate were mixed. Some lone parent customers believed that they were less well off than the calculation had predicted. For example, a lone parent customer who felt she was only slightly better off in work had been told that she would be close to £70 per week better off when she had a BOC based on the job she had found. She said:

'But, I was under the impression that, you know...because I think when they did a calculation, the figure that they gave me was round about the £70 mark. You will be £70 a week better off. And I'm not – nowhere near.'

(In work lone parent; Birmingham and Solihull)

This lone parent did not feel better off in work as she was paying off a social fund loan for the first seven months in work and also said that the HB calculation that she has received in the BOC was wrong.

Lone parent customers held varying opinions about whether they felt financially better off in work than on benefits and these views seem to be correlated with the hours worked. The views on whether they were better off in work of those working more than 30 hours per week were very mixed. For example, a lone parent customer working full-time as a Clerical Support Officer at a hospital felt that working did not increase her income dramatically. She said:

'At the minute I'm probably about...I'm only finding it just slightly [better].'

(In work lone parent; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

In contrast, it was common for those working between 16 and 29 hours per week to report that they were definitely better off in work. A lone parent customer working 20 hours per week as a shop assistant reported:

'Roughly, like I'm obviously that £40 a week better off, what they account for 52 weeks, roughly I'd say I'm about £30 on top of that £40 better off a week, which when you've been living on the social one parent, £30 is a lot of money. Yeah, you can jiggle things, can't you? You can do it, and I am better off, yeah.'

(In work lone parent; Birmingham and Solihull)

This seems to reflect tapers in the benefit/tax credit system, which incentivise lone parents to move into work of 16 hours per week but make working more hours, on low incomes, less financially worthwhile. Those working 16 to 29 hours per week who felt they were not better off or were only slightly better off were often self employed. For example, a lone parent who felt worse off in work said:

> *'That's probably because it's a business, and it's self-employed and it just takes time to build up...'*
>
> (In work lone parent; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

2.6 Effects of work on lone parent customers and their children

2.6.1 Effects of working on lone parent customers

Generally, lone parents who had moved into work in this study felt that working had a positive effect on their lives and the experience of work was overwhelmingly positive, beyond the financial impact of work. This is in line with the general sense among the lone parents and their children participating in Ridge and Millar's (2008) longitudinal qualitative study that work was beneficial for lone parents' self esteem and well-being. It was common for lone parent customers in this study to mention that they were happier or felt better since moving into work. The main reasons given for feeling happier and more confident were: making friends at work, feeling self-reliant and that they were a valued member of society. Often this was linked to getting out of the house and mixing with people at work. For example, a lone parent customer working two part-time jobs (as a playground supervisor and as a cleaner) reported that:

> *'I didn't want to be at home all day. You know, there's only so much you can do in a house, you know, cleaning and decorating, and I think it's nice to get out there to actually earn a wage packet, and it's nice to be meeting other people, you know, and you've got something to talk about.'*
>
> *(In work lone parent; Birmingham and Solihull)*

Several lone parents expressed the feeling that the social bonds created at work went beyond just making friends, but linked them into society more generally. For example:

> *'I feel like I belong in the world now and I'm not just a one parent on her own...'*
>
> *(In work lone parent; Birmingham and Solihull)*

Working was also frequently linked to an increase in confidence and self-esteem. Sometimes this was because of the removal of the stigma the lone parent customer felt from claiming benefits. For example, a lone parent customer with two part-time cleaning jobs remarked:

> *'I tell you what, you feel more respect...you've got more pride and respect about yourself when you're working....Yes, hold your head up high and think, don't look down your nose at me, you know....It's nice to be able to do that. I haven't been able to do it for a long time.'*
>
> (In work lone parent; North and East Yorkshire and the Humber)

The confidence gained from removal of this perceived stigma could be beneficial in other areas of the customer's life. For example, the same lone parent customer went on to say that the confidence gained from working had meant that she had started to take better care of her health. Working also brought lone parents a sense of satisfaction with earning their own money and no longer relying on benefits.

While it was common for lone parent customers to move into low-paid, low-skilled work, usually part-time, with little support for training and progression, lone parents were nevertheless generally happy in their jobs. This seemed to be particularly the case with care work. Many lone parent customers thought they would not enjoy care work, but reported that over time they gained fulfilment from working with their clients, despite a lack of prospects for progression. A lone parent customer in Yorkshire working at a residential home for elderly people whose typical tasks included washing and clothing the residents said:

> *'Yes, I enjoy it. I never thought I would, because my niece, I mean she's done it for nearly ten years and she used to describe what she did...But once you get to know the people you're caring for, you know what I mean, it's like you've got 43 grandmas and grandpas, you know what I mean?'*
>
> (In work lone parent; North and East Yorkshire and the Humber)

While working was, in the main, a positive experience for interviewees, lone parents could find it stressful combining work and family responsibilities. A crunch time, for example, was when a child was sick, and the lone parent had to juggle work and caring responsibilities. This was particularly an issue where lone parents had children with health problems.

There were also a few cases of lone parents who were worried about their job security because of the recession and its aftermath, and whether they might be made redundant. While this chapter focuses on those in work at the time of interview, only one lone parent had moved from IS into work had subsequently fallen out of work and become a JSA new and repeat lone parent customer (see Section 3.5.2).

2.6.2 Effects of working on children

Lone parent customers reported that their working had had a number of positive effects on their children, both direct and indirect. These ranged from children having the opportunity to go on school trips because of extra family income, to observing the good example of a working parent, and greater independence.

Lone parent customers felt that there were a number of direct benefits for their children. One of these was an increase in independence and another came from the increased family income from working. This meant that some children were now able to go on school trips, which would otherwise have been unaffordable. Interviews for this research were carried out in January to March, and so some parents reflected on the better Christmas that they had been able to provide for their children recently. For example, when asked whether her children minded her working, one lone parent customer said '*No, the presents were big last year, the Christmas presents*.' (In work lone parent; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth).

It was common for lone parents to say that moving into work also led to more indirect benefits for their children, for example, being a good role model for their children or that their children were now proud of them for working. Children's sense of pride due to their parent moving into work was sometimes linked with the removal of the perceived stigma of being on benefits, similarly noted above. For example, a lone parent customer in Yorkshire remarked:

> *'I think she's proud that her mum's working; before it was always a stigma. She used to say things, you know. "Well, you're not working." So that's helping that, seeing her mum's doing something.'*
>
> (In work lone parent; North and East Yorkshire and the Humber)

Some lone parents said that they hoped that their children would go on to have better education and careers than they had done and that by working they were contributing to this.

Lone parents were, in some cases, concerned about the effect on children of leaving them alone while they were at work. While these lone parents felt that their children were too old for childcare, they still had concerns around leaving children at home alone when working in the evenings or in school holidays.

2.7 Summary

- Lone parents typically tended to have had two routes into work from IS. One group moved directly into work as LPO came to affect them. This group often had more recent work experience than other lone parents. Some had cycled between work and IS, and some of this group were already working in mini-jobs and extended their hours to 16 hours per week or more. A second group moved from IS and into work via JSA. This group was more diverse in work readiness than those who moved directly into work.
- Lone parents used a variety of methods to look for work and had then moved into a range of jobs, which tended to be mainly low-paid and low-skilled work with little chance of progression. Lone parents had overwhelmingly chosen part-time jobs with hours to fit with looking after their children.
- Overall, lone parents in this study did not use formal childcare, not because of a lack of appropriate availability or affordability, but because they only worked while their children were at school, used informal childcare or felt that they did not need childcare as their children were old enough not to require it.
- The range of support on offer to help with the financial transition into work meant that it was rare for lone parent customers in this study to have experienced financial difficulties with the transition.
- Generally, lone parent customers working more than 16 hours per week were receiving IWC. For some who were not, this was because they were not eligible to claim it, or because they had not heard of it. IWC was, in some cases, an incentive to move into work but not in others. For example, some lone parent customers first heard of IWC after they had found a job.
- Many lone parent customers described their money management in terms of various 'pots' of income that were assigned to different expenditure.
- Lone parent customers held varying opinions whether they felt financially better off in work than on benefits and these views seemed to correlate with the hours worked. Those working more than 30 hours per week were very mixed about whether they were better off in work, whereas it was common for those working between 16 and 29 hours per week to report that they were definitely better off in work, reflecting the fact that lone parents were typically moving into low wage jobs and the effect of tapers in the tax credit/benefit system.
- Generally, lone parents who had moved into work in this study felt that working had a positive effect on their lives. The main reasons given for feeling happier and more confident were: making friends at work, feeling self-reliant and feeling that they were a valued member of society.

- Lone parent customers interviewed reported positive effects on their children of their working, including: the opportunity to go on school trips and have Christmas presents because of extra family income, observing the good example of a working parent, and greater independence. Lone parents were, in some cases, concerned about the effect on children of leaving them alone. Lone parents who felt that their children were too old for childcare still had concerns about leaving their children at home alone when working in the evenings or in school holidays.

3 Experiences of Jobseeker's Allowance

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative data show that, as of February 2010, of those lone parents on Income Support (IS) affected by phase 1 of the roll-out of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) who left IS, 56 per cent moved on to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). Administrative data also show that, as of June 2010, there were 64,485 lone parents claiming JSA, 59 per cent of whom had a youngest child aged 12 to 15 and 41 per cent who had a youngest child younger than 12.

This chapter reviews the experiences of lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15 who were claiming JSA at the time of interview or who had experiences of claiming JSA. It includes information from 73 interviews with lone parents who were claiming JSA at the time of interview, and 21 interviews with lone parents who had moved to another destination at the time of interview but reported an experience of the JSA regime since LPO.

This chapter of the report explores:

- Jobcentre Plus staffing structures and processes to support lone parents on JSA;
- understanding of the JSA regime;
- lone parents' experiences of claiming JSA;
- JSA flexibilities for parents;
- experiences of the JSA regime including:
  - job search review appointments;
  - the Back to Work Session (BtWS);
  - New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and Optional Early Entry to Stage 3;
  - experiences of stages 2 and 3 of the regime;
  - lone parent customer work search activities;
- understanding and experience of JSA sanctions and disallowances;
- In Work Credit (IWC);
- views on the usefulness of Jobcentre Plus support;
- childcare to support lone parents' moves into work;
- the effect of the JSA regime on lone parent customers.

3.1 Lone parents on JSA in the research

There were three groups of lone parent customers interviewed with experience of JSA:

- Some of the lone parent customers who were claiming JSA at the time of interview had moved directly from IS to JSA.
- Others had experienced a less direct route, having initially made a claim for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) because of an illness or disability. Following an ESA Work Capability Assessment (WCA) these lone parent customers were found to be Fit for Work and therefore, not eligible for ESA, and they subsequently made a claim for JSA.
- The final group of lone parent customers who were claiming JSA at the time of interview were those with a youngest child aged 12 or over who had made a new and repeat claim for JSA since LPO was introduced.

This stage of the evaluation aimed to focus on lone parents who had been claiming JSA for three to 11 months (in stages two and three of the JSA regime). Stage 1 of the JSA regime is covered in detail in the Early Findings report (Gloster *et al*., 2010). Because of the complexity of some lone parent customer journeys to their current JSA claim, some interviewees were at an earlier stage of the regime. Information from staff interviews which is relevant to the JSA regime for lone parents is also presented in this chapter.

3.2 JSA regime for lone parents

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 Plus office 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 their entitlement to benefit or be subject to a benefit sanction. JSA disentitlement and sanctions are also explored later in this chapter.

The JSA regime is divided into four stages. Jobcentre Plus delivers the first three stages and the fourth is delivered by contracted, external providers. The four stages are as follows:

- Stage 1: initial claim to three months: self directed job search and fortnightly job search reviews, plus a group (back to work) 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, a period of weekly job search reviews followed by fortnightly job search reviews and submission to vacancies.
- Stage 3: six to 12 months: supported job search with an adviser, fortnightly job search reviews and 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. However, by summer 2011 FND will be phased out and folded into a single integrated Work Programme.

Staff are also able to fast-track lone parent customers to later stages of the regime if they need extra support, and lone parents can also access support from NDLP while claiming JSA.

3.3 Jobcentre Plus operation of the JSA regime for lone parents

3.3.1 Staffing models to support lone parents on JSA

The Early Findings report (Gloster *et al*., 2010) noted that the members of Jobcentre Plus staff who carried out fortnightly job search review appointments and who supported lone parent customers on the JSA regime varied between the case study districts, and in some cases between Jobcentre Plus offices within the same district. For example, in some instances it was the Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviewer (FJR) who conducted job search reviews with lone parents, in others it was a Lone Parent Adviser (LPA). It was also noted that, with these different staffing arrangements, there were likely to be differences in lone parent customers' experiences of the JSA regime.

As phase 2 of LPO went live in October 2009, Jobcentre Plus guidance was issued to remind managers to ensure that appropriately trained staff were used to support lone parents to prepare for, and move into work. In particular it stated that lone parents on JSA should be dealt with as follows:

- New Jobseeker Interviews (NJIs) and 13 weeks, six and 12 monthly interviews to be conducted by an LPA who has received the appropriate training on JSA or a JSA adviser who has undergone lone parent training.
- Fortnightly interventions to be conducted by dedicated FJR staff who have received training to deal with lone parents or an LPA, if resources permit.

This guidance did, therefore, reinforce the need to ensure staff were appropriately trained, while offering flexibility for Jobcentre Plus districts and offices to tailor the staffing model for working with lone parents on JSA according to local circumstances.

With this ongoing scope for flexibility, the variation of staffing structures and processes reported in the Early Findings report (Gloster *et al*., 2010) was reflected during this stage of the evaluation, and staffing models remained variable both between case study districts and between offices within districts. The models reported ranged from LPAs having very little contact with lone parents once they moved from IS (and little or no contact with lone parent customers making new and repeat JSA claims) to their covering all JSA interviews and fortnightly job search reviews.

In many instances staff also reported that staffing models in their district or office were in the process of change, and in general such change tended to be towards increasing the involvement of LPAs with lone parents on the JSA regime. Staff in some districts also referred to changes related to 'advisory services of the future' and in particular a change for band B staff (currently Diary Admin. Support Officers and FJRs). These roles were being redesigned into a single assistant adviser role and current plans were that these staff would support specific teams of advisers, such as LPAs (who would also take on broader roles, such as dealing with all parents rather than just lone parents). These assistant advisers would take on the fortnightly job search review appointments with that team's customers.

As previously discussed, it was probable that with these different staffing arrangements there were likely to be differences in lone parent customers' experiences of the JSA regime. However, as the lone parent customers interviewed were located across the case study districts it was not possible to make any definitive links between operating models at particular offices and lone parent customer experience. There were, however, two consistent themes that emerged from the discussions with

staff and lone parent customers about lone parent experience of the JSA regime, which were linked to Jobcentre Plus staffing and operations. These were the potential advantages for lone parent customers of dealing with specialist advisory staff (LPAs) and also the issue that not all lone parent customers claiming JSA are identified as such. These two issues are explored further below.

3.3.2 Specialist versus generalist staff

In general, staff indicated that specialist advisers (that is, LPAs) were better equipped to deal with lone parent customers than mainstream advisers, who might not fully understand lone parent customers' needs or be aware of the full range of provision available to support lone parents.

> *'It gives the customer a much more personalised service. They know exactly what's available for them and all the incentives that can be available as well.'*
>
> (Adviser Service Manager (ASM))

In discussions of this issue, specific examples were given of situations where mainstream advisers apparently failed to offer appropriate information, such as the availability of IWC (see Section 3.3) for lone parents who move into work. Some ASMs also suggested that mainstream advisers are less well equipped to challenge the attitudes of some lone parents in areas such as their reluctance to use childcare in order to be able to take up work. Childcare provision and lone parents' attitudes to using childcare are explored further in Section 3.15.

There was also some evidence from the interviews with lone parent customers that they were sometimes aware of differences between the support offered by specialist and mainstream staff. This was mentioned by some lone parent customers who had moved to JSA from IS and also noted by some lone parent customers who had made a new or repeat claim for JSA. Lone parent customers generally suggested that they received more help and support from LPAs compared with other advisers, although this may be linked to seeing LPAs for specific activities, such as interviews, as opposed to fortnightly job search review appointments:

> *'The most helpful one I must be honest was the one I often saw, the lone parent adviser.'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; South East Wales)

Another issue related to use of mainstream advisers mentioned by staff was the fact that Jobcentre Plus had recently recruited a number of new advisers in response to the rise in unemployment. It was pointed out that many of these mainstream advisory staff were, therefore, relatively new to their roles and therefore, less likely to be aware of the full range of services and provision for all customer groups.

While the move towards fully utilising the specialist skills and knowledge of LPAs to support work with lone parents on JSA did appear to be generally preferred (and this was the direction of travel in most case study districts) some LPAs also acknowledged that they may need to improve their own understanding of the JSA regime to support this. Some staff also questioned whether there would be adequate LPA resource available to support all of the lone parents claiming JSA. Issues related to staffing capacity for the delivery of LPO are reviewed further below.

3.3.3 Identification of lone parent customers

The second operational issue which may have affected the experience of lone parent customers is that those who make a new and repeat claim to JSA are not always clearly identified as lone parents (flagged via a marker on the Labour Market System (LMS)). Some staff did express a concern about the probability that there are lone parents who have 'got lost in the system'. Clearly if this marker is not in place and staff are unaware of the customer's status then some lone parents on JSA may not be offered relevant services or dealt with by specialist staff.

This concern was supported by some lone parent customer interviews who reported that Jobcentre Plus staff did not seem to be aware they were a parent. This view was based on a lack of discussion about issues such as childcare, or not being offered relevant information on financial help, such as Child Tax Credit (CTC).

> *'I don't think they know I've got a child you know. I really don't think that, none of them have ever mentioned it. Because even in my initial interview, he never mentioned nothing about child tax credits, childcare. So I'm assuming that...I don't even know if they're aware I've got a child.'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

3.3.4 Staffing capacity

Most of the staff interviewed – in particular those in managerial grades – did not see overall Jobcentre Plus staffing capacity to support the roll-out of LPO as problematic. There were, however, some concerns about the capacity to support the move towards using specialist LPAs to work with all lone parents on the JSA regime. As reported above this was a move which appeared to be taking place in many offices within the case study areas. For example, some LPAs stated that the reason they did not work with lone parents on JSA beyond the NJI was that they simply did not have the staffing capacity to do so.

Related to this, some LPAs suggested that, in order to work more effectively with lone parent customers, they needed longer interviews than their current appointment system allowed. Some Childcare Partnership Managers (CPMs) also suggested that the limited time in appointments meant that childcare conversations, where advisers aim to identify barriers to work related to childcare provision, are not taking place or being recorded appropriately. This issue is discussed further in the Section 3.15.

Some advisers suggested that capacity constraints also meant that they did not have sufficient time to absorb information on the range of ongoing operational changes, which undermined their ability to implement these changes appropriately. LPAs also cited this lack of time as a barrier to their ability to train or work with mainstream JSA advisers (in order to develop the skills of mainstream advisers for work with lone parents).

Overall, managers did appear to be aware of the constraints that advisers raised, and some noted that, in line with ongoing changes to operational processes and unemployment levels, staffing capacity was monitored and could be adjusted as required.

3.4 Understanding of the JSA regime

3.4.1 Staff understanding of the JSA regime

Generally staff understanding of LPO and the JSA regime appeared to be good, and staff who had been in post prior to the roll-out of LPO reported that LPO related communications, guidance and training was adequate. Some staff did, however, suggest the need for improvements in the training and information provided for staff new to adviser roles generally, or to working with the JSA regime or the lone parent customer group. These advisers were more likely to indicate a need for further training or, as noted above, some reported the need for more time to assimilate new information. There was also a suggestion that the format in which new information was distributed should be reviewed, with a particular concern about the use of e-mail to communicate changes, with limited further support.

Underlying these issues was a sense from some advisers that they felt overwhelmed by the amount and pace of changes within their work, a view which reflects findings from the early process study of *The Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal , the six month offer and support for the newly unemployed evaluations (JRFND)* (Knight *et al.,* 2010).

As the staffing models used to support lone parents on JSA varied, the adviser experience of the regime was also varied, depending on which customers they worked with, and at which stages. It should be noted that the adviser focus groups were primarily attended by LPAs. It was not always possible to discuss all aspects of the JSA regime, and the adviser views presented in this chapter are primarily those of LPAs, rather than mainstream advisers.

3.4.2 Lone parent customer understanding of the JSA regime

In line with the Early Findings research (Gloster *et al*., 2010), which also focused on lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15 but on the first three months of the JSA regime, lone parent customers interviewed for this wave of research generally had a good general understanding of the requirements of the JSA regime. This included:

- the need to attend fortnightly job search review appointments, including the need to attend weekly at certain points;
- an understanding of being 'available for work';
- the need to seek work (and provide evidence of doing so);
- the need to provide evidence of any mini-jobs/volunteering being undertaken;
- completing a JSAg, including the need to be looking for a variety of types of work.

Some lone parent customers, however, felt that Jobcentre Plus staff could have explained more detail of the JSA regime at the beginning of their claim and some also reported that they needed to ask staff for further information.

While lone parent customers involved in the Early Findings research (Gloster *et al*., 2010) reported that they had a clear understanding of the regime, they were at an early stage of their JSA claim. Some of the lone parents involved in this wave of research had progressed to later stages, and appeared to be finding the regime more complex than they had anticipated. For some, this complexity did appear to be a source of anxiety, in that they were concerned that they may inadvertently fail to comply with regime requirements and risk a loss of benefit.

> *'I suppose my biggest fear is she may say to me one day, well you know, we don't think that you're doing enough and we're going to stop your benefit. I mean that's me personally wondering if this can happen because that part has never been explained to me.'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

The potential for the complexity of the regime to be a source of difficulty for some lone parent customers was reported by staff views in the Early Findings report (Gloster *et al*., 2010). They suggested that some lone parent customers can find it hard to adjust to the reality of the JSA regime as it's *'too much to take in'*, in particular for lone parent customers moving from IS to JSA. The early process study of the JRFND (Knight *et al*., 2010) evaluation also described staff reluctance to reveal the 'bigger picture' of regime stages, and the process of escalating conditionality over time. This study reported that, instead, staff tended to explain only the requirements of the particular stage the lone parent customer was in.

3.5 Lone parents' experience of making a JSA claim

This section briefly reviews some of the work-related constraints described by lone parent customers who were claiming JSA at the time of their interview. It explores their journeys leading up to a claim for JSA, along with their experience of making a claim. Subsequent sections will examine staff and lone parent customer experience of the JSA regime for lone parents.

Lone parent customers who had moved from IS to JSA, and those who had moved from IS to ESA and then onto JSA, generally described more constraints to work than those making new and repeat JSA claims who had moved onto JSA from work. These constraints included: a lack of skills, qualifications or experience and low levels of confidence in some of those who had not worked for some time. Those who had moved from IS to ESA, and after the ESA WCA found them to be Fit for Work had made a new and repeat claim for JSA, commonly felt that health also affected their ability to work. An additional and significant constraint to all lone parents moving into work, referred to by Jobcentre Plus staff and lone parent customers in all the case study districts, was the lack of available jobs because of the recession and its aftermath.

3.5.1 Lone parent customer journeys to JSA

There were a variety of routes by which the lone parents interviewed during this study had reached their current claim for JSA. Some lone parent customers had moved directly from IS to JSA because they lost their IS eligibility LPO. Others with a youngest child aged 12 and over had made a new and repeat claim for JSA since LPO was introduced. This latter group included some lone parent customers who had cycled between work and benefits, and included one lone parent customer who had moved onto JSA as a result of LPO, then moved into work, and then back onto JSA. This lone parent customer had taken a temporary retail job at Christmas time and moved back onto JSA when it ended.

Within the 'new and repeat' group, the most common experience was that of lone parents who had been working and lost their jobs in the recession. These lone parents were found throughout the case study districts and in a variety of industries and (generally low-skilled) occupations. Some lone parents who were nurses or care workers had not been made redundant but had worked as 'bank staff' and had seen their hours fall from full-time equivalent down to just the occasional shift which had led them to claim JSA. Less typical lone parent customer journeys were experienced by lone parent customers who had initially made a claim for ESA because of an illness or disability. As noted above some of these lone parent customers were found to be Fit for Work following a WCA and they subsequently made a claim for JSA (see also Section 3.5.2).

3.5.2 Making a claim for JSA

As described within the Early Findings report (Gloster *et al*., 2010) lone parents whose IS eligibility is ending because of LPO are invited to an interview with an LPA and a 'benefit switching' process (to JSA or ESA) is facilitated by the adviser. New and repeat JSA lone parent customers have to make a claim through the Jobcentre Plus call centre, and then attend the local Jobcentre Plus office for a face-to-face interview.

Lone parent customer experience of making a claim for JSA following these customer journeys is described in more detail in the sections below. As with the Early Findings research most lone parent customers who moved from IS to JSA due to LPO reported a straightforward transfer process, facilitated by Jobcentre Plus. Lone parent customers affected by LPO who were moving from work to JSA report slightly more difficulties with the claim process, and those working in mini-jobs (fewer than 16 hours per week) who claimed JSA felt the process of evidencing their mini-jobs was complex and difficult.

The lone parent customers who reported the most significant difficulties with claiming JSA were those who had initially moved from IS to ESA, and then to JSA, with an apparent lack of appropriate information from Jobcentre Plus cited by lone parent customers as a cause of delays to claims and payment gaps.

Making a JSA claim – IS to JSA

Lone parent customers who had moved from IS to JSA appeared to be well informed about the changes arising from LPO. Generally they were clear about when they had to claim JSA, and there were many examples of a straightforward move from IS to JSA, with a reported wait for their first payment of around two to four weeks. In terms of payment gaps, lone parent customers' confusion when describing their journey off IS meant that it was sometimes difficult to disentangle the switch to fortnightly payments that other benefit claimants were going through, from payment gaps due to problems with their JSA claim process (see also Section 4.3). However, gaps of up to four weeks indicate problems that went beyond the switch to fortnightly payments. These included examples of lone parents phoning to check on their claim every week and being told it was fine but it still did not come through, and an incorrectly entered National Insurance number delaying a claim.

The provision of written information, followed by a face-to-face appointment appeared to offer a comprehensive and helpful process for lone parent customers, with an opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings and ensure lone parent customers were clear about the change to their entitlement.

Making a JSA claim – work to JSA

Lone parents affected by LPO who were making a new and repeat claim for JSA, in common with other JSA claimants, have to do so via a Jobcentre Plus call centre. As with the Early Findings research (Gloster *et al.*, 2010) some lone parent customers reported a frustration at having to repeat the details given over the telephone at their first appointment with the local Jobcentre Plus office, in one instance the lone parent customer reported that this was because the information could not be found on the Jobcentre Plus system.

> *'He said "Right, now you have to make an appointment at the Jobcentre". So I had to go down to the Jobcentre and they couldn't find me on the system either. So I had to go through it all over again, down there.'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

There appears, therefore, to be a need to streamline the process to avoid customers having to provide their details more than once when making a new JSA claim. This would apply to the JSA regime as a whole and does not relate solely to lone parent JSA customers.

Also in line with the Early Findings report is a payment gap reported by some of these lone parent customers, with some stating that they had waited up to six weeks for their first payment.

Another group who reported difficulties with their JSA claim were lone parent customers working in mini-jobs of fewer than 16 hours per week. They tended to report that claiming JSA while declaring work was a complicated and difficult process. One new and repeat lone parent customer reported that she decided to give up her four hour per week mini-job as it was causing too much 'hassle' when she claimed JSA:

'Well on the Friday it took me nearly three hours, and they kept passing me from one person to the another and nobody seemed to know what they were doing, so I said "Right, on Monday I'm going in, I'm telling them I'm not working". So I did that, and the claim went through fine. I thought, "I'm telling you I'm working four hours and then…" So I told the people I couldn't work for them anymore and that was it. And everything went through fine.'

(JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; South East Wales)

Making a JSA claim – IS to ESA to JSA

Lone parent customers who had moved from IS to ESA and then finally to JSA had experienced a more complex customer journey, and also appeared to have experienced particular difficulties with making a claim for JSA. The following case study offers an example of this customer journey.

Case Study 5: A lone parent customer journey from IS to ESA to JSA

'Katherine' is a lone parent with three children. When her claim for IS ended she made a claim for ESA as she suffered from arthritis and back problems, which caused difficulties with mobility. Prior to her claim for ESA, Katherine had received IS for '20 years, on and off.' She claimed ESA for two months and then underwent a WCA, which found her Fit for Work and therefore, not eligible for ESA. She reported that she did receive a letter stating that her benefits would stop, but stated that because of her mobility issues she could not get to her local Jobcentre Plus office to discuss this. It is also notable the respondent struggled slightly with speaking English (it was not her first language), which may have made the benefit claims process more difficult for her to understand.

In October 2009 Katherine received her last ESA payment and at the beginning of December 2009 made a call to the Jobcentre Plus to request a crisis loan, *'because the house was cold and I couldn't get food.'* At this point she was informed she needed to claim for JSA and she received her first JSA payment on 22 December. During the period following her last ESA payment and receiving JSA Katherine lived off borrowed money from family and friends, Child Benefit (ChB) and CTC.

(JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

Other lone parent customers in this situation also stated that the letter they received simply informed them that their ESA claim would end and they would stop receiving payments. They reported that it offered no further information on what they should do next.

'I just got a letter saying my benefit had stopped and that was it.'

(JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; North and East Yorkshire and the Humber)

Section 4.4 describes how the letter giving the result of the WCA does in fact set out the options going forward for those deemed Fit for Work. However, clearly these messages were not always being picked up by lone parent customers. Some, who sought further information from Jobcentre Plus on what they should do in these circumstances, indicated that the information they were offered was not clear.

'I just rang them up when I got that saying that my benefit [ESA] *had stopped, [they said] that I've got to reclaim and that was it. So I didn't know what I was reclaiming.'*

(JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; North and East Yorkshire and the Humber)

Other lone parent customers were also unaware that their ESA payments would stop immediately after receiving the letter about the end of their ESA claim. This, along with a lack of information about making a claim for JSA after losing their eligibility for ESA, meant that some lone parent customers reported being without benefit for a number of weeks before they received their first JSA payment. Section 7.3 discusses this issue further and makes recommendations for lone parents who move through the ESA regime and onto JSA.

3.6 JSA flexibilities for parents

As part of LPO, additional flexibilities were introduced to the JSA regime to meet the specific needs of lone parent customers who are responsible for caring for a child or children. 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 account of whether appropriate and/or affordable childcare is available. Section 2.4 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 per 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 (that is, eligible for JSA) when a child is excluded from school and childcare arrangements cannot be made;
- treating parents as available for work (that is, eligible for JSA) during school holidays if childcare arrangements cannot be made;
- the possibility of a JSA hardship payment. This is a reduced payment of income-based JSA which people can apply for when they lose their benefits through being sanctioned or being disentitled.

From 26 April 2010 an additional JSA flexibility was introduced which allows lone parents receiving JSA who have a child under 13 to restrict their availability for work to school hours. As this additional flexibility came into force after the current fieldwork it would not have been applied to any of the lone parent customers who were interviewed, although staff were asked if they were aware of this planned change.

3.6.1 Staff awareness and experience of flexibilities

The LPO Early Findings report (Gloster *et al*., 2010) indicated that there was generally a good level of awareness of JSA parent flexibilities among specialist staff, although this was more limited among mainstream JSA staff. Findings from this stage of the research were broadly similar to these early

findings and most advisers had a good understanding of the flexibilities and their application, for example, within a lone parent customers' JSAg. The flexibility that appeared to be most commonly applied to lone parent customers was the restriction of working hours (to a minimum of 16 hours per week).

When staff were asked about the new flexibility to restrict availability for work to their child's normal school hours, there appeared to be quite low levels of awareness (although fieldwork was carried out prior to the implementation of this new flexibility in April 2010). When this flexibility was discussed further a number of staff expressed the concern that very few jobs, if any, would offer these working hours, and thus suggested aiming to restrict working hours in this way was unrealistic. While some staff described this as a 'well intentioned' policy that would lead to practical difficulties, others felt that it potentially undermined the aim of helping lone parents in work, as there were so few school-hours jobs available that lone parents would not move into work.

3.6.2 Lone parent customer awareness and experience of flexibilities

When asked about flexibilities for parents claiming JSA, lone parent customers appeared to have little recognition or understanding of what was meant by this. This reflects indications from staff that they apply the flexibilities where appropriate but do not typically inform lone parent customers about the flexibilities. Staff indicated this was due to a desire to maintain control over decisions about when flexibilities should apply, and a concern that customers would otherwise attempt to self-determine when they might be applicable, for example, deciding that they should use postal signing during school holidays when the adviser may feel they could still attend.

Despite this, there were numerous cases which demonstrated that Jobcentre Plus staff had applied the parent flexibilities to lone parent JSA customers. The main examples of this were where lone parents referred to restricting the hours they were available for work, such as refusing night shifts, because of the lack of appropriate and affordable childcare provision:

> *'I said "I can work any shift", but once it was quarter past seven, and I said, "Well obviously I can't work nights" and that was fine. They just* [Jobcentre Plus] *took it straight off so, yes, they were all right.'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; North and East Yorkshire and the Humber)

Some lone parent customers also described situations where they had been able to postpone their fortnightly job search review appointments because of difficulties with childcare.

3.7 Lone parent customers' overall views on the usefulness of Jobcentre Plus support

Lone parent customer views on the various stages of the JSA regime are discussed within the relevant sections below. Lone parent customers' views on how useful they found the support offered by Jobcentre Plus varied, depending on whether they were new and repeat lone parent customers who had moved to JSA from work, new and repeat lone parent customers who had moved to JSA from ESA, or lone parent customers who had moved from IS to JSA.

New and repeat lone parent customers who had moved from work to JSA tended to be more job-ready and equipped to actively seek work. There was a general sense from some lone parent customers in this group, particularly during the early stages of the JSA regime, that attending the Jobcentre Plus office was more related to 'checking up on them' than to any offer of support to find work. They did, however, see some advantages to attending fortnightly job search reviews (see Section 3.8), although often found the BtWS less useful (see Section 3.9).

New and repeat lone parent customers who had moved from IS to ESA and then to JSA, reported difficulties owing to an apparent lack of personalised support tailored to their individual circumstances. The case study below describes the problems described by one of these lone parent customers.

Case Study 6: A lone parent customer journey from IS to ESA to JSA

'Emma' is a deaf lone parent customer who had been claiming JSA for six months at the time of the interview, although she was initially moved to ESA when her IS eligibility ended (she had been receiving IS with a Disability Premium (ISDP)). After a few weeks on ESA, and following a discussion with her doctor, she decided that she was well enough to make a JSA claim. Emma described difficulties at her fortnightly job search review appointments as she could not hear her name being called, and on more than one occasion was informed that she had missed her appointment time. She had previously explained to FJR staff that they needed to wave to her, as she was deaf, but said they appeared to be too embarrassed to do so. Emma had also recently attended her six-month interview and said the adviser informed her that she should not have been applying for driving jobs (one of the three areas of work agreed at her NJI) because of her disability. Emma felt she was being discriminated against, and following further discussions was referred to a Disability Employment Adviser (DEA). She had also recently received a letter from Jobcentre Plus which informed her that as she had received ISDP she was entitled to go back onto IS if she wanted to (see Section 6.2.1 for an explanation of this issue). Emma reported that she was going to discuss the situation with the DEA.

(JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; South East Wales)

Lone parent customers who had moved to JSA from IS, and those who had moved from IS to ESA to JSA, tended to compare their experience of JSA with the support that they received on IS. In general they felt that there was less support offered, fewer training opportunities and a sense that they were offered a less personalised service. This was particularly the case when comparing fortnightly job-search review appointments with Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) when on IS, and these lone parent customers often found BtWSs more useful than regular sign-on appointments. Some of these lone parent customers reported feeling that the lack of continuity and an ongoing relationship with an adviser (which they experienced on IS) held back their work search. They felt they had to 'go through the whole process' (JSA from IS lone parent customer; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders) again with each member of staff that they saw, whereas when they were claiming IS they saw one adviser who 'knew their story'. Some lone parents commented that advisers appeared to have a lack of understanding of, or sympathy with, their personal circumstances. Previous research with lone parents has found that the personalised nature of support and empathy shown by advisers is crucial to positive employment outcomes (Hasluck and Green, 2007).

Lone parent customers who had moved to JSA from IS commonly mentioned a lack of support to access training, particularly those who had not reached their 13 week interview. For example:

> *'I just need help getting to do basic computer skills. I don't think it's much to ask for. They are trying to force you out to work but they're not giving you what you need to get out there and do it. They just, it's just like they don't care.'*
>
> (JSA from IS lone parent customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Although new and repeat lone parent customers who had moved to JSA from work did appear to be better able to carry out their own work search activities, some lone parent customers from both the new and repeat JSA and the IS groups articulated a desire for more support from Jobcentre Plus at

an earlier stage of the regime. When lone parent customers moved on to later stages in the regime, most appeared to value the support offered via their meeting with an adviser. These meetings offered an important opportunity for Jobcentre Plus staff to demonstrate the range of support available and to explain to lone parent customers how Jobcentre Plus could help with their search for work. These issues are discussed in further detail below.

3.8 Job search review appointments

In line with the Early Findings report (Gloster *et al*., 2010), lone parent customers described their fortnightly job search review 'signing on' appointments as short, generally between two to five minutes. A common description of the process was that it was very simple; the lone parent customer showed the adviser their 'book', described very briefly how they had looked for work and signed their name:

> *'You just go in and sign. They say, "Have you been looking for work?" You say, "Yes". That's it, "Fine, thank you".'*
>
> (JSA from IS lone parent customer; South East Wales)

Some lone parent customers also reported that other activities were undertaken, such as job search, and that the length of these appointments varied, although there was potentially some confusion between fortnightly job search review appointments and other interviews with an adviser.

Although the fortnightly job search review itself was generally short, waiting times of 20 minutes or longer were reported, with some lone parent customers waiting up to an hour. This is similar to the Early Findings research, and the longer waits appeared to be more of a problem in urban areas. This wait, combined with travel time, could significantly extend the time taken to attend fortnightly job search reviews. This extended travel time was particularly true of lone parent customers living in rural areas, where travelling to the local Jobcentre Plus office could take over an hour. Lone parent customers in this situation were often unhappy about the overall time taken to attend such a short appointment and suggested it was wasted time which could be better spent looking for work:

> *'I mean that hour and a half I spend travelling backwards and forwards to there, I could be out looking for work, or sorting stuff out.'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; North and East Yorkshire and the Humber)

In general lone parent customers who had moved from IS to JSA tended to describe fortnightly job search reviews in more negative terms than new and repeat JSA lone parent customers (as they were comparing them to the more intensive support received through WFIs on IS), and some described feeling 'like a number' and looked down on by Jobcentre Plus staff. While some new and repeat JSA lone parent customers also reported difficulties with the experience of attending fortnightly job search reviews they tended to be accepting of them and described it as something that they 'had to do'. Some of these new and repeat lone parent customers also described a range of positive elements that they associated with these regular reviews:

- an opportunity to keep in touch with the local labour market and see what jobs were available;
- a support for work search by having someone to report progress to;
- an encouragement to establish and maintain a routine;
- a way to meet and talk to other people who were looking for work;
- something that encouraged them to get out of the house and actively search for work.

'By being there you have no excuse really for not looking for jobs, they've got more than enough information there to get a job. And I think sitting on your backside getting a Giro through the post is not the best way to go to be honest.'

(JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

3.8.1 Weekly job search review appointments

A number of lone parent customers who had experience of stage 2 of the JSA regime reported that weekly job search review appointments did not differ from their usual fortnightly job search review appointments. All lone parent customers appeared to have been informed of the fact they would need to attend weekly in advance of this happening, and lone parent customers who had not yet reached this stage seemed to be aware that it would happen at some point. On the whole, despite not understanding why it was necessary to attend weekly, lone parent customers saw it as something they had to do in order to receive their benefit: '*well if you don't sign on, you don't get money, simple as*' (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; South East Wales). Some lone parent customers who viewed the process of attending the local Jobcentre Plus office for job search review appointments as unpleasant suggested that this requirement for an increase in attendance was an additional incentive to find work.

The Early Findings report (Gloster *et al*., 2010) noted that some lone parent customers struggled with the cost of travelling to job search review appointments, which had the greatest impact on lone parent customers who lived in rural areas. Generally, this was not reported to be as significant within this study, although the increased travel cost for weekly appointments was a concern for some.

3.8.2 Job search review appointments and mini-jobs

Lone parent customers with mini-jobs tended to report longer fortnightly job search review appointments, as they had to declare the number of hours they had worked and produce evidence to support this, that is, a pay slip. These lone parent customers generally reported the process of 'signing on' and, following this, of seeing another member of staff to make a declaration of work. In general they stated that this process lasted around 15 to 30 minutes. As with the process of making a claim for JSA (see Section 3.5), lone parent customers who had a mini-job generally found the JSA regime more difficult and reported some problems with JSA payments. While this issue affects all JSA claimants in mini-jobs, the nature of the lone parent customer group and their greater likelihood to be in mini-jobs means that this issue is now likely to affect more people on JSA. The study below describes the case of a JSA lone parent customer who worked 20 hours per month:

Case Study 7: A lone parent customer experience of claiming benefit alongside a mini-job

'Natalie' is a lone parent with two children. She works 20 hours a month as a cleaner, has worked in this job for nine years and has been claiming JSA for four months. Prior to claiming JSA, Natalie had a second job, working in total 20 hours per week, but had to give up this second job due to illness. Natalie was paid monthly which appeared to cause problems with her JSA claim as she did not have a wage slip every time she attended a fortnightly job search review appointment. She stated that she had verbally informed Jobcentre Plus staff about the frequency of her pay and written this down when she declared her hours worked. Natalie reported that her benefits had been stopped four times during the course of her current JSA claim because of problems related to her wage slips. On some occasions she had been informed that the payment was stopped as she had not provided a wage slip, and on the last occasion she stated the 20 hours on her wage slip had been misread as 20 hours per week. When her JSA payment was stopped, her Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) also ceased.

(JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

3.9 Back to Work Sessions

BtWSs are group sessions run for lone parent customers in stage 1 of the JSA regime. Staff taking part in the research interviews did not appear to be directly involved in the delivery of the BtWS and views on their usefulness were mixed. Some staff described them as *'an excellent source of information'* and suggested that lone parents generally found them helpful, whereas others suggested they were formulaic and of little value, as they repeated information lone parent customers were given at their NJI. This range of staff views reflects those reported in the early process study of the JRFND evaluation (Knight *et al*., 2010).

In some case study areas staff noted that there were no problems with lone parent customer attendance, although others suggested that this was an issue, even though attendance is mandatory. Many of the lone parent customers interviewed reported attending at least one BtWS, with some, who had been claiming JSA for longer, attending two. All lone parent customers interviewed were aware that the BtWS was mandatory and that they could lose benefit if they did not attend. Generally lone parent customers commented they were happy to attend, with some indicating that they '*would have gone anyway*'. However, the fact that the session was mandatory was often stated as the reason that they did attend.

Lone parent customers reported that the BtWS lasted around an hour and that they were given information on the JSA regime, along with some advice on how Jobcentre Plus could help with work search. While the general content of the sessions was similar, the depth of the information and advice offered appeared to vary. Some lone parent customers reported receiving only basic information about the JSA regime, while others reported receiving this along with more detailed information to support their work search activities such as local jobs fairs and job websites. Some lone parent customers also recalled being offered information on the financial advice and support available from Jobcentre Plus such as Better Off Calculations (BOCs), benefit run-ons and discretionary payments, like help with the purchase of clothes for job interviews.

The perceived usefulness of the BtWS varied according to individual lone parent customer circumstances. In general, new and repeat JSA lone parent customers and lone parent customers who had, at the time of the interview, moved into work found the BtWS of limited value. Lone parent customers who moved from IS to JSA reported finding the sessions more useful. They appeared to appreciate being informed about the services that could help them while they were claiming JSA and during their transition to work, in particular the financial help they could access. On the whole, lone parents did not consider the BtWS to be an important tool in their work search. Some of the lone parents interviewed, however, felt that BtWS were a source of more general support as it brought to their attention the type of help that was available to them.

> *'It was useful for, just to feel like you're not alone and that there is places out there, there is places and people willing to help you and there'll be another one and it's just to help you get more confidence. I felt that when I left the meeting, I felt I had a purpose. It wasn't a waste of time.'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

In terms of the format of the BtWS some lone parent customers reported difficulties related to the group nature of the session, and the fact that these groups are mixed, including both men and women from a range of backgrounds. Some lone parent customers reported feeling intimidated and unable to speak up and ask questions in front of other people, particularly people who were in different situations from their own. One lone parent customer suggested that customers attending BtWS should be split into groups depending on their situation:

> *'They should have had designated slots for people...you know, different scenarios and if you are a single parent what advice they can offer you on childcare; where you can go for childcare; what services. I think that's what they should have done.'*
>
> (ESA lone parent customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

Generally the lone parent customers who reported most difficulties with the group nature of the BtWS had previously been on a health-related benefit, and prior to this, IS. Perhaps in recognition of these difficulties, staff in one case study district reported that they did not refer some lone parents to a group BtWS, and delivered the content of the session in an ad hoc individual interview.

3.10 NDLP and Optional Early Entry to Stage 3

New and repeat JSA lone parent customers who had moved from work onto JSA were more content with the 'self-help' approach of stage 1 of the JSA regime. However, lone parent customers who had been out of the labour market for a significant amount of time, as many who had moved from IS to JSA, or to JSA via ESA had been, reported a need for more support. Some members of staff noted that the initial stages of the JSA regime were not designed for lone parent customers who have been out of work for some time, and thus might not be suitable for some lone parent customers:

> *'Someone converts from...lone parent IS, onto JSA then they're classed as a J1 claim, but that customer might have been unemployed ten years. So typically they are a long-term unemployed customer, it's just that that claim to JSA counts them in a different box. So what I'm trying to say is that Jobcentre Plus services geared at that customer aren't necessarily what that customer may need.'*
>
> (Childcare Partnership Manager)

To address this type of issue, lone parent customers can access support from NDLP whilst on JSA and they are also eligible for Optional Early Entry to Stage 3.

3.10.1 New Deal for Lone Parents

DWP figures show that in any one month the probability of JSA lone parents joining NDLP is similar to that of IS lone parents. Approximately one to 1.5 per cent of both the JSA lone parent and the IS lone parent client base start an NDLP spell in each month.

Guidance states that advisers should explain the benefits of NDLP to lone parent customers. Advisory staff reported that NDLP was actively promoted with IS lone parent customers in the run up to the end of their IS eligibility, and LPAs appeared to be confident that lone parent customers leaving IS would be aware of the availability of this extra support. While some staff suggested that lone parents who made a new or repeat claim for JSA would also be advised about NDLP at their NJI, others suggested that mainstream advisers may not be aware of the support available via NDLP, and thus fail to promote this with lone parent customers. This may partly explain why the lone parent customers who reported that they had requested additional support at the early stages of their claim were not offered a referral to NDLP.

Generally there was low awareness of NDLP among the lone parents interviewed. In some cases lone parents had heard of NDLP, or who had been on it when they were on IS, but this was often some time ago. The Early Findings report (Gloster *et al*., 2010) found no instances of JSA lone parent customers accessing support through NDLP. In this wave of research, very few lone parent customers appeared to have accessed NDLP from JSA. One of the JSA lone parent customers who was on NDLP reported that she had been on NDLP in the past and had found the help that she had received from an employment programme provider very useful in the run-up to her IS ending. Once on JSA, the lone parent customer visited the provider again but found there was confusion over whether she could still be supported by them:

> *'I went there and they weren't sure – even in the Jobcentre they weren't sure because I'd gone over to JSA – if they were going to be allowed to see me or not.'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

This, and the overall low awareness of NDLP among JSA lone parent customers, does suggest that some Jobcentre Plus staff and NDLP provider staff are uncertain about NDLP eligibility, and the fact that this is available to lone parents who are claiming JSA.

3.10.2 Optional Early Entry to Stage 3

Another option for lone parent JSA customers wanting increased support is to progress voluntarily to, and participate in, stage 3 of the JSA regime, the 'Supported Jobsearch' stage. All lone parent customers are eligible for this Optional Early Entry to Stage 3.

The extra support includes interviews with Personal Advisers, weekly signing-on for six weeks, skills support for those who need it, at least one mandatory activity (possibly three) and a JSAg review to match and submit to vacancies. Customers agreeing to undertake mandatory activities will be required to attend, participate in and complete these activities, or risk loss of benefit if they cannot show good cause for not doing so. They will also not be able to revert back to earlier stages of the JSA regime and are likely to move onto FND much earlier than they would otherwise

Advisers generally reported a limited use of Optional Early Entry to Stage 3 by lone parent customers. This was partly because of mixed levels of awareness of the process, although in one district, advisers reported that they felt the process was time consuming. There was also a suggestion in one case study district that the main reason advisers encouraged lone parent customers to enter stage 3 early was so that employers could receive a recruitment subsidy (an incentive for employers to recruit people who have been out of work for over six months). Advisers in another district reported that they were not allowed to 'fast track' lone parent customers:

'We're not allowed to have them fast tracked in our office. They mustn't ever be fast tracked, you can't jump from stage 1 to stage 3.'

(Personal Adviser)

There was also very little evidence from lone parent customers interviews that they had any knowledge or experience of Optional Early Entry to Stage 3. All but one of the lone parent customers interviewed reported that they were not offered the opportunity to move to a later stage of the JSA regime in order to receive extra support, indeed some lone parent customers suggested that when they had asked for extra help during stage 1 they were told that it was not available until after 13 weeks of their claim.

'All we get out of them is, "We don't help you for 13 weeks." They're not helpful at all.'

(JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

The only reported case of what appeared to be a form of Optional Early Entry was a lone parent customer who had informed her adviser at her 13 week interview that she wanted to start her own business. The lone parent customer stated that the adviser had then 'fast-tracked' her to FND so that she could receive self-employment credit and at the time of the interview she was seeing her FND adviser every six weeks.

3.11 Experiences of stages 2 and 3 of the JSA regime

Stage 2 is three to six months of the JSA regime and includes a mandatory interview with an adviser, directed job search, a period of weekly job search review appointments and submission to job vacancies. Stage 3, months six to 12, includes supported job search with an adviser, fortnightly job search reviews and a back to work action plan. This section looks at experiences of these stages of the regime, in particular the interviews with advisers. It also reviews the submission of lone parent customers to job vacancies.

3.11.1 Week 13 interview

After claiming JSA for 13 weeks, lone parent customers move to the second stage of the JSA regime and are required to attend an interview with an adviser. At this meeting, the lone parent customer is required to review their job goals and the adviser will check (and challenge) any restrictions placed on their availability to work. There are a number of tasks which should be completed at this interview and these include:

- a review of the JSAg;
- a discussion of job goals;
- completion of the Customer Assessment Tool (CAT). This is used by advisers to assess the barriers to work of lone parent customers in order to best meet their needs;
- carrying out an in-work BOC;
- identification of skills needs;
- submitting lone parent customers for jobs;
- informing lone parent customers about what will happen next with their claim.

After this interview lone parent customers are also required to change from fortnightly to weekly job search review appointments for up to six weeks, as reported in Section 3.8 on job search reviews.

There was some degree of confusion among the lone parents interviewed about the different types of appointments that they had attended at the local Jobcentre Plus office. Some lone parent customers appeared to confuse the BtWS with the 13 week interview and others, who reported that they been claiming JSA for over 13 weeks and up to six months, stated that they had not attended an interview. Where lone parent customers did recall the 13 week interview their experiences were, in the main, reported as positive. Lone parent customers often welcomed the opportunity to receive the extra support offered via their appointment with an adviser. They also generally reported that the Jobcentre Plus staff who conducted the interviews were helpful and approachable. Some lone parent customers also suggested that they would have appreciated the opportunity to have had this type of interview at an earlier stage in their JSA claim:

> *'I think that you should have that meeting at the beginning, not 13 weeks into your looking, because you could have spent 13 weeks just buying the same newspaper if you're not a person who has access to the internet, not knowing that there are other things that you can do. If you had that at the beginning, then that gives you something to go away with to actually say, right, I'm going to try that, I'm going to try this, I'm going to try that, not 13 weeks – that's three months. So you could be doing the same thing over and over and not getting any leap ahead.'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Lone parent customers commonly reported completing a review of their JSAg and discussing job goals at the 13 week interview. They also recalled being given information about the next stages of the regime, such as the period of weekly job search review appointments. The completion of in-work BOC did appear to be more patchy, although some lone parent customers who had moved from IS were aware of BOCs from previous WFIs. This may suggest that advisers are using discretion about whether it would be useful to repeat the process, where this had been carried out previously.

Lone parent customers recollection of other elements of the 13 week interview, such as completing the CAT and skills assessments were minimal, with only one lone parent customer specifically recalling filling in a questionnaire about her skills. Staff also reported that while core elements of the interview such as the review of the JSAg and completion of BOCs are routinely carried out, this is not always the case for some elements, such as completion of the CAT.

3.11.2 Targeted interviews

At stage 2 of the JSA regime, lone parent customers can also be offered the opportunity of additional help in the form of two targeted interviews which are intended for lone parent customers who are furthest from the labour market and who may require additional support.

The ASM from one case study district reported that all lone parents who moved to JSA from IS are likely to need this support as they have been out of work for some time. They described the support offered via these targeted interviews as *'individually tailored'* support, such as advice on job search, Curriculum Vitae (CV) preparation and a review of childcare barriers, with options to refer to courses such as confidence building, etc. While the ASM from one case study district reported that they used these types of interview wherever possible there was also some indication that the process for identifying which lone parent customers would benefit from targeted interviews required improvement. The ASM from another district also suggested that most lone parents at this stage of the regime were still being dealt with by mainstream advisers and so were not receiving, *'the full lone parent service'*.

There was also very little evidence from lone parent customer interviews that they had been offered, or taken part in, a stage 2 targeted interview, although one lone parent customer did report that once a month her job search review appointment had been extended to include a one-to-one interview at this stage.

3.11.3 Stage 3 interviews

After claiming JSA for six months, all lone parent customers should receive a further advisory interview to review job goals, agree an action plan, intensify job search activity and receive an assessment of basic skills if one has not already been carried out. The stage 2 targeted interviews along with activities which form stage 3 of the regime, give advisers greater flexibility to tailor their work to lone parent customers. Advisers are expected to use their knowledge of the local labour market and local (non-contracted) provision to identify suitable job vacancies and training opportunities. Advisers can also refer lone parent customers to providers who have a Jobcentre Plus support contract to offer additional support, such as development of interview skills. While the early process study of the JRFND evaluation research suggested that some advisers appreciate this flexibility, it also reported that others indicated a need for further guidance on possible activities (Knight *et al*., 2010). An ASM from one case study district in this research suggested that LPAs were more comfortable with this flexible approach than mainstream advisers, as it reflected the way in which they already worked with lone parents on IS.

Following the six-month interview, in addition to attending the fortnightly job search reviews, lone parent customers should also have weekly meetings with an adviser to create a personal action plan. Once this weekly review period is complete, lone parent customers should continue to have regular meetings with an adviser.

Advisory service staff suggested that, at the time of the study, few lone parents affected by LPO were at this stage of a JSA claim, and that most of these would have been seen by a mainstream adviser. This meant that few of the staff interviewed had any experience of working with lone parent customers at this stage unless they were accessing NDLP. Those who were able to comment about stage 3 referred to offering the range of interview activities described above (for both stages 2 and 3), with some noting a concern about constraints on the contracted provision that was available. This was in part linked to delays in the referral process and the high volume of referrals (following increases in the JSA registers because of the recession and its aftermath). Other staff noted the need for additional provision to support lone parent customers with basic skills needs, and one ASM reported that a number of LPAs on their team had noted that many lone parent customers were below the entry level that Jobcentre Plus usually dealt with. As a result of this, the district was investigating what could be put in place to support these lone parent customers.

Some of the lone parents interviewed, who had been claiming JSA for six months or more, reported that they had taken part in the mandatory 26 week interview. One lone parent customer reported that she felt that in this interview she was *'pushed harder'* to find a job. A lone parent customer who was about to start stage 3 stated she had been informed that she would face increasing pressure to find work:

> *'Now I've been told, "You're going to stage 3, you've been unemployed for six months now and we're going, they're really going to"...The last adviser I saw she said "I must warn you, they are really going to be on your back, it's not a case of, okay, alright, how did this go? It's going to be 'you will go'."'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Evidence of the weekly review period was minimal among the lone parents interviewed, with only one lone parent customer reporting experience of this, although it should be noted that few of the lone parents interviewed had progressed far into stage 3 of the JSA regime.

3.11.4 Job referrals

Some JSA lone parent customers reported that Jobcentre Plus staff had referred them for a job interview, although their experience of this was varied. Some lone parent customers perceived this as positive and helpful, and some of the lone parents interviewed who were currently in work had secured their job after being referred to an interview by Jobcentre Plus (see Section 2.2). Other lone parent customers who had been referred to jobs reported less helpful experiences, as they felt the jobs they had been referred to were not appropriate to them. Examples of this included a job with working hours that would cause childcare problems and a situation where the lone parent customer felt they were unable to carry out the job as described, (as they were recovering from an operation and only able to take up 'light cleaning' duties).

> *'But I didn't go, it was split shifts, I just couldn't do night shifts with her.'*
>
> (ESA lone parent customer; North and East Yorkshire and the Humber)
>
> *'They sent me one; I had one come through but it was at the NEC, and it was a job I couldn't do, for one, because it included machinery, buffing of the floors, which I can't do.'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

In neither of these situations did it appear that the customer was subject to a benefit sanction (benefit sanctions are discussed further in Section 3.13) for refusing to attend the interview. In the first case, it is likely that one of the JSA parent flexibilities was applied, which extends good cause for failing to take up a job to take into account whether appropriate and/or affordable childcare is available.

Another case of what was considered to be an inappropriate referral was described by a lone parent customer who reported that she had been referred to an interview without being given details of what the job would entail, in terms of experience and working hours required. When she arrived at the interview she found that the job was unsuitable in both these areas and described her embarrassment at the situation:

> *'And then the guy said to me it was a job for an Australian bar, he says, "Can you work every Saturday night for the Christmas party nights, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Hogmanay?" And I went "No"...But I was so embarrassed, I said to him, "I'm really sorry because I never knew, I never realised that" and I said "I feel like I'm wasting your time".'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

While these cases emphasised the need for advisers to review lone parent customer circumstances fully, and the potential application of JSA parent flexibilities, there was some evidence of positive job outcomes for lone parents following Jobcentre Plus referrals. At the time of research two customers had a job interview which they were due to attend that had been arranged by Jobcentre Plus. Some customers who were in work for 16 hours or more when interviewed had also got their job through being referred to interview by Jobcentre Plus.

3.12 Lone parent customer work search activities

As with the Early Findings report (Gloster *et al.*, 2010), lone parents claiming JSA described a range of work search activities. Those commonly cited included: looking for job advertisements in local newspapers and shop windows, internet searches, using Jobcentre Plus job points and approaching employers directly. Some lone parents also referred to more informal methods, such as utilising contacts identified via family and friends. It was common for lone parent customers to describe using a number of these approaches.

The Early Findings report found that many lone parents, particularly those making a new or repeat claim for JSA, felt that the internet was a particularly useful element of their job search activities. This view was reflected by some of the lone parents interviewed at this stage, for example, some suggested that online job advertisements contained more useful information than those in newspapers. Some lone parent customers also reported that they had been given direction and support in using this method of looking for work by Jobcentre Plus, such as staff supplying the details of relevant websites. These lone parents had access to the internet at home and either asked their children to help them or were adept at using the internet themselves:

> *'The internet was more interesting, I looked at the Jobcentre site, the Job Plus site. But I actually found a job off that Gumtree.'*
>
> (In work lone parent; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

While a number of lone parent customers did refer to using job points in local Jobcentre Plus offices, some lone parent customers also described problems with this method, either because job points had not been working, or the vacancy information they supplied was incorrect or out of date.

Other lone parent customers appeared to be more sceptical about the value of using approaches such as the internet, and preferred a direct approach to employers, in particular where this had been a successful strategy they had adopted in the past. Another approach described by some lone parents, which appears to have been successfully utilised by some of the lone parent customers who had moved into work, was the use of more informal methods to identify job opportunities. This is discussed further in Section 2.2.

Lone parents were asked about Jobcentre Plus support for their work search activities and some, particularly those at an early stage of the JSA regime, suggested that they had not received this type of support even when they had requested it (this issue is discussed in Section 3.10). Other lone parent customers, however, did report a range of support for their job search activities, which came either directly from Jobcentre Plus staff or via a provider that Jobcentre Plus had referred them to. Assistance with writing a CV was one of the most commonly reported aspects of this support, and as noted above, some lone parent customers also reported assistance from Jobcentre Plus staff to utilise the internet as a method of looking for work. Some lone parent customers also referred to work search support being offered at the BtWS (see Section 3.9), although generally lone parent customers did not see this as an important element of work search support.

The lone parents who were interviewed described looking for a very diverse range of work, and they commonly had clear ideas about the type of employment they were hoping to secure. The types of work reported ranged from fairly low-paid, low-skilled work, such as laundry, cleaning, caring, retail and packing, to more skilled areas, such as hairdressing, catering, and painting and decorating. Some lone parent customers were educated to degree level and were seeking opportunities in more highly skilled employment, such as accountancy and social work, and others suggested that they would like to set up their own businesses (for example, cleaning, catering and book-keeping).

Work aspirations were often based on past work experience and generally appeared to be realistic goals based on lone parent customers' experience and qualifications. Lone parent customers were also aware of the need to widen the scope of the type of work they would consider taking up if they were not able to secure an opportunity in their preferred area (as required by the JSA regime). Lone parent customers also tended to be looking for work that would fit with their children's school hours and informal childcare arrangements, as they did not want to use formal childcare. Lone parent customer perspectives on childcare are explored further in Section 3.15.

3.13 Sanctions and disentitlements within the JSA regime

Conditionality is a key feature of the JSA regime and lone parents claiming JSA are subject to the same requirements as other jobseekers. However, there are additional JSA flexibilities (discussed in Section 3.6) 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. It should be noted that there are new regulations regarding cases of failure to attend appointments which came into force from April 2010. As lone parent customer interviews were completed prior to the implementation of these changes, the experiences they report will be based on the previous regime. It may, however, be useful to reflect on the potential effect of the regime change on the types of cases that were reported, and this will be discussed further in Section 3.13.4.

Prior to April 2010 a lone parent would lose entitlement to JSA that is, have their claim disallowed, if they failed to attend their fortnightly job search review appointment without demonstrating good cause (a judgement on good cause will involve consideration of the additional flexibilities). Under the LPO changes Jobcentre Plus introduced a process similar to that available under IS, which requires Jobcentre Plus staff to try to contact any parent, including lone parents, by telephone 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 telephone on the day they fail to attend their fortnightly job search review appointment. If contact is not made by telephone, 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 lone parent 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 varies between one and 26 weeks and is determined at the discretion of a Labour Market Decision Maker (LMDM). A sanction may also be applied where a jobseeker has failed to carry out an activity designed to improve their employability (such as attending an appropriate training course), or refused to carry out a jobseeker's direction. However, appropriate childcare not being available might be considered good cause for non-compliance. Such sanctions are for fixed periods of two, four and 26 weeks, depending on previous non-compliance.

Frontline Jobcentre Plus staff identify cases that may require referral to Decision Making and Appeals (DMA) for disallowance or sanctioning decisions (with some cases, such as straightforward decisions on good cause for a failure to attend, made at the local Jobcentre Plus office level). As with judgments regarding the application of JSA flexibilities, an internal Jobcentre Plus 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 a LMDM.

Once the referral is made, the LMDM will assess the evidence, including the customer's view of 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.

DWP administrative data show that, historically, only two to three per cent of lone parents on JSA incurred a sanction at some point during their claim and around five to six per cent were disallowed. Administrative data to March 2010 show that of the lone parents who moved from IS to JSA because of phase 1 of LPO, two per cent incurred a sanction and five per cent were disallowed at some point, usually for failing to attend a mandatory intervention.[5]

When the issues of disallowance and benefit sanctions were discussed during the interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff and lone parent customers, both groups tended to use 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 (for example, when reporting specific cases). A lone parent customers' experience of JSA disallowance or a JSA sanction is similar that is, 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.

3.13.1 Staff views and experience of disallowance and sanctions for lone parents on JSA

The issue of disallowance and sanctions was explored with all of the staff interviewed, including any direct experience they had of referring lone parents for DMA and, for LMDMs, any experience they had of dealing with referrals for benefit sanctions or disallowance with these lone parent customers. As with the Early Findings report (Gloster *et al*., 2010), staff generally reported that they had little or no direct experience of the disallowance or sanctions process for lone parents who were now claiming JSA because of the changes introduced by LPO. Advisers and ASMs also indicated that they felt lone parent customers would be aware of what they needed to do to comply with the conditions of the JSA regime and thus avoid any loss of benefit (either sanction or disallowance). They described how lone parent customers would be advised about JSA conditionality, and some staff mentioned that lone parent customers would be reminded about this on a fairly regular basis. Again this reflects staff views from the Early Findings report.

The Jobcentre Plus staff interviewed appeared to be aware of, and following, the internal Jobcentre Plus escalation process for review of cases involving lone parents, prior to referral to DMA. However, the majority of advisers involved in the focus groups were LPAs and their ongoing involvement with lone parent customers, once they had moved to JSA, did vary considerably both between case study districts and between offices within the same district.

The cases of disallowance or sanction reported were most commonly related to failures to attend fortnightly job search review appointments and BtWSs, with a few references to failure to comply with a jobseeker's direction. For example, one ASM reported a DMA referral for a lone parent who could not speak English, and who was refusing to attend a language training course. This lone parent received a sanction and then subsequently agreed to attend the course. The only other specific examples reported were cases where an adviser felt that the lone parent customer was not undertaking sufficient job search activity or not actively seeking work.

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5 The data exclude the period of time a person is on JSA after their youngest child turned 16 as, at this point, the JSA customer ceases to be classified as a lone parent.

On the whole LMDMs reported that the implementation of LPO had had little impact on the overall workload of their teams. These staff also indicated that many of the cases related to the application of flexibilities, which would be dealt with at local Jobcentre Plus office level and would not be referred for DMA. However, LMDMs also indicated that for the majority of the cases they dealt with they would not necessarily be aware of the customer's status as a parent or lone parent, unless this was relevant to the case for example, childcare difficulties as a reason for a Failure to Attend (FTA):

> *'One of the forms the Jobcentre send to us with the case, there is a thing that says whether it's a...the parents' status, whether it's a couple, lone parent, but they're not always completed. But it's not something we would take into consideration...we have to look exactly what day they should have attended, when they attended and why they didn't...It might become an issue if they say the child was ill and they had look after the child and had nobody else to, if they're a lone parent – then fair enough, that's an acceptable reason.'*
>
> (Labour Market Decision Maker)

A concern noted by one LMDM interviewed during the Early Findings research was access to information on the availability and affordability of local childcare (as many LMDM teams are based at a location that is geographically remote form the Jobcentre Plus district they cover). When LMDMs were asked about the availability of local information to support the decision making process during this stage of the research, some indicated that they were generally reliant on the information supplied by local Jobcentre Plus office staff:

> *'...dealing with the vast area we do, we really have no idea about what's going on in local communities...I would hope we would have enough information to give the decision, but it would depend on the Jobcentre sending us that information really.'*
>
> (Labour Market Decision Maker)

Another LMDM stated that in cases related to the availability and/or affordability of childcare they would always discuss the detail with the lone parent customer concerned, and review all of this information before making a decision. Due to the small number of cases where staff had experience of direct involvement in the sanctions or disallowance process, Jobcentre Plus staff were reluctant to express any firm views on the effect of this aspect of the JSA regime on the behaviour of lone parent customers. Some staff did indicate that the possibility of losing benefit did make lone parent customers more likely to attend appointments, although some LPAs also described a reluctance to use this method to achieve lone parent customer compliance:

> *'You get close to thinking, well, I don't think they're really taking any action, they should be doing it* [actively seeking work] *but I would never want to be the first adviser to get someone who isn't actively seeking work* [sanctioned] *and...well in my area anyway we try to be the good guys helping them into work.'*
>
> (Personal Adviser)

In general this reluctance to refer to DMA seemed to stem from a concern about undermining positive relationships that advisers had built up with lone parent customers, which they felt underpinned their work to move lone parent customers towards employment (as previously noted the majority of advisers who took part in the focus groups were LPAs). However, there was also a sense that staff wanted to avoid the financial hardship that a sanction may cause lone parents and their children, and also any adverse publicity linked to this.

Referral to DMA was an area where some ASMs felt they needed to carry out further work with their adviser teams. One described time they had spent reviewing the DMA referral process with their team, and this included a reminder to advisers that DMA activity must be considered if a lone parent customer was not undertaking job search activities or following up on potential jobs. Another ASM suggested that advisers may need additional training linked to DMA, although they did indicate that an internal Jobcentre Plus toolkit which offered guidance on DMA was 'very good'. As already noted above, many JSA lone parent customers are now seen by mainstream advisers who are likely to have more experience of this aspect of the JSA regime and thus may feel more confident about using DMA processes.

3.13.2 Lone parent customer views and experience of sanctions on the JSA regime

As with the staff interviews for this aspect of the study, the themes arising from interviews with lone parent customers were broadly similar to the Early Findings research (Gloster *et al.*, 2010). Lone parent customers generally demonstrated that they were aware of some aspects of JSA regime conditionality, such as the need to actively seek work and attend appointments at the local Jobcentre Plus office to prevent losing benefit:

> *'They tell you if you don't sign on you don't get your money, your benefit gets suspended.'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

In general lone parent customers indicated that Jobcentre Plus staff had explained this aspect of benefit conditionality (the need to attend appointments), although some did suggest that Jobcentre Plus staff had not done so and their knowledge came from conversations with friends or acquaintances. In some cases lone parent customers stated that they only became aware that they could lose benefit when this actually happened to them.

What was less clear from interviews was the depth of lone parent customers' knowledge about the range of circumstances in which someone may lose entitlement to benefit, or when a sanction may be applied, and the detail of the processes involved. Lone parent customers tended to cite failure to attend an appointment as the main reason that someone would lose benefit, although there are a wide range of circumstances in which a claim may be subject to a sanction or disallowed (described above). However, as also reported above, some Jobcentre Plus staff did describe a reluctance to use sanctions with lone parent customers to address issues such as failing to actively seek work.

Of the 94 lone parent customers interviewed during this study who reported experience of the JSA regime, 28 stated that they had experienced a loss of benefit at some point during their benefit claim, although four of these were referring to a sanction while claiming IS. Most of the other lone parent customers reported losing JSA because they missed an appointment at the local Jobcentre Plus office (that is, their claims were disallowed) and there did not appear to be any lone parent customers who had experienced a benefit sanction. The reasons why these lone parent customers missed their appointments were varied although, broadly, lone parent customers reported that they had either forgotten or were confused about their appointment dates, or stated that either they or one of their children was ill.

These appear to be higher rates of disallowance than would be expected based on DWP administrative data for lone parents generally, although the incidence of sanctions appears to be lower. It should, however, be noted that this study is qualitative in nature and not statistically representative of all lone parents affected by LPO. There are a number of reasons why this research might have picked up on more cases of disallowance than is evident from the official statistics. For instance, this might include research effects (where we would not expect those interviewed to be

statistically representative of the wider population of JSA lone parents) and definitional reasons (that is the official statistics relate to a precise definition of a disallowance/sanction based on a rate per claim, whereas participants may have been talking about any experience of a loss of benefit, not necessarily within their current claim and not necessarily always caused by a disallowance/ sanction).

Where the financial implications of the benefit loss were discussed, most lone parent customers reported that they had lost benefit for a fairly short time and that they had been able to manage financially by relying on ChB and CTC payments, and loans from family and friends during this period. The main financial difficulties reported were linked to the knock-on effect on their HB and CTB, which were often reported as taking some considerable time to resolve, sometimes leading to payment arrears.

3.13.3 Re-engagement following disallowance

Some lone parent customers appeared to find the process of re-engagement following their disallowance difficult. As noted, some lone parent customers stated that they only became aware that they could lose benefit when this actually happened and said that they did not know what they needed to do to rectify this situation. Some also described difficulties with the Jobcentre Plus staff they dealt with after their disallowance, and in particular the need to make a number of telephone calls, being passed from one member of staff to another. There were, however, other lone parent customers who felt that Jobcentre Plus communicated benefit stoppages and processes quite clearly. One lone parent customer who had experienced a disallowance stated:

> *'I mean, for people that turned around and said well they stopped money...without notifying me, utter rubbish. I do not believe that for one minute. I mean, I can say for the system itself they do notify you in advance what's going on.'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; South East Wales)

In summary, while lone parent customers were generally aware of the principle of disallowance and sanctions they appear to have a limited understanding of specific details on all aspects of conditionality and the associated processes, such as re-engagement after a claim is disallowed. These levels of awareness reflect findings from the Early Findings research (Gloster *et al.*, 2010), earlier research into JSA regime sanctions (Peters and Joyce, 2006) and research on benefit sanctions that specifically focused on lone parents' experiences (Joyce and Whiting, 2006; Goodwin, 2008).

3.13.4 Changes to the JSA sanctions regime

From April 2010 a fixed one-week sanction is applied where it is determined that a jobseeker did not have good cause for non-attendance. For a second, and any subsequent failures to attend within the same jobseeking period, a fixed two-week sanction will be applied. The imposition of a sanction means total loss of benefit (100 per cent) for the specified period, although lone parent customers do have the opportunity to apply for hardship payments (a reduced award of benefit to give a minimum level of financial support). Some Jobcentre Plus staff highlighted this issue and the importance of explaining this change to lone parent customers. One ASM described how they had carried out a specific half-day workshop for advisory staff, so that they would be in a position to cascade this *'critically important'* information to lone parent customers.

The use of a fixed sanction will simplify the process involved following an FTA without good cause (that is, there will be no need to make a new claim via the rapid reclaim process), although some staff interviewed did indicate that it may have a more significant financial effect on lone parent customers. For example, the disallowance/rapid reclaim process may have resulted in the loss of

a few day's benefit, whereas a fixed sanction will result in the loss of one or two weeks' benefit (although a customer may be eligible to apply for a hardship payment). *'It's actually quite harsh, I think, for lone parents.'* (ASM). One of the LMDMs also suggested that this new fixed sanction process may also increase the number of referrals to their team, and potentially the number of appeals that will be made. It may, therefore, be useful to explore the effect of this change to the JSA sanctions regime, and where relevant the associated process for hardship payments, within the next phase of LPO research.

3.14 In Work Credit

IWC is one aspect of support lone parent customers may be eligible for when they return to work of 16 hours per week or more. IWC is a weekly payment of £40 (£60 in London) 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 ESA or a combination of these benefits. In London the qualifying benefits also include Incapacity Benefit, Carer's Allowance and Severe Disability Allowance. A lone parent customer will still qualify for IWC if they move from IS to JSA following 52 weeks on either benefit. Lone parent 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 lone parent customer must be moving immediately from one of the eligible benefits into work. Therefore, lone parent customers affected by LPO may be eligible for IWC if they have been claiming benefit for a sufficiently long period of time. The aim is that IWC will be an incentive to look for work and that it will ease the financial transition back to work for lone parent customers who receive it.

Lone parents in this research were asked whether they had heard of IWC, their views on it and whether it was an incentive to work. Findings on IWC among those in work at the time of interview are reported in Section 2.5.2. There was varying awareness of IWC among those not in work at the time of the interview, and it was just as common for lone parents not to have heard of it as to have heard of it, and this did not differ by the type of benefit that they were claiming. It is important to note that a lack of awareness of IWC among some lone parent customers may have been because they were not entitled to receive it if they had not been on benefits for long enough to be eligible, and therefore, had not been made aware of it. Those that had heard of IWC had heard about it through advisers at Jobcentre Plus during WFIs while claiming IS, or by word of mouth from other lone parents that they knew. A number of lone parents also had experiences of claiming it in the past.

While lone parents not in work at the time of the interview thought that IWC sounded like a good idea, opinion on whether they thought it would act as an incentive for them to move into work was more mixed. While generally lone parents felt that it would incentivise them, some said it would not, for a number of reasons: because they wanted to work anyway, because they felt that they could not work, because they said that they would be no better off in work even with IWC, and because it only lasted for 12 months. The IWC evaluation further explores the effects 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 (see Sims *et al.*, 2010).

3.15 Childcare to support the JSA regime

The Early Findings report (Gloster *et al.*, 2010) presented a detailed examination of a range of childcare-related issues within the context of LPO, including the attitudes of lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15 to using childcare, and the availability and affordability of provision.

The childcare-related issues arising from both staff and lone parent customer interviews within this stage of the research tended to fall within two interlinked themes, which are broadly very similar to those in the earlier report, for example:

- lone parent customers' attitudes to using childcare;
- the nature of the childcare provision that was available.

3.15.1 Staff perspectives on childcare

Staff continued to report the reluctance of some lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15 to using childcare (in particular formal provision) and described their 'childcare conversations' with lone parent customers to explore and challenge this attitude. In general there was a sense that these conversations were more likely to have taken place when lone parent customers were seen by LPAs, and that these specialists were better equipped to handle these childcare discussions than mainstream advisers.

> *'"X" is a great adviser…*[but]*…when it came to lone parents he was a walkover because a mother would look at him and say, "I can't do that because of my child" he would go "Okay".'*
>
> (Lone Parent Obligation Roll-Out Lead)

One of the case study districts reported work that was being undertaken to develop solution-focused interview and questioning techniques to challenge lone parent customers' perceptions about the use of childcare. The techniques involved asking lone parent customers to reflect on their attitudes and barriers and rate these, and to then prompt the lone parent customers to come up with ways in which these could be improved. They had carried out the development stage of this work with the assistance of Jobcentre Plus psychology staff and reported that they were now piloting the new approach in some areas of the district to assess any effect the use of these techniques may have on outcomes. In addition to the need for this type of work to challenge the attitudes of some lone parents, staff also reported that gaps in provision do continue to be problematic in some specific areas. These were childcare provision for:

- children with special needs (that is, a disability and/or behavioural difficulties);
- older children – who are seen by their parents as too old for formal childcare and too young to leave unsupervised.

The availability of more generic childcare provision was also a specific difficulty reported in rural areas, with some adviser staff noting significant gaps in the areas they covered. High cost of childcare was also noted as an issue in Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth, and Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders, with the suggestion that these costs could not be met by financial support for childcare costs that was currently available.

CPMs reported a variety of approaches used to identify and report any particular gaps in provision to local authorities (local authorities in England and Wales have a duty to secure sufficient childcare to meet the needs of working parents). For example where lone parent customers report childcare-related barriers to work these can be recorded by advisers using markers in the Jobcentre Plus LMS and data extracted and fed back to the relevant local authority. Only one of the CPMs interviewed appeared to be using this method, as others had significant concerns about the quality of the data that were being captured on LMS, and described work being carried out to improve data quality before they would be confident about using it in this way.

One of the CPMs also reported that their most significant concern related to provision was the potential impact of the recession. They suggested that the significant job losses which had been seen in their district meant that many parents no longer had an immediate need for childcare, and many places were now vacant. They were concerned that this significant fall in demand locally could undermine the viability of many childcare providers, with the potential that these providers would go out of business.

3.15.2 Lone parent customer perspectives on childcare

Lone parent customer views tended to reflect the issues reported by staff, in particular a reluctance to use formal childcare, with a general preference to use informal childcare offered by family and friends. As a result of this many lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15 appeared to restrict their availability for work to fit around school and informal childcare, and all of the lone parent customers who were interviewed who had moved into work (see Section 2.4) reported that they used informal childcare.

Parents with older children were concerned about leaving them without supervision but felt children would not be willing to use 'childcare'. While this was a general issue, lone parents who had made a new or repeat claim for JSA (as opposed to those who moved directly from IS) did appear to be more willing to leave older children while they were at work. The new and repeat JSA lone parent customers also reported positive views on the use of after school clubs for younger children.

The reluctance to use formal childcare among lone parents has also been identified in other research (see Bell *et al.*, 2005). In their longitudinal qualitative study of lone parents Ridge and Millar (2008) found that mothers of school age children tended to use informal childcare where possible and many worked part-time and within school hours while their children were younger. The 2007 Families and Children Study also found that the use of informal childcare is common among the population of lone parents in work as a whole (Philo *et al.*, 2009).

In line with staff views, lone parent customers also raised the issue of the lack of childcare provision for disabled children and those with special needs. A more general concern about the location of provision in relation to home and the potential workplace was noted, in particular in rural areas. Some lone parents in more rural locations suggested that, while some provision was available, it was often some distance from their home, and limited public transport meant it would not be feasible for them to fit in the use of this provision with journeys to and from work.

A final issue arising from discussions of childcare with lone parents during this study was that many lone parents appeared to have a very limited knowledge of financial support that may be available for childcare costs if they were to move into work.

3.16 The effect of the JSA regime on lone parents' attitudes to work

This section examines staff views on the JSA regime for lone parents and their perceptions of lone parent customers' response to the JSA regime. It is followed by a discussion on the views of lone parents claiming JSA about the effect of the regime on their attitudes to work.

3.16.1 Staff views on the JSA regime for lone parents

In general staff were positive, and in some cases extremely positive, about the JSA regime for lone parents, in particular where they had experience of seeing lone parent customers move into work after claiming JSA. Staff did, however, raise a number of issues linked to the operation and design of the JSA regime for lone parents, where they felt there was potential for improvement.

There were, for example, some concerns about the service offered to lone parents by mainstream advisers. Linked to this, staff identified a number of benefits, both to lone parent customers' experience and the effectiveness of the regime, which they felt were offered by the use of specialist staff. For example, some staff suggested that LPAs had a better understanding of lone parents' circumstances, and a more comprehensive knowledge of the full range of services which could be offered to lone parents to assist them on their journey to work. In addition to this there was also an indication that LPAs were better able to challenge the negative attitudes that some lone parent customers held towards the use of childcare. Some staff also raised a concern that lone parent customers who make new and repeat claims to JSA are not always identified as such, and thus will not gain access to all of the appropriate services.

Staff acknowledged capacity constraints on the increased involvement of LPAs in the JSA regime, and some also raised the issue of the impact of capacity-related time constraints on the effective delivery of interventions. Related to this, some staff reported that they did not have sufficient time to assimilate the new information they required in order to keep pace with changes to the operation of the benefits regime within Jobcentre Plus.

Regarding the design of the JSA regime, there were mixed views on the usefulness of BtWS and some concerns about the suitability of the 'self help' approach of the early stages of the regime for lone parent customers who have been out of work for some time, such as lone parents who had moved from IS. Staff also reported some difficulties related to fast-tracking lone parent customers who might have benefited from additional support to later stages in the regime. In some areas staff described a reluctance to use JSA sanctions with lone parent customers and some had concerns about the potential impact of the recent change to using fixed sanctions following a FTA without good cause.

Finally a key challenge for the future implementation of LPO, mentioned by some staff, was the ongoing decrease in age of the youngest child at which lone parents lose their eligibility for IS (on the grounds of being a lone parent). At the time of this study this had reduced to age ten, with a reduction to the age of seven planned for the third phase of LPO later in 2010 and potentially to age five in early 2012. Some advisers indicated that they felt it would be extremely challenging to 'sell' LPO to lone parent customers with younger children (due to an expectation that a greater number of lone parent customers would feel their children were too young to leave in the care of someone else), and some ASMs also indicated that they felt some LPAs themselves may also have difficulties in accepting the further age reductions.

3.16.2 Staff views on lone parents' reactions to JSA

When staff were asked for their views on lone parent customer reactions to the JSA regime generally those who felt most able to comment were LPAs. These staff reported that lone parents who were new and repeat JSA customers tended to be more job ready and proactive about finding work than lone parent customers who moved from IS, although both groups were generally coping well with the JSA regime.

Some advisers described factors which they felt helped support a successful lone parent customer transition from IS to JSA. These included lone parent customer acceptance of the change and having a full understanding of the conditionality of JSA before moving on from IS. Generally they felt that younger lone parent customers tended to have more successful transitions to JSA and they also reported that ongoing contact with the same LPA assisted a smooth transition.

Staff felt that lone parent customers who were more concerned about moving from IS to JSA tended to express fears about leaving the 'security' of IS, which they may have been claiming for a number of years. For some lone parent customers this was related to a general concern about potentially leaving the security of benefits for work. For other lone parent customers this concern appeared to be related to a perceived 'stigma' attached to JSA and 'signing-on'.

In some instances advisers felt that avoidance of this 'stigma' was part of the reason why some lone parents moved straight into work from IS in the period leading up to their loss of IS eligibility. In other cases, adviser staff from more than one case study district reported that some of their lone parent customers were having another child in order to avoid the move to JSA. Some of these advisers also suggested that this could become more of a problem when LPO was fully rolled out, as those with younger children were more likely to be of child bearing age. There was no evidence of lone parent customers having another child in order to maintain their IS eligibility in any of the lone parent customer interviews that were carried out (see Section 6.2.3).

3.16.3 Lone parent customers' attitudes to work

Those who had moved from work to JSA commonly described the financial effect of the fall in their income, and some reported difficulties with budgeting, describing a need to manage money more carefully and cut down on expenditure. Lone parent customers who had previously worked were also more likely to report having overdrafts and credit cards which they were struggling to pay. Some lone parent customers in this group also described feeling pressured by the JSA regime to accept *'any old job'*, despite the fact that they might be qualified in another field, and some expressed concerns that they may be no better off financially if they accepted some of the jobs that were available. The process of signing on and the sanctions regime (rather than being in debt) led to some lone parents feeling that they would have to take any job irrespective of their preferences and qualifications.

Concerns about whether they would be better off in work were also shared by some lone parents who had been claiming other benefits for some time before their move to JSA. While some of these lone parent customers thought that they would be better off in work, others were unsure and this was in some cases linked to previous experiences of working. For example, a loss of related benefits, such as HB and CTB meant that lone parent customers felt they were not better off. One lone parent customer described how the BOC carried out by an adviser was incorrect as it had miscalculated Council Tax. So while *'It looked good on paper…it didn't ring true at all, because I wasn't better off.'*

Despite some of these financial concerns, lone parent customers often stated that they did want to work for both financial and other reasons, and also that they were happy to work now that their children were older and more grown up. Some lone parent customers reported that they did not want to remain at home as their children grew up and were at school. They felt that working would give them more sense of identity, and one lone parent customer stated she didn't want to be 'just a statistic', which offered a sense of how she felt about claiming benefits:

> *'I like to think at some point I could, literally, you know, like, be independent and be going to work like other people do, I suppose.'*
>
> (JSA new and repeat lone parent customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Lone parents also felt it was important for them to move into work to be a good role model and set a positive example for their children.

3.16.4 The effects of the JSA regime on lone parent customers' attitudes to work

Lone parents who had made a new and repeat claim for JSA after leaving work generally did not tend to view the JSA regime as having had an effect on their attitudes to work, as they already felt motivated to find employment. However, this group did find aspects of the JSA regime beneficial, for example, job search review appointments, for keeping them in touch with the local labour market and having someone to report progress to (see Section 3.8).

In contrast, lone parents who had claimed JSA having previously been on IS felt that JSA was having an effect on their attitudes to work. They found claiming JSA a demanding and sometimes uncomfortable experience, more so than claiming IS had been, and felt that the JSA regime was, therefore, giving them a 'push' towards work. This 'push' was based on a desire to stop claiming JSA that was particularly linked to their dislike of attending the local Jobcentre Plus office for regular job search review appointments. These appointments left some lone parents (who had previously used a different part of the local Jobcentre Plus office while on IS) feeling intimidated, both by staff, including security guards and by other JSA lone parent customers, such as '*drug users*'. This was a particular anxiety for some lone parents when they needed to bring their child to their appointment with them. This dislike of attending regular job search review appointments was in addition to the feeling that they had a less personalised service on JSA than they had when on IS and a lack of understanding of their situations (see Section 3.8).

Despite a dislike of aspects of the JSA regime among lone parent customers with a previous experience of IS, these lone parents did recognise that this 'push' away from JSA towards work was useful and offered the additional incentive they needed to find work. One lone parent who had moved into work described this experience:

> *'I think moving to JSA was the best thing I've done actually. It was better for me because it gave me more incentive to get back to work because I didn't like signing on. I don't know. Just there's an atmosphere about it when you're queuing up to sign on, and that. Because when you're on IS your money goes in the bank, no-one knows your business.'*
>
> (In work lone parent; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

There was no evidence, however, that the JSA regime was changing lone parent attitudes to the type of work they were willing to do or to childcare; lone parents still wanted to be better off in work, to work part-time and to use informal childcare rather than to move into any kind of work or to consider using formal childcare.

It is also important to note that the increasing age of their children also played a role in changing attitudes to work. Some lone parent customers interviewed who were now on JSA suggested that in the past they had not wanted to consider work because their child or children were too young for them to feel comfortable leaving them. Now their child or children were older and more independent, they wanted to look for and move into work. Positively changing attitudes towards work among JSA lone parents with a previous experience of IS may, therefore, be a result of not only the increased conditionality that LPO and the JSA regime bring, but also the increasing age of their child or children.

3.17 Summary

- Staffing models to support the JSA regime for lone parents varied between case study districts and between offices within the same district, which meant there was likely to be differences in the delivery and lone parent customers' experience of the JSA regime. There were indications that the use of specialist LPAs offered a number of benefits, both to lone parent customers' experiences and the effectiveness of the regime.
- Lone parent customers making new and repeat claims for JSA were not always clearly identified as such. Where this was the case lone parents may not have benefited from JSA parent flexibilities, have been offered relevant services or dealt with by specialist staff.
- In general staff and lone parent customers demonstrated a good understanding of the JSA regime for lone parents, although some lone parent customers who were at later stages of the regime suggested it was more complex than they had anticipated and felt they could have been offered more detail of the full regime at the beginning of their claim.
- Experiences of making a claim for JSA varied. Lone parent customers who moved from IS to JSA generally experienced a smooth transition while lone parent customers who had more complex journeys, such as those who moved from IS to ESA to JSA, experienced more difficulties, particularly during the move from ESA to JSA. Lone parent customers with mini-jobs also reported more difficulties with claiming JSA and with their fortnightly job search review appointments as providing evidence of their mini-jobs could be complicated.
- Staff generally demonstrated a good understanding of the JSA flexibilities, and the flexibility that appeared to be most commonly applied was the restriction on working hours (to a minimum of 16 hours per week). The extension of JSA flexibilities to allow lone parents to restrict availability for work to their child's normal school hours was a concern for some staff who felt that there were very few jobs, if any, which would offer these working hours, which could potentially undermine their ability to help lone parents move into work.
- Lone parent customers' views on how useful they found the support offered by Jobcentre Plus varied, depending on their circumstances prior to claiming JSA. Lone parent customers who had moved to JSA from IS, and those who had moved from IS to ESA to JSA, tended to compare their experience of JSA with the support that they received on IS. In general they felt that there was less support offered, fewer training opportunities and a sense that they were offered a less personalised service. Some lone parents commented that advisers appeared to have a lack of understanding of, or sympathy with, their personal circumstances. Some lone parent customers from all groups articulated a desire for more support from Jobcentre Plus at an earlier stage of the regime.
- Some staff also highlighted that the initial stages of the JSA regime were not designed for lone parent customers who have been out of work for some time, and thus may not be suitable for lone parent customers moving from IS or ESA. Despite this, there was little evidence from lone parent customers interviewed of the use of NDLP or Optional Early Entry to Stage 3 to offer extra support. This may be linked to the numbers of non-specialist and new advisers working with lone parents on the JSA regime over the past year, who were generally felt to be less experienced and knowledgeable about NDLP and Optional Early Entry than lone parent advisers.
- During later stages of the JSA regime, lone parent customers appeared to particularly value the support offered via the one-to-one interviews with an adviser. These interviews offered an important opportunity for Jobcentre Plus staff to demonstrate the range of support available and to explain how Jobcentre Plus could help with lone parent customers' search for work.

- While lone parent customers were generally aware of the principle of sanctions they appeared to have little understanding of the different aspects of conditionality and of the various consequences that result from different violations. Some advisers described a reluctance to use the JSA sanctions regime with lone parents, which was linked to a concern about undermining relationships with lone parent customers and avoiding financial hardship for lone parent and their children (and any adverse publicity linked to this). Despite this apparent reluctance, the high reported levels of JSA disallowance from lone parent customers in this study are higher than the rates of disallowance that would be expected based on DWP administrative data for lone parents nationally.
- There were gaps in childcare provision reported in rural areas, and more generally for children with special needs and for older children, although lone parents tended to display a preference for informal childcare offered by family and friends over formal provision. Staff might have needed longer interviews than the existing appointment system allowed to have childcare conversations that challenged lone parents' attitudes to childcare.
- Lone parents who had made a new and repeat claim for JSA after leaving work generally did not tend to view the JSA regime as having had an effect on their attitudes to work, as they already felt motivated to find employment. In contrast, lone parents who had claimed JSA having previously been on IS felt that the JSA regime was giving them a 'push' towards work, based on a desire to stop claiming JSA. It is also important to note that the increasing age of their children also played a role in changing their attitudes towards work.
- A significant constraint on the effectiveness of the JSA regime in moving lone parents into work was the reduced availability of jobs owing to the recession and its aftermath. This was referred to by Jobcentre Plus staff and lone parent customers in all the case study districts. The recession also appeared to have had an impact on delivery of the JSA regime, particularly in relation to the numbers of new staff and the overall capacity of staff.

4 Experiences of Employment and Support Allowance

Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) is a new benefit which, from 27 October 2008, has applied to new customers with an illness or disability, replacing Incapacity Benefit and Income Support (IS) paid on incapacity grounds, i.e Income Support with Disability Premium (ISDP). It aims to help people move into work, rather than stay on benefits. The experience of ESA for ESA customers as a whole is currently being evaluated (see Barnes *et al*., 2010).

This chapter reports findings from interviews with lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15 who moved off IS and made a claim for ESA, either immediately following the end of their eligibility, or after moving from IS to another immediate destination. Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative data show that as of February 2010, of those lone parents on IS affected by phase 1 of the roll-out of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) who left IS, 18 per cent moved directly onto ESA.

This chapter mainly focuses on the 36 interviewees claiming ESA at the time of the interview, but also includes information from a further 15 interviewees who had experience of the ESA regime since leaving IS but were at another destination (Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), IS, work or other) by the time of interview. The lone parents were interviewed three to 11 months after their IS claim ended, and their durations on ESA varied. The chapter explores:

- health problems faced by lone parents on ESA;
- the ESA regime;
- lone parent customers' understanding of the ESA regime;
- making an ESA claim;
- the Work Capability Assessment (WCA);
- the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG, including experience of the Work Focused Health Related Assessment (WFHRA) and the Work Focused Interview (WFI) regime under Pathways to Work);
- the effects of the ESA regime on lone parent customers' attitudes to work.

4.1 Health problems faced by lone parents on ESA

Interviewees who were on ESA at the time of the interview described their main barrier to work as overcoming their health problems/disabilities, and did not generally feel able/well enough to work when interviewed. They had a range of health problems and disabilities including:

- mental health issues (these were common and often described as depression but also included anxiety, agoraphobia and schizophrenia);
- back pain;
- angina;
- asthma;
- epilepsy;
- fibromyalgia;

- failing eyesight;
- diabetes;
- high blood pressure;
- arthritis;
- cancer.

Some of these were fluctuating conditions which interviewees felt would make it difficult to work, as they would have to take periods off sick when their condition was bad. Some conditions were acute (for example, having operations for various issues), and these interviewees saw ESA as temporary while they were having and recovering from operations (these respondents were in the group described in Section 4.5, who had not got as far as the WCA). Other conditions were chronic and these interviewees generally wanted to prioritise managing their health conditions before thinking about work. Lone parents claiming ESA when interviewed also had fewer qualifications and more children than other lone parents in this research (see the Appendix).

4.2 The ESA regime

After applying, claimants for ESA first undergo a WCA to test if they are eligible for ESA. The WCA involves a face-to-face medical health assessment that is compulsory for all claimants unless they qualify under 'special rules' to go straight into the support group, for example, in cases where the claimant is certified terminally ill. Following the WCA, claimants for ESA can be allocated to three groups:

- **Support group**, if they are deemed to have an illness or disability that means they are unable to undertake any form of work-related activity;
- **WRAG**, if they are deemed fit to participate in job-search activities en route to supported employment;
- **Fit for Work** group and therefore, not eligible for ESA.

The level of benefit the customer will receive depends on whether they enter the support group or the WRAG, and on whether they receive contribution-based or income-related payments. There were no cases of lone parents in this research who had been allocated to the support group, either before or after undergoing the WCA, and experiences of being in the support group are not, therefore, reported below.

For those allocated to the WRAG, a WFHRA was carried out following the WCA to explore customers' views about moving into work and what health-related support might help such a move (although the coalition government has announced that this will be suspended from 19 July 2010 for two years to give DWP/Jobcentre Plus an opportunity to reconsider its purpose and delivery). If allocated to the WRAG, customers are then required to participate in job search activities by attending WFIs through Pathways to Work as a condition of receiving their full ESA amount. Customers in the support group are not required to attend any further WFIs as a condition of receiving their full ESA, although they can do so on a voluntary basis.

4.3 Lone parent customer understanding of the ESA regime

Lone parents who had claimed ESA at any point since their IS eligibility ended were asked how they had heard about ESA and about their understanding of different aspects of the ESA regime. Interviewees recalled how they were told about claiming ESA as an option when they were seeing Lone Parent Advisers as part of the LPO process in the run up to their IS eligibility ending. This was usually when lone parent customers were told about the choice of benefits, with ESA as an option, when they told their adviser that they had a health problem or disability (or that they did not feel ready or Fit for Work), or when advisers knew this as it had been discussed at previous WFIs, for example, where a lone parent had been claiming ISDP.[6] Lone parent customers reported that, when telling lone parents about ESA, advisers often then recommended that they apply for ESA, for example, by saying that if they were not ready for work then this was the benefit to apply for. In a few cases lone parents had been advised by others to claim ESA when their IS eligibility ended, for example, by an eyesight assessor, and a gypsy and travellers' liaison officer.

Chapter 3 has shown that lone parents who move from IS to JSA generally understand the basic details of the JSA regime. Similarly, it was common for lone parent customers to recall being told the basics of the ESA regime before they moved off IS, including that they would have to do certain things to be entitled to claim the benefit, and specifically that they would have to send in sick notes[7] and would have to have 'a medical' – the WCA. However, unlike in the case of JSA (see Section 3.4), this was not always the case. Lone parent customers described having gaps in their payment of ESA as they had not realised that they had to keep sending in sick notes as a condition of receiving the benefit. Others knew about the requirement to send in sick notes but not that they would have to attend a 'medical', and one thought, until she started claiming ESA rather than IS, that it was just a new name for her benefit and that nothing else would change from the IS regime.

Across the board there was no clear understanding of the ESA regime **beyond** knowing that sick notes and 'a medical' would be required. Lone parents were not aware of the WRAG and support group, or the details of the different assessments involved (the WCA and WFHRA) and what they were called. Interviewees in some cases felt that it would have been helpful to have had more and clearer information, for example, because they did not remember having the ESA process and the groups explained, or because they could not always read the information that they were given (due to literacy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) issues). As this information is given to lone parent customers in the run up to their eligibility ending it could perhaps be reinforced in a further interview once their ESA claim has started.

Understanding did not seem to improve once their claim for ESA began. For example, confusion about what benefit they were on was not uncommon; one lone parent appeared not to know what ESA was or why they were on it. Knowledge was normally restricted to knowing that there would be a 'medical' but with no clear understanding of what they would have to do afterwards, including no understanding that, if they were found Fit for Work in the WCA, they would either have to make an appeal, in order to continue claiming ESA, or that they would need to immediately claim JSA (see Section 3.5.2).

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6 An issue related to how Jobcentre Plus was working with lone parents with a medical condition as part of LPO was identified, which resulted in changes to LPO processes that came into effect on 31 August 2009. Under the new processes, lone parents receiving IS, and 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 being advised to apply for ESA.

7 Medical certificates which were universally referred to as 'sick notes' and from April 2010 have become fit notes.

This contrasts with the findings that those claiming JSA had a good general understanding of the requirements of the JSA regime (see Section 3.4.2). However, it is in line with the early findings from the ESA evaluation, which found a theme running through all stages of the customer journey was an information deficit, with lone parent customers somewhat unclear about how each stage worked (Barnes *et al*., 2010).

4.4 Making an ESA claim

Customers making a claim for ESA have to show that they have limited capability for work by providing a medical certificate. If a customer is making a new claim they first phone Jobcentre Plus. Lone parent customers whose IS eligibility is due to end can fill out a benefit switching form with their adviser's help to make a claim for ESA. Customers who have made a claim for ESA are then asked to complete an ESA50 form which requires them to fill in details about their illness or disability, and their support and treatment, before undertaking a WCA.

Generally, lone parent customers had a straightforward journey directly from IS onto ESA, with advisers helping them through the benefit switching process or by making a new claim themselves. Lone parent customer journeys off ESA were more difficult. Some lone parent customers experienced payment gaps after their ESA claim ended when they had been found Fit for Work and before their JSA claim began (see Section 3.4.2), and one was experiencing this gap when interviewed (see Section 5.2.4).

Experiences of making an ESA claim varied. For some interviewees the claim process was very straightforward. These lone parent customers had no problems with phoning the contact centre where they were making a new claim themselves, and applications were in place so that there was no gap between payments for IS ending and payments for ESA beginning. This tallies with the early findings from the ESA evaluation which found that customers generally reported finding the initial claim to be relatively unproblematic (Barnes *et al*., 2010).

However, for others, including some of those who had gone through the benefit switching process, problems occurred during the claim process that were usually caused by paperwork (including sick notes) going missing, leading to payments being stopped and subsequent periods of financial hardship. The issues of having to speak to different people at contact centres and the cost of phone calls from mobile phones (particularly when chasing missing payments by phone), as well as the cost of sending in or taking sick notes to Jobcentre Plus were also raised.

In terms of payment gaps, lone parent customers' confusion when describing their journey off IS meant that it was sometimes difficult to disentangle the switch to fortnightly payments (that other benefit claimants were going through) from payment gaps caused by problems in the ESA claim process. Interviewees were not always sure why their benefit income had gone up and down in this period. However, it was clear that there were a number of payment gaps **beyond** the shift to fortnightly payments, as lone parent customers reported gaps that were most often between three and seven weeks, and in one case a lone parent customer reported having had a gap of three months. Payment gaps were caused when sick notes were lost (or delayed in the Christmas post). Payment gaps could also result when lone parents were not aware that they had to continue to send in sick notes as a condition of receiving ESA, as discussed above.

A number of strategies were used to get benefits reinstated and to avoid this happening again – for example, one lone parent had begun to take her sick note into the local Jobcentre Plus office to get a stamped receipt from them to say they had received it, and was doing this regularly. Another

lone parent customer had been through the benefit switching process with his adviser and then discovered he had not received the benefit payment, so went to his adviser who found the receipt to say he had handed in his sick note and phoned up on his behalf to sort it out. Another lone parent customer expressed frustration that she had reportedly been told that Jobcentre Plus would not accept a sick note being handed in by another person (she was unable to leave her house alone). She also reported being told that a fax was not acceptable as the date the sick note ran out could then be forged, but was worried that it would get lost if she posted it, as this had happened previously, leading to a payment gap. She had resolved this by going to the local Jobcentre Plus office, getting an adviser to phone the contact centre to make an appointment so she could then hand the sick note in at the Jobcentre Plus office, so that they could then fax it for her.

There were a number of interesting cases experienced by lone parent customers interviewed where payment gaps had not been caused by sick notes being lost. One reported a two-month payment gap caused by her delay in sending the ESA50 form in, as she reported being told to get proof from her employer of the hours she worked. The form was then lost when she did send it. Another reported that, having made her new claim over the phone, someone had cancelled her claim and she had to do it again face-to-face a month later.

Another interviewee came out of hospital on a Friday and was reportedly told that she had to take a sick note into the local Jobcentre Plus office on the Monday to make an ESA claim (having been on JSA when she went into hospital). A friend took her to the Jobcentre Plus office and when she arrived she was told that she would have to wait in a queue which she said made her feel very unwell. Her sick note was taken but her JSA payment was then backdated as her last JSA payment had not been received and this then automatically stopped her ESA claim. She reported that she was then advised she would have to phone every two weeks to ensure her claim remained open.

Payment gaps led to financial hardship. Interviewees often did not realise that there was a problem until they got their bank statement or went to the bank to find that money was not there. This led to one lone parent having a payment gap over Christmas which left her very distressed about how to afford to cook a Christmas meal for her children. It was not always clear whether these payments had subsequently been back-dated once the problem had been resolved. These findings are in line with evidence from the early findings of the ESA evaluation which found that after a smooth initial claim, some experienced delays in payments and found that documents had not been received by the Benefit Delivery Centre (BDC). This caused those affected considerable stress and, in some cases, financial hardship (Barnes *et al*., 2010).

After having made the initial claim for ESA, customers are required to fill in the ESA50 form and, while some found filling in the forms simple and straightforward, others had required some help. This help was often from family or friends, but interviewees had also received help from, for example, social workers, someone from a cancer charity at the hospital where they were receiving treatment, and from local advice centres. In a few cases lone parent customers volunteered the fact that they had needed help because they struggled with reading and writing. In one case a lone parent customer felt that her health condition did not easily fit her into claiming either JSA or ESA and reported that she had wanted to *'be honest'* on the ESA50 form and say that her condition fluctuated but had been advised by her social worker to fill in the forms by thinking of her condition on a bad day. The early findings from the ESA evaluation were also that many customers reported that they had struggled with the ESA50 form. The main complaints were over its length, its perceived complexity and customers' belief that it was unduly repetitious (Barnes *et al*., 2010).

4.5 Work Capability Assessment

The WCA should be delivered by the relevant DWP contractor within the first 13 weeks of a new ESA claim. It is carried out by an approved healthcare professional and should take around 40 minutes. There are questions around a number of activities that relate to physical health issues (such as bending or kneeling, hearing) and mental health issues (such as dealing with other people, coping with change). Each activity is broken down into a number of descriptors. Descriptors carry zero, six, nine or 15 points which relate to the degree of difficulty a person has in carrying out each task. A person has to score at least 15 points to be found to have limited capability for work. Scoring less than 15 points means being found Fit for Work and no longer eligible to claim ESA. Customers have one month after receiving a decision to appeal against an ESA decision that they are Fit for Work and those appealing are entitled to stay on the ESA basic rate (called the assessment rate) while they are appealing.

The latest official statistics (DWP, 2010a) for completed WCA assessments show that to the end of May 2010:

- ten per cent were placed in the support group;
- twenty-four per cent were placed in the WRAG;
- sixty-six per cent were found Fit for Work and their claim for ESA terminated.

The latest data on appeals show that 32 per cent of Fit for Work decisions had been appealed and heard by a tribunal by the end of November 2009. Of these, 40 per cent were found in favour of the customer.

Interviewees who had attended the face-to-face stage of the WCA described it as including questions about their physical and mental capabilities and physical examinations including, for example, some physical exercises such as bending and having their blood pressure taken. The face-to-face stage of the WCA was described by interviewees as taking between ten and 40 minutes, although usually described as being around 20 minutes to half an hour.

There was some dissatisfaction at having to deal with someone who did not know the details of their health condition as their own doctor did, and some did not feel comfortable discussing mental health issues with someone who was not their own doctor. One lone parent customer did not want to admit what she was not able to do because she feared that if she told about her situation she would risk having her children taken into care as they had to help care for her. She was, therefore, not completely honest in the face-to-face stage of her WCA and was subsequently deemed Fit for Work.

Lone parents interviewed in this research who had been, or were on, ESA fell into a number of groups when it came to the WCA:

- lone parent customers who had not got as far as the WCA (either before ceasing their ESA claim and claiming JSA, or who were on ESA and were awaiting the WCA at the time of interview);
- those who had had a WCA and were awaiting the decision;
- those who had the WCA, been deemed Fit for Work and who were appealing (which was by far the most common experience);
- those who had had the WCA, been deemed Fit for Work, who had not appealed and were now on JSA (see also Section 3.5.2);
- those who had had the WCA, been deemed as having limited capability for work and had been assigned to the WRAG.

In terms of reactions to the WCA, it was common for lone parent customers who had been deemed Fit for Work after the WCA to be shocked and upset, particularly at scoring zero points. Lone parent customers felt that their result meant that they had not been listened to during the face-to-face stage of the WCA. There were also concerns that the WCA did not adequately take into account fluctuating conditions. Lone parent customers were, therefore, advised, and sometimes helped, by doctors, Jobcentre Plus staff and social workers to appeal. One lone parent customer described how she had seen a copy of the report as part of her appeal process and that there was no mention of her talking about having taken an overdose in the past, even though she felt this was important. She also objected to other things that the healthcare professional had said in the report. Another lone parent felt that the face-to-face stage of the WCA was *'a physical medical, and it didn't take, you know, into account any mental health issues'* (ESA lone parent customer; North and East Yorkshire and the Humber) so appealed successfully and went into the WRAG. There were also cases described where lone parents had scored zero points and they felt this was wrong, based on how bad they felt their mental health issues had been and how suicidal they had felt, or that they did not feel able to leave the house alone.

These findings are in line with the early findings from the ESA evaluation which cited BDC staff, Jobcentre Plus and provider advisers expressing concerns at the perceived stringency of the WCA. The early findings from the ESA evaluation also found that, perhaps unsurprisingly, customers who had been found Fit for Work following the WCA were sometimes highly critical of the decision. Some of these customers were appealing and had sought help from advice organisations to do so. Other customers were less emotive and had more of a grudging acceptance of the decision. These tended to be those with a history of benefit claiming who then went (back) onto JSA (Barnes *et al.*, 2010).

While it was common for lone parents in this research who were deemed Fit for Work to end up appealing the decision, it was also common for interviewees who had been deemed Fit for Work after the WCA not to understand **initially** what to do at this point: that they either needed to appeal to reinstate their ESA claim or to make a claim for JSA. While these options are set out to ESA claimants in the letter giving them the result of the WCA, it appeared that these messages were not always understood. Interviewees were not asked specifically about their understanding of this letter, but when discussing the outcome of the WCA seemed to be more focused on the result in the letter than what it said about next steps for them.

Lone parent customers' lack of understanding led to gaps between benefit claims, and subsequent financial hardship, when lone parents had to rely on Child Benefit (ChB), Child Tax Credit (CTC), crisis loans or financial help from friends and families. Section 3.5.2 explores the transition from ESA to JSA after being deemed Fit for Work under the WCA. Some did not realise that their benefits would stop when they were deemed Fit for Work and there was also confusion about whether they could remain on ESA while appealing.[8] For example:

> *'It was the appeal that was going through because I knew I had to put a medical in every month – but then they stopped the benefit just completely out of the blue, bang, that's it, your benefit has stopped. And if it wasn't for me going to the doctor, and she says to me, "You still need the medical certificate while you're putting an appeal in", I wouldn't have been any the wiser because nobody wrote to me and said you must still send that medical every month too, even if you're going for the appeal.'*
>
> (ESA lone parent customer; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

[8] Individuals are entitled to receive ESA at the assessment rate while they wait for the outcome of their appeal.

A couple of interviewees (who were back on ESA or on JSA) reported initially having no income while appealing, even though they should have been able to receive the ESA assessment rate. Section 5.2.4 explores the experience of someone who was experiencing this gap at the time of interview through not claiming ESA while appealing her WCA decision. One interviewee had submitted an appeal just before Christmas and was worried about whether her money would stop if she failed in her appeal, but it was explained to her that she would still receive ESA up to the appeal decision and if she failed the appeal she would then have to make a claim for JSA.

As well as gaps between benefit claims leading to financial hardship, the appeals process was reported to be stressful (see Section 4.6).

4.6 Work Related Activity Group

For those allocated to the WRAG following the WCA, having been found to have limited capability for work, currently a WFHRA is carried out to explore customers' views about moving into work and what health-related support might help such a move. The coalition government announced that this would be suspended from 19 July 2010 for two years to give DWP/Jobcentre Plus an opportunity to reconsider its purpose and delivery. In this research only a handful of lone parents had been allocated to the WRAG. These lone parent customers had usually received a WFHRA but did not describe it as such but rather as a 'second medical' where they talked about what they could and could not do in terms of work. This tallies with the early findings from the ESA evaluation which found that customers were generally unaware of whether or not they had received a WFHRA as well as a WCA, viewing the medical as a single process (Barnes *et al.*, 2010).

After the WFHRA ESA claimants in the WRAG take part in a series of WFIs and may also receive other additional support (such as the condition management programme) delivered through Pathways to Work. DWP uses external contractors to lead delivery of Pathways to Work (beyond the first WFI delivered by Jobcentre Plus) in 60 per cent of Jobcentre Plus districts. In all of our case study areas Pathways to Work was delivered by external contractors. Pathways to Work will be folded into the Work Programme by summer 2011.

The purpose of a WFI delivered through Pathways to Work is to discuss the customer's views on returning to work and the package of support that may be required. Personal Advisers (PAs) will discuss the type of work that might be most suitable with the customer and can refer them for employment, training or condition management support, to help them manage and cope with their illness or disability in a work context. During these discussions the customer and PA might explore the customer's:

- job goals;
- skills, strengths and abilities;
- factors preventing them from finding work or limiting the work they can do, then helping them to overcome these barriers;
- ideas, problems and issues.

Customers in the WRAG may attend WFIs as they prepare to return to work at intervals that best meet their needs (at the time of this research being undertaken customers could attend up to six WFIs, at approximately monthly intervals).

While in this research only a handful of lone parents had been allocated to the WRAG, it was much more common than this would suggest to have had experience of WFIs under Pathways to Work. This is because lone parent customers often began the WFI regime either while waiting for their

WCA, while waiting to hear the outcome of their WCA, or while waiting for their appeal to be heard[9] having been found Fit for Work by the WCA (one lone parent customer we interviewed had just been asked to attend a WFI while appealing, but did not feel able to as she did not feel able to leave the house alone). Therefore, it was common for lone parents on ESA to have experienced WFIs under Pathways to Work. This is in line with the early findings from the ESA evaluation which found that delays in the system, especially regarding the WCA, meant that customers were not receiving a decision on their claim by the time of their second, or in some cases their third, WFI (Barnes *et al*., 2010). This was viewed by advisers in the ESA evaluation as a brake on engaging with work-focused activity, since customers generally feared that this would prejudice the outcome of their appeal (Barnes *et al*., 2010), and is also a concern that has been raised by providers delivering Pathways to Work (National Audit Office, 2010).

Whether interviewees had had one or more WFIs varied and, while some knew that they would be attending WFIs once a month for six months, others did not. In the case study area where there was a choice of Pathways to Work providers (North and East Yorkshire and the Humber) one interviewee recalled having a Jobcentre Plus adviser explain that they could choose which provider to go to. Interviewees described the content of WFIs as including: talking to their adviser about the kinds of work that they could manage with their health problem, doing an action plan, being offered help with their curriculum vitae and interview skills, being referred for training including classes for English as a second or other language and motivational/confidence building workshops, and being offered specialist support that was available for people with health problems, including physiotherapy and counselling.

In this research no lone parent customers reported taking part in permitted work. People who are receiving ESA can undertake permitted work – working up to 16 hours and earning up to £93 per week – to help them try work out and move closer to the labour market.

4.7 Effects of the ESA regime on lone parents' attitudes to work

4.7.1 Lone parent customers' attitudes to work

Many lone parents struggled financially to get by on benefits and it was common for lone parents on ESA to be in debt. This included a range of different types of debt and whether debt was seen as manageable also varied. Given the financial struggle on benefits, it was common for interviewees on ESA at the time of the interview to think that they would be financially better off in work, often after having had a Better Off Calculation, or based on past experiences of work. However, in some cases lone parents did not think that they would be better off, or thought that working would make no financial difference, or did not know whether they would be better off or not. However, the better off in work message was not a critical factor in lone parents' decisions about work, as the financial pull of work was secondary to the constraint of their health condition or disability (see Section 4.1).

Interviewees did, however, have aspirations to work in the future, for example, *'eventually I would like to be able to return to work'*. These aspirations were driven by the financial struggle and stigma associated with being on benefits, wanting to set a good example to their children, not wanting to be 'stuck at home', and wanting the positive effects of work for themselves such as increased self-esteem and contact with other adults. When asked what kinds of jobs they would like to do interviewees often appeared to have not given this much thought and jobs aspirations ranged from

[9] From 15 March 2010 those appealing against an ESA decision that they are fit for work do not have to take part in work-related activities such as WFIs while they are waiting for their appeal to be heard.

roles lone parents often move into, such as cleaning, retail, catering and caring, to career aspirations such as working with animals, being a Disc Jockey (DJ) or becoming a fashion designer. While aspirations to work in the future were expressed, lone parents were generally not actively looking for work when interviewed because they did not feel ready and able to work at that time because of their health. For example, in terms of work search activities, a lone parent customer said:

> *'At the moment I don't do anything, no. At this present time I'm looking after my health.'*
>
> *(ESA lone parent customer; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)*

Those who were carrying out some work search activities, were not doing so in an intensive manner. Typically this involved looking in local papers or shop windows and this group of lone parents often pointed out that they were only sometimes looking for work or would look only occasionally. Those engaged in Pathways to Work were engaged in work search activities as part of the programme (see Section 4.6).

4.7.2 The effect of the ESA regime on customer's attitudes to work

Generally, the ESA regime had not had any effect on lone parent customers' attitudes to work, as lone parents did not feel able to work because of their health (see Section 4.7.1). There was a good deal of dissatisfaction among interviewees towards the ESA regime (although this needs to be considered in the context of the common experience of appealing against their WCA decision). Lone parents found it stressful compared with being on IS, due to:

- having to go through the process of submitting sick notes[10];
- dealing with payment gaps when sick notes were lost;
- going through the WCA process;
- being found Fit for Work following the WCA and going through the appeals process.

There was a general view of not liking having to phone up and speak to a different person each time when trying to sort out benefit payment issues, especially where there were problems with missing sick notes. Payment gaps (see Sections 4.4 and 4.5) led to lone parent customers struggling financially and getting into further debt, often using crisis loans or family members for help. Dealing with this financial hardship was extremely stressful. Lone parent customers also found the WCA process itself stressful, and the appeals process caused a good to deal of anxiety and worry (see Section 4.4). Lone parent customers sometimes felt that the stress was making their health worse.

In contrast to the rest of the ESA regime, being on Pathways to Work and having the opportunity to see someone, with whom to discuss health issues and how they affected work, was generally seen by lone parents as helpful. One interviewee reported, for example, how they felt able to speak openly about their heroin addiction and did not feel 'pushed' into work. Another lone parent customer liked being able to discuss their ill health and felt that the Pathways to Work adviser *'talks you in to going into work'* (ESA lone parent customer; South East Wales). This was echoed by an interviewee who felt that Pathways to Work provided the right balance of not forcing you into work immediately but getting you to think about it and supporting you *'whereas IS they kind of left you....every six months your circumstances this week, fine, see you later'* (ESA lone parent customer; South East Wales). There was some evidence that the more intensive WFI regime available through Pathways to Work, than interviewees had experienced on IS, was increasing motivation to work for some, building their confidence to go back to work and useful for *'getting you in the mindset'*.

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[10] Although they may have had a health condition while claiming IS, being able to claim IS as a lone parent meant that they did not have to provide evidence of their health condition.

However, the fact that some lone parent customers were attending Pathways to Work WFIs while waiting for the results of their appeal[11] meant that the positive effects of Pathways to Work, through improving motivation, could be curtailed. For example, in one case, a lone parent was carrying out some work search activities, but was waiting for the result of her appeal before looking intensively. She said:

> *'Not 100 per cent. I sort of, I mean I get emails on a regular basis on different sorts of jobs...I looked at a couple and thought oh, that's tempting, and then I can't really, I don't want to do anything until I have actually heard whether this appeal is successful, and then obviously [if] they say no, we really believe you are fit for work, then I will start looking again wholeheartedly.'*
>
> (ESA lone parent customer; North and East Yorkshire and the Humber)

The early findings from the ESA evaluation also found that the large number of customers appealing was viewed by advisers as a brake on engaging with work focused activity, since customers generally feared that this would prejudice the outcome of their appeal (Barnes *et al*., 2010).

While support through Pathways to Work was generally seen by lone parents as helpful, some lone parent customers did not feel that the support was relevant, for example, one lone parent who was still recovering from cancer and did not yet feel ready to go back to work, or others who were unhappy about seeing a different adviser each time or reported becoming angry when it was suggested that they see a psychiatrist. Attending WFIs could be seen by some interviewees as just something that they had to do as a condition of receiving benefit.

4.8 Summary

- Lone parent customers who were on ESA at the time of the interview described their main barrier to work as overcoming their health problems/disabilities, and did not feel able/well enough to work when interviewed for this research.
- Lone parents reported hearing about ESA from their lone parent adviser in the run up to their IS eligibility ending and reported that advisers often recommended ESA where they knew the lone parent customer had health problems or disabilities.
- While it was common for lone parent customers to recall being told the basics of the ESA regime before they moved off IS (including having to send in sick notes and having 'a medical') this was not always the case. Lone parents were not aware of the WRAG and support groups or the details of the different assessments involved (the WCA and WFHRA) and what they were called. Understanding did not seem to improve once their claim for ESA began. Some lone parent customers described having gaps in their payment of ESA as they had not realised that they had to keep sending in sick notes as a condition of receiving the benefit.
- Generally, lone parent customers had a straightforward journey directly from IS onto ESA, with advisers helping them through the benefit switching process or by making a new claim themselves. Experiences of the claim process varied. For some interviewees the claim process was very straightforward. However, for others, including some of those who had gone through the benefit switching process, problems occurred that were usually caused by paperwork (including sick notes) going missing, leading to payments being stopped and subsequent periods of financial hardship.

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[11] From 15 March 2010 those appealing against an ESA decision that they are Fit for Work do not have to take part in work-related activities such as WFIs while they are waiting for their appeal to be heard.

- Those who had been deemed Fit for Work after the WCA usually appealed, although there were a few cases of lone parent customers who were not appealing and who had moved onto JSA. It was common for lone parent customers to feel shocked and upset, particularly at scoring zero points, and to feel that their result meant that they had not been listened to during the face-to-face stage of the WCA. Lone parent customers were advised by doctors, Jobcentre Plus staff and social workers to appeal.
- Lone parent customer journeys off ESA were more difficult than the journey onto ESA had been. While it was common for lone parents deemed Fit for Work to end up appealing the decision, it was also common for interviewees who had been deemed Fit for Work after the WCA not to understand *initially* what to do at this point: that they needed to appeal to reinstate their ESA claim or to make a claim for JSA. This led to gaps between benefit claims and subsequent financial hardship.
- In this research only a handful of lone parents had been allocated to the WRAG after undergoing a WCA and being found to have limited capability for work. However, it was common for lone parent customers to have experienced Pathways to Work because they often began the WFI regime before entering the WRAG: while waiting for their WCA, while waiting for the outcome of their WCA or while appealing a WCA decision that they were Fit for Work. There were no cases of lone parents in this research who had been allocated to the support group.
- Lone parents found the ESA regime stressful compared with being on IS, due to having to go through the process of submitting sick notes, dealing with payment gaps when sick notes were lost, going through the WCA process, being found Fit for Work following the WCA and going through the appeals process.
- Generally, the ESA regime had not had any effect on lone parents' attitudes to work, as lone parents did not feel able to work because of their health. However, seeing someone through Pathways to Work, and discussing health issues with them and how they affected work, was seen as helpful. There was some evidence that the more intensive WFI regime available through Pathways to Work than they had experienced on IS had increased motivation to work for some.

5 Experiences of other destinations

This chapter considers the experiences of lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15 who were not claiming Income Support (IS), Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), or working 16 hours or more per week at the time of interview in early 2010. Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative data show that, as of February 2010, of those lone parents on IS affected by phase 1 of the roll-out of the Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) who left IS:

- two per cent had re-partnered;
- two per cent had moved to another benefit or had some other known outcome;
- six per cent had an unknown immediate destination from IS.

For the six per cent where no immediate destination was known, a small number moved into employment, or had a JSA or ESA claim at a later date. Overall, the administrative data had no information about four per cent of all those who left IS, although some of this four per cent may have moved into employment.[12]

Evidence from the United States of America (USA) reports that a significant group of lone parents (around 20 per cent of leavers) became 'disconnected' after welfare reform, reporting no income from employment or from welfare, with some experiencing this status for a prolonged period (Finn and Gloster, 2010). To examine whether this was also an issue in the United Kingdom (UK) under LPO, 38 interviews with lone parents were completed who had 'other' or 'unknown' recorded as an immediate destination from IS in the administrative data. However, of these, only 11 were actually found to be at an 'other' destination by the time of interview (the remaining 27 having gone on to claim JSA, IS or ESA or moved into work). Alongside these 11 'other' destination interviewees, a further five[13] lone parents had initially moved directly from IS to either JSA, ESA or into work, but were found to be at an 'other' destination by the time of the interview.

A key finding of this research appears to be that most of the lone parents that the administrative data suggest had an immediate destination of 'other' or 'unknown', in actual fact move onto an out-of-work benefit or into work. Either these lone parents were not 'disconnected' or if they were, they experienced this only for a short period, or had re-partnered. The LPO survey, being carried out of the course of the evaluation, will also be able to shed further light on this.

The circumstances of these 16 lone parent customers who could be classified at an 'other' destination at the time of interview were extremely varied, and are described in turn below:

- some had re-partnered or reconciled with their former partner and so were no longer lone parents;
- some were not working and not claiming;
- some were claiming Incapacity Benefit (IB) due to a personal disability or health issue (the least common of the three groups).

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12 DWP's job entry statistics make use of the information given by lone parents when they leave benefits and Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs' (HMRC) P45 data.

13 Of these, two were JSA new and repeat claimants according to administrative data, one was a JSA from IS claimant, one was an ESA claimant and one was in work. They had all subsequently moved to an 'other' destination by the time of interview.

5.1 Lone parents who had re-partnered

Lone parents interviewed who had re-partnered or reconciled with their former partner had generally done so prior to the date they would have lost their IS eligibility because of the age of their youngest child. They had, therefore, closed their IS claim sooner than they would have needed to had they continued to be lone parents. Some were aware of LPO and the implications this would have had for them if they had remained lone parents, while others did not appear to be aware of the changes.

In terms of income, the re-partnered interviewees were generally reliant on either their partners' income from work or a joint benefit claim made by their partners. A small number received Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for a personal disability or health issue or worked part-time themselves. Generally, they felt they were managing financially though none reported having savings. The interviewees had limited contact with Jobcentre Plus though, in the main, they reported Jobcentre Plus staff as having been helpful and approachable in the dealings they had with them.

Some of the interviewees stated that they were actively looking for work, suggesting that they had always had a desire to eventually go back to work. They felt that the ending of their IS claim had not had an impact on or caused this:

> *'It didn't affect me. I was looking for work anyway.'*
>
> (Other destination lone parent customer; North and East Yorkshire and the Humber)

Some of those that had re-partnered, and were looking for work, were accessing Jobcentre Plus support on a voluntary basis and some had recently had a better off calculation when they were a lone parent, which they felt was helpful. Some of those who were not claiming because they had re-partnered were looking for work while others were not. One lone parent customer was receiving support with her work search through a course she had been referred to by Jobcentre Plus.

5.2 Lone parents not working and not claiming

A small number of the lone parents interviewed were not working and not claiming. This was because:

- they were not claiming because they were no longer eligible for benefits;
- they had chosen not to claim;
- they were in a transitional phase before claiming JSA;
- they should have been claiming ESA while appealing but were not.

5.2.1 No longer being eligible to claim benefits

In three cases lone parents were not claiming benefits because they were no longer eligible for benefits for reasons unrelated to LPO. In one case, the lone parent's main sources of income at the time of interview were child maintenance and Carer's Allowance for her son. This income combined with savings meant she was no longer eligible to claim IS. The interviewee had received IS for the first eight months after her marriage breakup but reported that she had then been told she should never have received this and her claim was stopped though she was not asked to repay the money. Her leaving IS was not, therefore, as a result of LPO.

In the second case, the lone parent's main source of income at the time of interview appeared to be child maintenance, alongside financial support such as Housing Benefit (HB), Council Tax Benefit (CTB), ChB and CTC. While this lone parent's main income was classified as child maintenance, she suggested that she often experienced issues with the payments being made late which affected her ability to pay direct debit bills. While there was some confusion from the interviewee about her benefits history and what she was currently claiming, it appeared that her IS eligibility had ended due to the level of child maintenance being received.[14] The interviewee indicated that she had been overpaid on IS because of an overlap of this and her child maintenance payments, and so was having to repay this. She felt that this was unfair as she felt she had always given Jobcentre Plus all the information they requested. Her leaving IS was not, therefore, as a result of LPO.

In the third case, the lone parent's main source of income at the time of interview was a student loan, which she was in receipt of for studying a full-time degree. This individual displayed some confusion over the reason her IS eligibility ended and her benefit claim history. She appeared to have been claiming IS in error while in receipt of a student loan and when her eligibility for IS ended tried to make a claim for JSA but was turned down because she was studying full-time and therefore, not available for work. She reported being told she would have to pay back IS received while a full-time student. Her leaving IS was not, therefore, as a result of LPO.

5.2.2 Choosing not to claim benefits

In one case, a lone parent had chosen not to claim benefits despite appearing to be eligible. Her main source of income since losing her eligibility to IS had been a part-time cleaning job which she had started while on IS, but she had lost the job due to redundancy just before Christmas and at the time of interview was looking for a new full-time job. In the meantime, the interviewee had chosen to move herself and her children in with family rather than try to make a benefit claim:

> *'I will get other work...I will never go back on benefits again...I'd rather have nothing.'*
>
> (Other destination lone parent customer; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

The underlying reason behind this determination to not claim appeared to be a bad experience in the latter stage of her IS claim, during which time she was also working in a mini-job. The interviewee reported that Jobcentre Plus were continually requesting payslips and other evidence of her mini-job and claimed that they then lost some of the payslips and suspended her benefits payments. The individual felt that having a mini-job and claiming benefits was made untenable and reported feeling 'forced off' benefits:

> *'It was every month they wanted something...then they would lose the stuff and I couldn't be bothered with it anymore. I was starting work at six o'clock in the morning, having to get away up there and it just didn't seem worth it. I would have rather kept the job than go back on to full benefits again.'*

This individual was aware of the financial advantages of working and felt that one positive of her experience was that it had helped her to encourage her children never to claim benefits. Despite being unhappy with the way in which her IS eligibility ended, she felt that losing her IS eligibility had been beneficial for her.

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[14] At the time of the research, child maintenance payments were taken into account when calculating IS payments, but since 12 April 2010 they are fully disregarded in income-related benefits.

5.2.3 Being in a transitional phase before claiming JSA

One lone parent was in a transitional phase before applying for JSA. This lone parent fostered children and in-between foster children had claimed JSA. This lone parent's most recent foster child had recently left and so she was planning to re-apply to JSA. In the meantime she indicated that she had been living off savings from her foster care allowance and the HB, CTB, ChB and CTC she had continued to receive throughout. This lone parent demonstrated confusion over her benefit history. She reported that her IS claim had ended in 2007 when her youngest child was eight but did not appear to know why, and her inclusion in our research sample means she must also have had an IS claim more recently but this was not recalled. She demonstrated no awareness of LPO and it was not clear from the interview why she was not classified as IS exempt while she was a foster carer. This interviewee demonstrated a dislike of claiming benefits and a desire to work.

5.2.4 Waiting for an appeal for ESA to be re-instated

The final lone parent, who was not working and not claiming benefits, was appealing her Work Capability Assessment (WCA) decision and should have been claiming the ESA assessment rate while appealing (see Section 4.4) but was not doing so as she appeared unaware that she was entitled. This interviewee felt that her options when her IS eligibility ended were not clear and that she did not get enough information on ESA and was just told to call to apply for it. She did not appear to be aware of the process in advance of going through it and stated that she found the forms difficult to complete and that she would have liked more advice and support during the process. She indicated that she did not feel any more inclined to look for work now and was not sure whether she would be better off in work. While awaiting the outcome of her appeal, this interviewee reported struggling financially and had borrowed from family, and applied for a crisis loan from Jobcentre Plus. She reported that she was not happy she had been moved off IS and would have liked to remain on it. The interviewee did not demonstrate any awareness of her options should her ESA appeal fail nor indicated that she had considered what she would do at this stage. Section 4.4 explores the issue of lone parents having a payment gap while appealing their WCA decision in more detail.

5.3 Lone parents on IB

A small number of the lone parents interviewed reported receiving IB due to disability. It was very difficult to determine from these interviews whether lone parents were in fact receiving IB or were confusing it with other benefits.

In two cases, the lone parents reported being on IB for mental health issues. Neither of these lone parents demonstrated any awareness of LPO or why they had been moved onto IB rather than remaining on IS or transferring to ESA. In addition, neither appeared to have regular contact with the local Jobcentre Plus office nor indicated that Jobcentre Plus staff discussed work with them (suggesting that they may have been correct in reporting that they were on IB rather than IS, ESA or JSA). Both indicated they would like to work but felt they were not able to at the current time due to their mental health.

In the third case, the lone parent reported being on IB and higher rate DLA for physical mobility and mental health issues and also received Carer's Allowance for her son who was her carer. This

individual had previously been claiming IS with the disability premium but reported that she had been changed over to IB and DLA in August 2009.[15] While the transition from IS to IB appeared to have been smooth, the claim to DLA did not appear to be, with the interviewee indicating that there had been a three-month delay in her DLA claim starting as they had not received the paperwork. The interviewee was now receiving DLA but reported that it had only been backdated for part of the three-month gap. This lone parent did not demonstrate any awareness of the reasons behind her changing benefit claims. She believed she would be better off in work but did not currently feel able to work due to her physical and mental health.

5.4 Summary

- Evidence from the USA reports that a significant group of lone parents have become 'disconnected', reporting no income from employment or from welfare, with some experiencing this status for a prolonged period. This research found that lone parents reported as going to an 'other/unknown' destination either were not 'disconnected' or if they were, they experienced this only for a short period or had re-partnered.
- The circumstances of the lone parent customers who could be classified as in an 'other' destination at the time of interview were extremely varied: some had re-partnered or reconciled with their former partner and so were no longer lone parents, some were not working and not claiming and, less commonly, some were claiming IB due to a personal disability or health issue.
- Where lone parents had re-partnered or reconciled with their former partner, they reported closing their IS claim as soon as they re-partnered in the run up to the ending of their IS eligibility.
- It was difficult to determine whether lone parents who reported receiving IB were in fact receiving IB, or were confusing it with other benefits.
- Lone parents who were not working and not claiming at the time of interview had a range of circumstances: they were not claiming because they were no longer eligible for benefits for reasons other than the age of their youngest child; had chosen not to claim; were in a transitional phase before claiming JSA; or were appealing their WCA decision but were not claiming ESA while appealing.

[15] This should not have happened as, after the introduction of ESA in October 2008, no new applications to IB should have been made. This customer may in fact have been on ESA as she reported receiving a letter explaining that she had been incorrectly transferred off IS before 31 August 2009 and had the option of returning to IS because of her health problems (see Chapter 6 for an explanation of this issue).

6 Experiences of remaining on Income Support

In February 2010, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative data show that 27,400 lone parents with children aged 12 to 15 remained on Income Support (IS). The majority of these were exempt from Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) because they were also claiming Carer's Allowance (CA) (63 per cent). Less than one per cent were exempt because they were a foster parent or because their child received middle or higher rate Disability Living Allowance (DLA). The remainder were on IS for reasons other than an exemption:

- because they had a health condition or disability (five per cent);
- because they are scheduled to lose their IS eligibility during phase 2 of LPO (18 per cent);
- because of some other or unknown reason (13 per cent).[16]

This chapter considers the experiences of 28 lone parent customers who had a youngest child aged 12 to 15 and were claiming IS at the time of interview. It includes information from 16 interviews with lone parents who were showing as still claiming IS according to administrative data and a further 12[17] lone parent customers whom the administrative data showed as going to another immediate destination who were also claiming IS at the time of interview. The reasons for lone parent customers interviewed remaining on IS were varied:

- some were exempt from LPO (as they were in receipt of CA, had children on middle or higher rate DLA or had a foster child living with them);
- some were not exempt from LPO but remained on IS for other reasons (including disability or health issues, transitional protection, having another child, and delays in the ending of IS claims).

Each of these is discussed in turn below.

6.1 Lone parents exempt from their IS eligibility ending

One group of interviewees claiming IS at the time of interview were clearly exempt from LPO. Some of these lone parent customers were exempt as they were carers in receipt of CA. Some cared for a child because they had a disability such as autism, Down's syndrome, cerebral palsy or insulin-dependent diabetes. Others cared for another relative such as a parent, sibling or grandchild. In a small number of cases, the lone parent was in receipt of CA for caring for a non-relative such as a non live-in partner. Other reasons for exemption found among those interviewed included lone parent customers who were not in receipt of CA but who had a dependent child on the middle or higher rate of DLA and lone parent customers who were foster carers.

16 In some instances it could simply be that advisers had yet to deal with their case. However, they might also have been deemed exempt prior to the introduction of IT changes that allowed advisers to record this fact.

17 Of these, nine were in other or unknown destinations, two were JSA new and repeat claimants and one was a JSA from IS claimant, according to the administrative data.

6.1.1 Awareness of LPO

Levels of awareness about LPO were good among those on IS who were exempt. Generally, the lone parents interviewed who had remained on IS due to claiming CA had been told about the changes and had also been made aware that they were exempt and the reason why. All the lone parents interviewed who had remained on IS due to fostering were aware that they were exempt and why this was. A typical comment was:

> *'I've been told about it but I've been told it wouldn't affect me because I'm caring for my son.'*
>
> (IS lone parent customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

However, there were a couple of cases where lone parents indicated that they were told at one Jobcentre Plus interview about LPO but only found out at a later interview that they were in fact exempt. For example:

> *'They told me I'd be getting Jobseeker's Allowance and my Income Support would change to Jobseeker's and they'll do it around June, but when I went back this time they said we'll leave it just the way it is.'*
>
> (IS lone parent customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

There were also a limited number of lone parents who were exempt due to claiming CA who did not appear to have any awareness of the LPO or their exemption at the time of interview and who did not recall having any conversations with Jobcentre Plus about if, and when, they would need to move off IS.

6.1.2 Lone parent customer journeys

In terms of the benefit experience, generally lone parents interviewed who were exempt from LPO had simply remained on IS after their youngest child reached the current LPO age threshold and so had experienced no benefit transition. It was rarer for interviewees to report that they had left IS due to LPO and moved into work or onto Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), then recently returned to IS because they had become exempt since being subject to LPO, due to taking on caring responsibilities. For those lone parent customers, the process of transitioning between benefits was generally described as straightforward and clear. However, interviewees could be mis-advised. For example, in one case, a lone parent in receipt of CA for her son appeared to have been erroneously transferred off IS onto JSA despite bringing her exemption to staff attention:

> *'There should be some serious training because they don't know what they're talking about. She says you won't get [IS] because Scott's 13. I said, but Scott gets DLA money and I'm his carer. No, you're not entitled to it. So I think that's how I got onto JSA. My friends were saying you're entitled to IS but you listen to the people at the Jobcentre.'*
>
> (IS lone parent customer; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

This interviewee reported later seeing a manager at the local Jobcentre Plus office who rectified her IS claim, backdated it, and suggested she would investigate how she had received this advice in the first instance. In another case, an interviewee was appropriately moved onto JSA from IS when her youngest child reached 12 but, when her father became ill and she became his carer in receipt of CA, she was advised that although she would not have to look for full-time work she would have to remain on JSA rather than move back to IS:

> *'I go "I can't show you any proof that I'm looking for jobs while I've been busy looking after my dad so can I go onto IS for the time being?" He wasn't sure, he called his manager and he goes, "No you just carry on but we won't make you look for full-time".'*
>
> (IS lone parent customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

This interviewee reported later receiving advice about her entitlement to IS from a friend who also gave her the number for the contact centre where she spoke to someone who reinstated her IS claim.

In another case, the lone parent was in receipt of CA for caring for her father but was currently in the quarterly Work Focused Interview (WFI) process and reported she had been given a date next year (when her youngest child turns 14) when she would be moved off IS. The interviewee did not understand why her exemption would no longer apply at that time and reported that Jobcentre Plus would not explain to her why this decision had been made:

> *'Unless they know that my father's going to pop his clogs in 2011, I don't know. Neither do the Citizens' Advice Bureau.'*
>
> (IS lone parent customer; North and East Yorkshire and the Humber)

While these examples need to be considered in the context of the common experience of exemptions being correctly identified and dealt with by Jobcentre Plus staff, they do illustrate that there is some variation in practice and that some lone parent customers are possibly experiencing issues with Jobcentre Plus staff not dealing with exemptions appropriately.

Exempt lone parents interviewed typically reported attending the local Jobcentre Plus office for a WFI once every six months (as all lone parents on IS are required to do). However, examples were also given of yearly and quarterly WFI appointments. Where interviewees commented on Jobcentre Plus staff, they generally suggested the advisers were approachable and helpful. Views on the attitudes of Jobcentre Plus security staff and floor staff were often more negative, however. Some exempt interviewees saw the same adviser on each visit but this was not consistent across all interviewees; some saw different advisers. Those who saw the same adviser felt this was beneficial as they did not have to repeat their story at each interview and those who did not see the same adviser suggested they would prefer this consistency.

6.1.3 Caring responsibilities

There was a general perception among interviewees in receipt of CA that their role as carers was not something they had chosen but something they felt obligated to do due to circumstances. There were no indications among interviewees that they had chosen to care for a relative to gain exemption from IS. In addition, in some cases interviewees had an 'underlying entitlement' to CA but did not actually receive any CA payments due to the level of their IS, which resulted in their being no better off financially than when not caring. These interviewees indicated that they had not been made aware that they would not gain any additional income when they applied for CA. While this did not appear to make any interviewees question their caring role, some did express dissatisfaction over this. For example, one lone parent who was entitled to receive a small amount of CA on top of her IS said:

> *'They'll give you £53 Carer's Allowance but because you're on IS they take that off your IS and then they give you £29. So all I get for looking after my dad a week is basically £29.'*
>
> (IS lone parent customer; North and East Yorkshire and the Humber)

6.1.4 Attitudes to work

Overall exempt interviewees who were still on IS felt that LPO had not affected their decisions about, and attitudes to, work. While some exempt lone parents interviewed had recent work history, others reported having been out of the labour market since they became parents over 13, and in some cases as many as 19, years ago. Those that had not worked since having children typically displayed

multiple barriers to work in addition to their reasons for exemption. Issues with confidence were common, with some interviewees appearing to have become institutionalised to a life on benefits:

> *'I started working the week after I finished school and I always maintained it was going to stay that way. Things didn't go to plan: the kids came along and my husband did work but we got divorced and that's how I ended up on* [IS]*. In the beginning, part of me really, really wanted to go back to work but I've got that used to my routine now that I think going back to work would just shock me completely.'*
>
> (IS lone parent customer; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Other perceived barriers to work among those who were exempt and who had not worked since having children included a lack of training or experience, a lack of jobs in the local area and a reluctance to use childcare for children with disabilities. Another, often raised, concern was whether they would be better off financially in work. Lone parents generally recalled having a Better Off Calculation (BOC) at the local Jobcentre Plus office but, while these had been useful for some interviewees, others reported that the calculation had indicated they would not be better off in work. Some who reported that the calculation indicated that they would be better off in work questioned the accuracy of this:

> *'They have worked it out for me at times and they say if I went back to work I'd be £100 better off. But when I've looked at it I can't see why it would because you'd get your wage in one hand and you'd pay extra in rent.'*
>
> (IS lone parent customer; North and East Yorkshire and the Humber)

Financial concerns in relation to working were linked to concerns about losing Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit and potentially having some childcare costs to meet.

Generally those who had worked more recently, while parents, were more likely to report looking for, or considering looking for, work. Reasons provided for why their last jobs had ended varied from being made redundant, through changes in circumstances, such as starting caring or fostering, or becoming a lone parent, to not being able to afford rent or childcare costs. For those who had worked recently, the perception was that they were better off financially in work. On the other hand those who had given up work due to rent or childcare cost issues were concerned that they would be financially worse off in work. Interviewees who had worked recently also tended to report other advantages of working such as the social aspect of work.

While some exempt interviewees suggested that their caring or fostering role precluded them from looking for work, others felt it did not, although these interviewees suggested the hours they could realistically look to work and the timing of those hours were affected by their caring or fostering responsibilities. Generally, exempt lone parents who were looking for work were looking for part-time work during school hours. There were some suggestions that support and advice from Jobcentre Plus during WFIs for exempt lone parents could be improved. One interviewee suggested this might be due to a perception from staff that carers do not want or need to work:

> *'I've never had any support at all to find work. I think it is a big issue. You've got a child who's got a disability, it's all about the child. They forget that you've got a life and you want a career and you want to go out and work, and be a part of the economy as well. They just think you've got this money coming in, you don't need to work. But why don't I want to work? So in terms of finding a job* [in the past]*, I've done it all myself.'*
>
> (IS lone parent customer; Birmingham and Solihull)

Another interviewee was aware that there were rules on levels of training and work that are permitted while in receipt of CA but was unclear of the details and expressed a desire to have these explained to her and written down. Other interviewees, however, felt that the support they received from Jobcentre Plus was more than adequate and felt able to get any support they wanted. Some lone parent customers who were not currently seeking work saw the support of the Jobcentre Plus as useful for the future. For example, a lone parent customer who was a carer said:

> *'Yeah, I've got to be honest, they have any support that I want. I can just go down there, speak to her...If I need to talk or anything, do you know what I mean? Any problems, worry about work and going back to work and things like that. '*
>
> (IS lone parent customer; South East Wales)

There were some instances of lone parent customers who reported receiving support from Jobcentre Plus in writing a curriculum vitae or interview skills. They felt that this was useful in preparing them for work in the future when their circumstances changed.

6.2 IS lone parents who are not exempt but remained on IS

Alongside lone parent customers with standard caring or fostering exemptions from IS, some lone parent customers were interviewed who were still claiming IS for reasons other than an exemption. These reasons can be grouped as follows: a personal disability or health issue, transitional protection due to studying full-time, having another child and experiencing a delayed transition.

6.2.1 On IS due to personal disabilities or health issues

A small number of lone parents interviewed were claiming IS due to personal disabilities or health issues. An issue related to how Jobcentre Plus were working with lone parents with a medical condition in LPO was identified in 2009, which resulted in changes to LPO processes from 31 August 2009. Under the new processes, lone parents receiving IS, who had a disability or health condition and provided medical evidence of this, could continue to receive IS. Previously lone parent customers meeting these criteria were being transferred to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and were, therefore, given the option of transferring back to IS. From 30 December 2009 once the regulations had been changed, lone parents on IS with a health condition were no longer eligible to remain on IS for this reason, and were likely to be encouraged to claim ESA.

Awareness about LPO was mixed in this group of interviewees, with some clearly aware of LPO and their exemption due to a health condition and others unaware of the changes and any potential implications or exemptions for them.

Generally, the lone parents interviewed still claiming IS due to personal disabilities or health issues had remained on IS once their youngest child turned 12 and had not made the transition off IS. In one case, however, a lone parent had left IS due to LPO when her youngest child reached 12 and moved onto JSA for five weeks, only to subsequently be transferred back onto IS after qualifying for a temporary period of DLA due to having operations. This interviewee reported that the benefit transitions she experienced were smooth and suggested that she did not have to fill out any forms. In another case, a lone parent who was three years from retirement age reported being advised by her Lone Parent Adviser that her IS eligibility was due to end and that she should call the contact centre to apply for ESA but that she was subsequently advised by the contact centre to remain on IS:

'I phoned ESA and they told me I'm so close to retirement that it wouldn't be worth their while transferring me over and I was better off staying where I was...and if anyone tried to make me change they would stop it.'

(IS lone parent customer; South East Wales)

Lone parents interviewed who were on IS for medical reasons typically reported attending the local Jobcentre Plus office once every six months for WFIs. All reported seeing different advisers at different appointments and there was some suggestion that this was detrimental as it meant having to repeat the same things on every visit. However, Jobcentre Plus staff were generally found to be approachable, though some lone parent customers felt staff attitudes and service varied from staff member to staff member.

This group of interviewees had low levels of work history; the majority had been out of the labour market since having children or, in some instances, had no work history at all. Alongside health as a barrier to work, lone parent customers in this group also expressed concerns about confidence and a perception they would not be better off in work, similar issues to those raised by ESA lone parent customers (see Section 4.1). One exception was a lone parent customer from South East Wales who was working in a mini-job of 7.5 hours per week spread over five days and had been doing so for three years. While this lone parent customer felt working any additional hours would be untenable due to her physical disability, she felt the mini-job did much good, including giving her a reason to get up each day and a distraction from her pain. The lone parent customer was not aware whether the mini-job was financially beneficial or not and indeed suggested she had not checked as she enjoyed the job and wished to continue regardless. No lone parent customers in this group were looking for or considering looking for work (or an extension of hours of work in the case of the individual in a mini-job) and some suggested that because of this, attending the local Jobcentre Plus office for six monthly appointments was not a worthwhile use of Jobcentre Plus staff time:

'I feel the way things are with myself personally that it isn't worth me taking up that time. I feel as though that time should be spent with somebody that could do with a job and need the help.'

(IS lone parent customer; South East Wales)

6.2.2 On IS due to transitional protection

Only one lone parent customer interviewed had transitional protection for full-time study. This individual was in the final year of a full-time Level 3 course and reported that she attended an interview at the local Jobcentre Plus office during which she was informed her IS claim would be ended. She indicated that following this meeting she was advised by a friend that she was eligible for transitional protection until the summer when her course ended and so she researched this and got back in touch with Jobcentre Plus. The lone parent customer reported that transitional protection did end up being applied but indicated that there was staff confusion while she was arguing her case:

'I had a lady first for my lone parent adviser but she didn't understand so they had to pass me onto somebody else to say yes I'm eligible to stay on.'

(IS lone parent customer; South East Wales)

The lone parent customer was aware that her IS eligibility would end when her course ended, and that she would need to look for work at that time and claim JSA during any interim period. She felt that losing her IS eligibility would motivate her more to get a job.

This case illustrates that not all Jobcentre Plus staff are clear about transitional protection and its application.

6.2.3 On IS due to having a baby

An issue of concern raised by staff was that lone parent customers were having additional children in order to prevent their IS eligibility ending and avoid having to seek work or move onto the JSA regime (see Section 3.16). There is no evidence from lone parent customer interviews in this study that lone parent customers who had another child in the year before their IS eligibility is due to end were doing so in order to maintain their IS eligibility for a longer period. Furthermore, fertility rates amongst lone parent IS customers are being monitored by DWP, so that any such trends can be identified.

In our research with customers, only one lone parent customer had given birth to another child by the point of interview and no customers were pregnant at the time of interview. The lone parent customer who had had another child reported that she was already pregnant before she heard about LPO and was not told she would remain on IS, but instead only found out at a WFI attended just after giving birth.

This lone parent had a strong work history and had worked for the majority of her time as a parent, only giving up her last job three years ago when her childcare arrangements fell through. She reported disliking the stigma of claiming benefits and said she would like to go back into work or training once her youngest child started school. It was suggested by the interviewee that her reason for wanting to wait until her child started school before returning to work was not because she believed nursery would not be suitable for her daughter, but because she had found nursery costs too high in the past, even with 80 per cent of those costs covered by Working Tax Credit. For the same reason, the interviewee suggested she would ideally be looking for work that fitted within school hours. She recalled having a received a BOC a long time ago and suggested that she would welcome receiving another now, that took into account childcare costs.

6.2.4 IS lone parents with a delayed transition

A small number of individuals were interviewed who appeared to have been due to lose their IS eligibility once their youngest child reached 12 but who were still receiving IS at the time of interview despite their youngest children having passed this age threshold. The circumstances of these interviewees were varied and it is not possible to draw common themes.

One interviewee with a youngest child aged 13 was aware of LPO and had been provided with a date when her IS would end but there was no ascertainable reason why the ending of her IS eligibility had been delayed. This individual reported that having to move off IS would be ‘a kick start to go and do something’. The individual reported that she looks after her disabled mother and reported that Jobcentre Plus staff had suggested she apply for CA, but she had not and did not appear to be aware that successful receipt of this would mean she would be eligible to continue to claim IS.

Another interviewee was aware of LPO but had not yet been informed of when he would lose IS eligibility despite his youngest child being past the age of 12. This individual was undertaking voluntary work since his business failed 18 months ago and welcomed the extended stay on IS as this allowed him the flexibility to continue volunteering. However, the interviewee was keen to enter paid employment again and was hopeful the voluntary work would lead to a paid role in time.

A third interviewee had a youngest child aged 13 and no obvious reason for remaining on IS. In addition, and in contrast to the other two cases, this interviewee did not demonstrate any awareness of the changes nor the implications for her.

These interviewees could be examples of administrative oversight in the IS ending and benefit switching process. There is also the possibility that some or all of these interviews have other reasons for their continued IS claim or delayed IS eligibility ending, but if this was the case, those reasons were not apparent to the interviewees themselves as none were expressed during detailed exploration of their circumstances and benefit claims.

6.3 Summary

- DWP administrative data show that almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of those remaining on IS were exempt from LPO due to claiming CA. Less than one per cent were exempt because they were a foster parent or because their child received middle or higher rate DLA. The remainder were on IS for reasons other than an exemption: because they had a health condition or disability (five per cent), they are scheduled to lose their IS eligibility during phase 2 of LPO (18 per cent), or because of some other or unknown reason (13 per cent).
- Levels of awareness about LPO were good among those on IS who were exempt. Generally, the lone parents interviewed had been told about the changes and had also been made aware that they were exempt and the reason why.
- In a small number of cases, interviewees reported that they had left IS because of LPO and moved into work or onto JSA. Then they had recently returned to IS because they had become exempt (since being subject to LPO) because they had taken on caring responsibilities.
- There were no indications among interviewees that they had chosen to care for a relative to gain exemption from LPO.
- Exempt interviewees felt that LPO had not affected their decisions about, and attitudes to, work. While some interviewees suggested that their caring or fostering role precluded them from looking for work, a number felt it did not, although these interviewees suggested the hours they could realistically look to work and the timing of those hours were affected by their caring or fostering responsibilities.
- Only one lone parent customer interviewed had transitional protection for full-time study. This individual was in the final year of a full-time Level 3 course and her case illustrates that not all Jobcentre Plus staff are clear about transitional protection and its application.
- Some staff expressed a concern that lone parent customers may be having children to avoid LPO but there was no evidence of this among those interviewed. None were pregnant at the time of the interview and the one person who had had a child was pregnant before the relevant change.
- A small number of individuals were interviewed who were still receiving IS at the time of interview despite their youngest children having passed the age threshold. These interviewees could be examples of administrative oversight in the IS ending and benefit switching process.

7 Conclusions and 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 lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15 (the first group to be affected by the roll-out of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO), examining the destinations of these lone parents three to 11 months after their Income Support (IS) eligibility on the basis of their being a lone parent came to an end. The research focused on:

- findings in relation to lone parents who had moved off IS and into work of 16 hours or more per week (Chapter 2);
- findings from the second of three waves of qualitative work evaluating the Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) regime for lone parents. This study focused on the lone parents who have been on JSA for three to 11 months who have moved from IS, or who are new and repeat claimants of JSA, to see how lone parent customers are adapting to the JSA regime requirements (Chapter 3);
- lone parents' experiences of claiming Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and the effectiveness of this regime for lone parents (Chapter 4);
- experiences of lone parents who were at an 'other' destination at the time of interview, as they were not claiming IS, JSA or ESA , or working 16 hours or more per week (Chapter 5);
- experiences of lone parents who were claiming IS at the time of interview, either because they were exempt from LPO or were claiming IS for other reasons (Chapter 6).

This chapter revisits the research aims and questions, considers how the findings provide evidence to help answer them, and suggests recommendations for the next phases of roll-out.

7.1 Effects of LPO on lone parents

7.1.1 Lone parent customer journeys and destinations post-LPO

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative data show that, as of February 2010, 83 per cent of lone parents on IS affected by phase 1 of the roll-out of LPO (with a youngest child aged 12 to 15) had left IS. Of those who left IS:

- sixteen per cent moved straight into work of 16 hours per week or more;
- fifty-six per cent moved onto JSA;
- eighteen per cent moved onto ESA;
- two per cent had re-partnered;
- two per cent moved to another benefit or had some other known outcome;
- six per cent had an unknown immediate destination from IS.

Following the ending of IS eligibility on the basis of being a lone parent, the majority of the lone parents moved onto either JSA, ESA or into work. Smaller numbers of lone parents re-partnered, moved into a 'not working and not claiming' destination, moved onto Incapacity Benefit (IB) or remained on IS.

DWP administrative data also show that, as of February 2010, 27,400 lone parents with children aged 12 to 15 remained on IS. Almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of those remaining on IS were exempt from LPO due to claiming Carer's Allowance.

The numbers of lone parents interviewed in different destinations for this research was based, in part, on these national statistics available at the time of sampling.

While some lone parent customers interviewed had only experienced a single destination since their youngest child reached the LPO age threshold, others had experienced two or more destinations in the period since leaving IS and being interviewed for this research. This was particularly common in cases where lone parent customers leaving IS moved first to an 'unknown' or 'other' destination (that is, not JSA, ESA or work of 16 hours or more per week). By the point of interview, the majority of such lone parent customers had moved onto JSA, ESA or into work. It should be borne in mind, therefore, that administrative data showing lone parents moving to unknown and other immediate destinations is capturing these individuals who experience benefit gaps and more complex transitions to typical destinations, and not just those who have actually moved to unknown and other destinations.

The journeys between different benefits or between benefits and work that lone parent customers experienced were wide-ranging and disparate. While many interviewees exempt from LPO had simply remained on IS, others who were exempt and on IS by the time of the interview had experienced transitions off IS to work or other benefits before moving back on to IS. Some interviewees claiming JSA at the time of interview had made the transition directly from IS while others had experienced intermediate destinations such as work or ESA. Those on ESA had generally made the transition directly from IS, while those in work had either moved into employment straight from IS or had initially moved onto JSA and subsequently secured work. While many of those in other destinations had moved directly from IS to their other destination (re-partnering, IB, student, etc), others had experienced more complex journeys with multiple transitions.

Some recurrent themes emerged from these different lone parent customer journeys. Where benefit transitions were completed as a benefit switching process by Jobcentre Plus staff on behalf of lone parent customers (typically from IS to JSA and IS to ESA) the transition was generally reported to have been smooth and benefit payments continuous. However, where lone parent customers were required to make a new benefit claim (often to JSA after an unsuccessful ESA claim, or where employment had ended) more problems were reported. These included issues around awareness of how to claim, the cost of calling the contact centre to make a claim and delays in payments starting. There was evidence of some potentially unnecessary journeys by customers (for example, moves from one benefit to another and moves onto one particular benefit where another would be more suitable) and some examples of possible misadvice from Jobcentre Plus staff, which were most likely to be experienced by lone parent customers who were exempt from LPO. Complex and difficult journeys were most likely to be experienced by lone parent customers who had moved from IS to ESA. While the benefit switching process from IS to ESA was generally reported to be smooth, lone parent customer journeys through the ESA regime were often more complex and ESA was also more commonly experienced as an interim destination than other destinations.

While some lone parent customer journeys and destinations were strongly correlated with particular lone parent customer circumstances, for example, carers typically remaining on IS, the research also found some groups of lone parent customers with similar circumstances who had experienced very disparate journeys. This was most apparent in the case of lone parent customers with medical conditions. These lone parent customers could find themselves in one of a number of different situations:

- having been transferred from IS to ESA and were claiming ESA at the time of interview;
- having been transferred from IS to ESA but been found Fit for Work following the assessment process and so had left ESA and made a new and repeat JSA claim or were in a benefit gap
- having been transferred from IS to IB; or
- having been given the option to remain on IS at present.

7.1.2 The effect of LPO on lone parents' attitudes to work

Where LPO appears to have made an impact on attitudes to work is among lone parent customers who have moved onto JSA directly from IS. While JSA lone parent customers who were new and repeat claimants following a period of employment generally suggested that the effect on them had been minimal, as they were already motivated to find work, there was some evidence that JSA lone parent customers who had transferred from IS did not like the JSA regime compared with their experience of IS, which in turn gave them a 'push' towards work. This reflects the active, jobseeking nature of this benefit. In addition, some JSA lone parents who had transferred from IS suggested that in the past they had not wanted to consider work because their child or children were too young for them to feel comfortable leaving them, and that now their child or children were older and more independent they were wanting to look for and move into work. Positively changing attitudes towards work among JSA lone parents may, therefore, be a result, not just of the increased conditionality LPO and the JSA regime bring, which act as a 'push factor', but also of the increasing age of lone parent customers' children in some instances. It may be, therefore, that some of those who moved into work would have done so without LPO because their children were getting older.

JSA lone parent customers who had moved onto JSA following an unsuccessful ESA claim tended to display attitudes to work more akin with those claiming a health-related benefit or IS due to exemption than with those claiming JSA following IS or work. Where lone parent customers who had moved to JSA from ESA did express a desire to work, their career aspirations were often less clear and realistic than those of lone parents who have moved onto JSA from IS or work. However, many of the lone parent JSA claimants interviewed who had made the transition via ESA would not have been claiming JSA (and therefore, experiencing both the support and 'push' towards work this regime provides) for as long a period as those who made the transition directly from IS or work, and so this finding needs to be considered in light of this.

Interviewees with a significant medical condition or an LPO exemption were generally found to be furthest away from the labour market. Such lone parents were usually claiming ESA, IS or IB (though some lone parents who felt they had a significant medical condition had been found Fit for Work following the ESA assessment and moved onto JSA as discussed above). Most lone parent customers interviewed with a medical condition or an LPO exemption felt unable to work due to existing health reasons or caring commitments but, while some expressed a desire to work in future, others displayed no consideration of (or desire to) work in future. As would be expected, interviewees who only had temporary health issues or caring commitments were more likely to display positive and pro-active attitudes to working in future. Those with chronic medical conditions or long-term caring

commitments displayed a range of attitudes to future work despite as a group having ostensibly similar characteristics and barriers to work, suggesting that how individuals personally respond to their circumstances plays a major contributory role in their future likelihood to look for work alongside the level of barriers they face. This research did not suggest that those who are exempt from LPO because they are carers are any further from, or closer to the labour market than those with medical conditions. For lone parents on IS or IB, LPO did not appear to have affected their individual attitudes to work, which correlates with the inactive nature of these benefits. For those on ESA, the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) process and its outcome did not appear to motivate lone parents to work, and the stress and pressure that lone parents felt resulted from the ESA regime did not have the effect of 'pushing' lone parents into work as the JSA regime more often did.

There were mixed views from lone parents across all benefit destinations about whether they would be better off in work. Generally though, JSA lone parent customers who were new and repeat claimants following recent employment had been better off in work and so were well aware of the financial advantages of returning to work. Those who felt that they would not be better off were in a range of circumstances. Some had received a Better Off Calculation (BOC) showing they would not be better off in work due to their particular circumstances. Others had a previous experience of not being better off in work when in employment in the past. Finally, some had been on benefits for sustained periods of time and had a mistrust of the BOC they had received and a perception that they would not be better off, even if the calculation showed they would be. Anxiety, where expressed, was often in relation to losing the 'safety net' of Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB). The 'better off in work' message was not a strong one for those who did not feel able to work because of their health. For many lone parents who felt work would be beneficial however, the benefits they expected to gain were often far wider ranging than financial alone.

7.1.3 The experience of moving into work

Lone parents who had moved into work generally felt better off than when they were on benefits. While having a BOC was common, lone parents did not always feel in reality as 'better off' as their calculation had suggested, often due to the extra costs of being in work, such as travel to work, lunches and no longer receiving passported benefits, for example, children's free school meals. Those working 16 to 29 hours per week were much more likely to feel better off in work than those who worked for over 30 hours per week, reflecting the fact that lone parents were typically moving into low wage jobs and the effect of tapers in the tax credit system. The self-employed often did not feel much better off in work, but felt that this would change as their business built up (all had set up businesses in the past few months since LPO affected them).

Generally, lone parents who had moved into work in this study felt that working had a positive effect on their lives. The main reasons given for feeling happier and more confident were making friends at work, feeling self-reliant and that they were a valued member of society. While working was in the main a positive experience for interviewees, lone parents could find it stressful combining work and family responsibilities. A crunch time, for example, was when a child was sick and the lone parent had to juggle work and caring responsibilities. This was particularly an issue where lone parents had children with health problems. In the main, however, lone parents balanced work and family life by working during school hours and felt that working while they had children was less of an issue than it once would have been now that their children were older.

Lone parent customers reported positive effects on their children of their working, including: the opportunity to go on school trips and have Christmas presents because of extra family income,

observing the good example of a working parent, and greater independence. Lone parents who felt that their children were too old for childcare still had concerns around the effects of leaving their children at home alone when working in the evenings or in school holidays.

Working in 'mini-jobs' of fewer than 16 hours per week while claiming benefits was often also felt by lone parent customers to be very beneficial, providing an experience of work and a routine that could help prepare them for moving into work of 16 hours per week or more, and often benefiting their mental and physical health. However, the process of giving evidence of mini-jobs appeared to have put some lone parents off doing them. While on IS or JSA, some lone parent customers found that having to evidence their mini-jobs by continually providing payslips was 'too much hassle' and there were examples given of payslips getting lost, which led to benefit claims being closed.

It is recommended that to encourage more lone parents to move into work the following is considered:

- Encourage lone parents to work in mini-jobs as a stepping stone to work of 16 hours per week or more by improving the process by which they provide evidence of their employment.

7.1.4 Managing finances on benefits and in work

A number of issues were raised in this research relating to how lone parent customers managed their finances on benefits and in work. Lone parent customers across the different post-LPO destinations had limited receipt of child maintenance from former partners. It was also rare for lone parent customers to have any savings, although some of those in work used In Work Credit (IWC) to save for holidays/Christmas presents. It was not always the case that lone parent customers had friends or family that they could turn to in a financial emergency, particularly as the recession and its aftermath meant that friends and relatives were often in a similar financial position with 'everyone being in the same boat' financially. Even for those that did have access to such support, the support was often limited in amount.

Whether lone parents were in debt also varied across destinations, with no link emerging between a customer's benefit journey or post-LPO destination and their level of debt. It was common for lone parent customers to have debts of some kind, although some interviewees displayed a strong personal aversion to debt and these lone parents had managed to remain debt-free. For those in debt, whether this debt was seen as manageable or not varied dependent on the amount of debt and the individual's attitude to debt. Stresses were put on finances and debts were accrued due to a number of changes in lone parents' circumstances. Breakdowns of past relationships could leave lone parents in debt, as could the move from work back to benefits. Coping with reduced income in both circumstances led to lone parents having to deal with budgeting to manage their money more carefully and cut down on expenditure. Transitions from benefits to work or work to benefits could lead lone parent customers into financial difficulty where problems with claiming HB led to rent arrears and considerable worry for lone parents, as debts increased and their housing security felt under threat.

Those who were in work seemed to be managing their finances well, often assigning various 'pots' of income for different expenditure, for example, using tax credits for bills, wages for food shopping, and IWC for small 'luxuries' such as take-away meals, better quality groceries and Christmas presents.

There were a number of particular financial circumstances faced by lone parents in this research. Lone parents who re-partnered could find that they were worse off as a family than they had been when their partner and they had been living separately. Receiving high levels of child maintenance could remove lone parents from out-of-work benefits altogether. LPO also negatively affected the financial situation of lone parents who experienced payment gaps when making complex journeys

off IS to other destinations. Having gaps between benefits, due to problems with benefit claims and a lack of understanding of benefit regimes and how to move between them, can lead to financial hardship for lone parent families.

7.2 The effectiveness of the JSA regime for lone parents

Chapter 3 outlines the JSA regime for lone parent customers. Lone parent customers' views on, and experience of, claiming JSA generally tended to vary according to their circumstances prior to claiming JSA. For example, lone parent customers who had moved to JSA from work as a new and repeat lone parent customer tended to be more positive and more content with the 'self-help' approach of stage 1 of the JSA regime, whereas lone parents who had been out of the labour market for a longer period reported more difficulties and tended to have a more negative view of the regime as a whole. Despite these differences in attitude based on lone parent customers' previous destinations, many JSA lone parent claimants from all destinations expressed the view that claiming JSA could be an uncomfortable and/or demanding experience. For those who had moved to JSA from IS (including those who had done so via ESA) this appeared to change their attitudes towards claiming benefits. This, and a general dislike of some aspects of the JSA regime, appeared to offer lone parents a 'push' towards work.

While staff were positive about the JSA regime for lone parents overall, some also raised a number of issues related to the operation and design of the regime, where they felt there was potential for improvement. In particular, variation in staffing models (specialist versus generalist) appeared to have a significant effect on the delivery of JSA, both in terms of lone parent customers' experience and the effectiveness of regime delivery. In the JSA regime, the use of generalist or specialist staff was reflected in: staff knowledge of the range of services or provision available to lone parent customers, staff ability to deliver a more 'personalised' lone parent service and the effectiveness of the 'childcare conversations' with lone parents. Overall there were indications that the use of specialist staff offered a number of benefits, and there did appear to be a move to increase involvement of specialist staff across the case study areas.

In terms of the JSA regime itself, staff highlighted that the initial stages were not designed for customers who had been out of work for some time, and thus may not have been suitable for lone parent customers moving from IS (or from ESA), that is, those who had been out of the labour market for an extended period. Despite this, there was little evidence of fast-tracking lone parent customers to later stages of the JSA regime or the use of NDLP to offer extra support. At later stages of the JSA regime, lone parent customers appeared to particularly value the support offered via the one-to-one interviews with an adviser. These interviews offered an important opportunity for Jobcentre Plus staff to demonstrate the range of support available and to explain how Jobcentre Plus could help with customers' search for work.

Another issue which had a significant impact on the operation of the JSA regime was that lone parents making a new and repeat claim for JSA were not always clearly identified as such. Where this was the case lone parents were not always benefiting from JSA parent flexibilities, being offered relevant services or being dealt with by specialist staff, even where the office structure was set up as such.

A significant constraint on the effectiveness of the JSA regime in moving lone parent customers into work, which was referred to by Jobcentre Plus staff and lone parent customers in all of the case study districts, was the reduced availability of jobs due to the recession and its aftermath. The recession also appeared to have had an impact on delivery of the JSA regime. Staff highlighted that many generalist advisers were relatively new in post following recruitment to address rising JSA

registers, which may have had an impact on their understanding and experience of the JSA regime for lone parent customers and thus their ability to deliver this appropriately. While the recession itself appeared to have ended at the time of the research, the labour market was still weak and the public sector, including Jobcentre Plus, was facing likely reductions in staff.

It is recommended that in the operation of the JSA regime for lone parents the following are considered:

- promote and facilitate the increased use of specialist staff in the delivery of the JSA regime for lone parents within Jobcentre Plus;
- improve the use of referral to NDLP and consider the appropriateness of Optional Early Entry to Stage 3 for lone parent customers who have greater support needs;
- improve the process for the identification of lone parents making new and repeat claims to JSA and ensure all staff are prompted to check customer status in this regard when delivering all aspects of the JSA regime.

7.2.1 JSA disallowance and sanctioning lone parent customers

Section 3.13 outlines the operation of the JSA sanctions regime, and there was a sense from discussions with some advisers that they were reluctant to use JSA sanctions with lone parents. This was linked to a concern about undermining relationships with lone parent customers, and avoiding financial hardship for lone parents and their children (and any adverse publicity linked to this). However, of the 94 lone parent customers interviewed during this study who reported experience of the JSA regime, 24 stated that they had experienced a loss of benefit while claiming JSA. It appears that the benefit loss was generally due to missing an appointment at the local Jobcentre Plus office without demonstrating good cause, and therefore, having their JSA claim disallowed.

The lone parent customers who were interviewed were generally aware of the principle of sanctions, although they appeared to have a limited understanding of specific details on all aspects of conditionality and processes such as the reclaim process following a disallowance. These levels of awareness reflect those reported in the Early Findings and also earlier research into the JSA regime sanctions, (Peters and Joyce, 2006), and benefit sanctions that specifically focused on lone parents' experience (Joyce and Whiting, 2006; Goodwin, 2008).

From April 2010 a fixed one-week sanction is being applied where it is determined that a jobseeker did not have good cause for non-attendance. For a second, and any subsequent failures to attend within the same jobseeking period, a fixed two-week sanction will be applied. The imposition of a sanction means total loss of benefit (100 per cent) for the specified period, although customers do have the opportunity to apply for hardship payments. Some staff highlighted this issue and the importance of explaining the change to lone parent customers. The need to ensure that this information is effectively communicated is also highlighted by the evidence regarding the low level of awareness of the details of benefit conditionality and sanctions among lone parent customers.

While the use of a fixed sanction will simplify the process involved following a Failure to Attend (FTA) without good cause (that is, there will be no need to make a new claim), some staff interviewed did indicate that it may have a more significant financial effect on lone parent customers. For example the disallowance or rapid reclaim process may have resulted in the loss of a few days benefit, whereas a fixed sanction will result in the loss of one or two weeks' benefit. Along with information on the use of fixed sanctions for FTA it may, therefore, also be useful to ensure information on hardship payments is readily available to lone parent customers. It may also be relevant to explore

the effect of this change to the JSA sanctions regime, and the associated process for hardship payments, within the next phase of LPO research.

It is recommended that in the operation of the JSA sanctions regime for lone parents the following are considered:

- improve the provision of clear and comprehensive information on the JSA sanctions regime (to include the process for claiming hardship payments) to lone parents;
- review the effect of the change to JSA sanctions (implemented in April 2010 to mean non-attendance without good cause will result in a fixed sanction rather than a disallowance) on lone parent customers in the next wave of LPO research.

7.3 The effectiveness of the ESA regime for lone parents

Chapter 4 outlines the ESA regime for lone parents. Advisers were using ESA as the default option to suggest to lone parents with health problems and/or disabilities whose IS eligibility was due to end. Lone parents who moved off IS and onto ESA faced more constraints to work than other groups in this research, having health issues and/or disabilities that they felt meant that they were not able to work, as well as often having fewer qualifications than other lone parents and (along with some of those who moved from IS to JSA) often having spent long periods of time on benefits.

Unlike lone parents on JSA who understood the purpose of JSA and its focus on requiring them to actively seek work, lone parents on ESA were far less clear about how ESA related to future employment. ESA was not experienced as a clear and structured regime in the way that IS or JSA were and, because of the WCA part of the process, contact was not regular and understandable to lone parents. The journey onto ESA left some lone parents with payment gaps, either because of errors in the claim process, or because they did not understand how to meet the requirements of the regime, and this could lead to financial hardship.

Support provided through Pathways to Work – including work search activities, talking about how to manage work with a health condition or disability and referrals to specialist support for people with health problems – was helpful for lone parents and could increase their motivation to work. However, this support was often provided while waiting for the WCA, while waiting for the outcome of the WCA or while waiting for the outcome of their appeal, and then stopped when they were deemed Fit for Work and no longer eligible for ESA. Those that moved onto JSA continued to face the same issues with their health/disability but felt they received a very different level of support when they moved onto the JSA regime as a 'new and repeat' customer.

Lone parents often did not understand what to do when they received the outcome of their WCA, which could lead to payment gaps before they returned to JSA or before starting an appeal and remaining on ESA, leading to further financial hardship. While these vulnerable lone parents were supported through the LPO process while still on IS, they felt they received less support as they continued their journey onto, and then usually off, ESA.

This research, therefore, suggests that it is lone parents who are furthest from the labour market that may end up on the ESA regime after their IS eligibility ends. But, the research also raises a number of issues about how the regime operates for these customers. Although those claiming ESA appreciated elements of the support on offer, such as that provided by WFIs, the effect of WFIs was curtailed by lone parent customers' having their ESA claim terminated when deemed Fit for Work or if they lost their appeal against the WCA. Lone parents on ESA also tended to be unclear about how

ESA related to future employment and it may be useful to make this link more explicit if lone parent customers are to be motivated to work.

It is recommended that, in the operation of the ESA regime for lone parent customers, the following are considered:

- improve lone parents' understanding of ESA and provide appropriate one-to-one support to lone parents on ESA by enabling lone parents to continue to see their Lone Parent Adviser (LPA) or a specialist disability adviser while moving onto ESA and going through the WCA process;
- consider automatic New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) referral or Optional Early Entry to Stage 3 for lone parent customers who move from ESA onto JSA, rather than treating them as 'new and repeat' JSA customers, to address their need for more intensive support.

7.4 Childcare and its provision to support lone parents into work

Lone parents in this research had a youngest child aged 12 to 15 and so the childcare issues raised may not be typical of those faced by lone parents with younger children who will be affected by LPO as the roll-out continues. Two main issues were raised in this research regarding childcare: childcare provision and attitudes to using formal childcare. In terms of provision, issues were raised about the availability and affordability of childcare. Gaps were identified in provision for children with special needs (that is, a disability and/or behavioural difficulties) and older children who were seen by their parents as too old for formal childcare but too young to leave unsupervised.

There was also a concern that falls in demand locally for childcare caused by the recession could undermine the viability of childcare provision, with the potential that providers would go out of business. In high cost areas such as London, the costs of childcare could not always be met by the financial support for it that was currently available and, in some rural areas, availability was limited. Jobcentre Plus has a role in identifying and reporting any particular gaps in provision to local authorities (local authorities in England and Wales have a duty to secure sufficient childcare to meet the needs of working parents) and whether current systems supported this role was also raised.

In terms of attitudes to childcare, in the main, lone parents on benefits in this research did not want to use formal childcare when they moved into work, in line with other research on lone parents. Those who had moved into work did not use formal childcare and this was not generally because of a lack of appropriate childcare availability or affordability but because they only worked while their children were at school, used informal childcare or felt that they did not need formal childcare as their children were old enough to not require it. These reasons for not using formal childcare among lone parents have also been identified in other research.

It was felt by staff that LPAs were better equipped than mainstream advisers to handle childcare discussions, to challenge lone parents' often negative attitudes to using formal childcare and inform lone parents about what formal childcare is available. Staff may need longer interviews than the existing appointment system allowed to have childcare conversations to challenge lone parents' attitudes to childcare.

It is recommended that in relation to childcare for lone parents the following are considered:

- undertake further work with partner organisations to increase childcare provision as more lone parents become affected by LPO, including provision for children with disabilities, provision outside normal school and nursery hours, and seasonal or holiday provision, and provision for children aged 11 to 14;
- review potential best practice examples of advisers' challenging lone parent customers' attitudes to childcare (such as the solution-focused interview and questioning techniques pilot detailed in Section 3.15) and disseminate appropriate techniques to advisers;
- ensure that appointment times are sufficient to enable adequate childcare conversations to take place.

7.5 Implications of this research for future LPO roll-out

The new coalition UK Government, which came to power in May 2010, has outlined its plans to extend the scope of conditionality for lone parents on benefits and from early 2012 lone parents will lose their eligibility to IS when their youngest child reaches five. In addition, by summer 2011 the existing welfare to work provision, including Flexible New Deal and Pathways to Work, will be replaced by a single integrated Work Programme which will support workless lone parents, alongside other workless people, into employment.

The interviews on which the findings in this report are based were conducted prior to the change in government and so were not directly affected by it. However, the findings are relevant to new government policy.

Firstly, there are a number of key implications from this research in relation to the further roll-out of LPO to lone parents with a youngest child aged five.

The preference demonstrated by lone parents in this research for part-time work during school hours is likely to increase as the transition of those with younger children progresses. This will not only be because of increased numbers of lone parents required to look for work overall, but also because of increased numbers of those lone parents unwilling to work outside school hours, owing to the young age of their children. In addition, the extension of the JSA parent flexibilities in April 2010 supports such attitudes by allowing lone parents with a youngest child 13 and under to restrict their availability for work to school hours. While the recession is over, job cuts are not, with the Office for Budget Responsibility predicting 490,000 public sector job losses over the next five years. Increased numbers of lone parent (and other) jobseekers will be competing for a limited (and potentially decreasing) number of part-time school hour jobs.[18]

This will not only exacerbate the job availability issue raised in this research for lone parents who want to move into work, but will also potentially undermine the ability of advisers to work with, and challenge those who do not want to move into work, as a lack of school hour jobs will be a sufficient reason for them to remain on benefits.

The reducing age of the children of lone parents affected by LPO will also result in changing requirements for childcare. This research found that most lone parents affected by LPO who are in work currently are using informal childcare, working around school hours or leaving their children

[18] While latest employment figures show that part-time work is increasing, this may be a temporary effect as employers safeguard jobs by reducing those working full-time hours to working part-time hours (Office for National Statistics, 2010).

unsupervised at home as they are older. The reducing age will mean more lone parents will need to access formal childcare if they are to consider work outside school hours. However, the research indicated a general reluctance to use formal childcare among lone parents and time limitations on advisers to conduct childcare conversations to challenge such attitudes. As LPO is rolled out further, therefore, the need to increase expertise and time spent encouraging consideration of formal childcare will become more pressing.

Staff willingness to challenge lone parent customer viewpoints on working outside school hours and/or the use of formal childcare may also be an issue as the age reduces. Some advisers indicated that they felt it would be extremely challenging to 'sell' LPO to parents with younger children, and some Adviser Service Managers also indicated that they felt some LPAs themselves may also have difficulties in accepting the further age reductions.

The research also showed that those who had been on benefits for long periods of time were more likely to have become institutionalised to a life of claiming benefits and displayed more anxiety about moving into work. The reducing age will mean lone parents may have spent a shorter period of time on inactive benefits, and the requirement to start to look for work sooner may mean they are more likely to have more recent work history and be more aware, therefore, of the advantages of working.

Some front-line managers and advisers raised a concern about a potential trend of lone parents having additional children in order to remain on IS. While this was not the case among the lone parents interviewed as part of this research, this concern was raised by staff in more than one case study area who suggested they had seen a number of examples of this in their caseloads. This potential consequence of LPO needs to be investigated further to ascertain the true extent of the issue. DWP already monitor fertility rates amongst lone parent IS customers and, as LPO affects lone parents with younger and younger children, this must continue to be monitored in order to ascertain whether the trend increases as more lone parent customers of childbearing age are affected with less of an age gap between their current and potential children.

There are also implications from this research in relation to the design and timing of eligibility for the Work Programme. As LPO rolls out further, the proportion of lone parent JSA claimants who are far from the labour market is likely to increase, as those that are job ready will move quickly into work. It is likely to be these lone parents with multiple barriers who enter the Work Programme. This research found that the JSA regime was most effective for lone parents where they were identified as lone parents, and the support they received was personalised to their specific needs. Previous research with lone parents has also found that the personalised nature of support, and empathy shown by advisers, are crucial to positive employment outcomes (Hasluck and Green, 2007). Where lone parents enter the Work Programme, therefore, it will be critical to ensure the support they receive is tailored to their needs as lone parents.

It is recommended that, in the further roll out of LPO, the following are considered:

- monitor the impact of the new JSA parent flexibility, allowing restriction of availability to work to school hours, on the movement of lone parents with younger children into work;
- ensure the new Work Programme considers the specific support needs of lone parent customers.

Appendix

A.1 Case study district details

A.1.1 Birmingham and Solihull

This is the second largest Jobcentre Plus district in the country (by number of claimants) and contains 14 Jobcentre Plus offices. It is an urban area, and has a diverse socio-economic and ethnic population. Two main Benefit Delivery Centres (BDCs) cover the district, both of which are geographically based within the district, but the Labour Market Decision Makers (LMDMs) serving the district are based at another BDC outside the district but within the region. The district has one Childcare Partnership Manager (CPM) and a mixture of both centrally based and office-based administration teams. The area was part of the phase 1 roll-out of Flexible New Deal (FND) from April 2009.

A.1.2 Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders

This district contains 12 Jobcentre Plus offices. The area is a mixture of urban and rural. The Lothian and Borders areas of the district are rural and offices in these areas tend to cover a larger geographical area than those in Edinburgh. Two main BDCs cover the district, both of which are geographically based within the district but the LMDMs serving the district are based at another BDC outside the district but within the region. The district has one CPM and a centralised diary administration support team, plus individual office Diary Admin. Support Officers, but is moving towards a new structure based upon the 'advisory services for the future' model where all band B staff will become assistant advisers, and will be allocated to advisory teams based around lone parent customer groups. The area was part of the phase 1 roll-out of FND and is an adviser flexibility area pilot.

A.1.3 South East Wales

There are 13 Jobcentre Plus offices in this district which contains a mixture of urban and rural areas. Two main BDCs cover the district, both of which are geographically based outside the district but within Wales. The LMDMs serving the district are based at another BDC, which is also outside the district but within the region. The district has one CPM and a mixture of both centrally based and office-based administration teams. The area was part of the phase 1 roll-out of FND.

A.1.4 Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth

This district is an urban area within London. It contains nine Jobcentre Plus offices and is served by one BDC located remotely from the district in the north west of England and which also contains the LMDMs for the district. The district does not have a centralised diary admin. support team but instead has office-based teams, with smaller offices linking into larger offices' teams. The district has one CPM who is based at District Office. FND has been in place in the area since April 2009.

A.1.5 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. Smaller offices tend to be based upon the general adviser model while larger offices have teams of specialist advisers. There are three BDCs covering the district, all of which are geographically based within it and also contain the LMDMs for the district. The district has one CPM and a centralised diary admin. support team, plus individual office Diary Admin. Support Officers. As in the other case study areas, the district has operated under FND since April 2009.

A.2 Lone parent customer sampling and recruitment

Based upon administrative data from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) showing the immediate destinations of lone parents affected by the Lone Parent Obligations (LPO), the evaluation aimed to conduct 70 interviews with lone parents claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and 125 interviews with lone parents in non-JSA destinations. Due to the changing nature of some interviewees' journeys after Income Support (IS), some lone parent customers were no longer at the destination showing according to the administrative data by the point of interview. For example, some of the lone parent customers who were recorded as having an immediate destination from IS that was 'other' or 'unknown' in the administrative data had moved into more typical destinations by the time of interview.

Table A.1 Comparison of lone parent customer destinations at time of sampling and time of interview

Lone parent customer destination	Quotas	Recruited customers' status at sample	Lone parent customer status at interview
IS	15	16	28
JSA new and repeat	35	38	36
JSA from IS	35	36	37
Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)	35	33	36
In work > 16 hrs per week	40	41	49
Re-partnered	0	0	7
Other/unknown destination	35	38	9

JSA from IS lone parent customers were recruited from a sample of lone parents in the five case study areas with a youngest child aged 12 to 13 who lost IS entitlement in the period April to September 2009 and moved onto JSA as lone parents. At the time of interview, therefore, these lone parents would typically have been claiming JSA for between three and 11 months. Lone parents captured in the Early Findings research (Gloster *et al*., 2010) and lone parents who had reached the FND provider stage were excluded as outside the scope of this research.

JSA new and repeat lone parent customers were recruited from a sample of lone parents in the five case study areas with a youngest child aged 12 to 13 who had made a JSA claim as a lone parent in the period April to September 2009 and who had not transferred from IS, as categorised by having no history of an IS claim within the three months prior to the start of their JSA claim. At the time of interview therefore, these lone parents would typically have been claiming JSA for between three and 11 months. Lone parents captured in the Early Findings research were excluded as outside the scope of this research.

Non-JSA lone parent customers were recruited from a sample of lone parents in the five case study areas with a youngest child aged 12 to 13 who were due to lose IS entitlement in the period April to September 2009 but did not move onto JSA. Lone parents captured in the Early Findings research study were excluded as outside the scope of this research. Administrative data were then used to infer destinations where possible. Those that appeared on any of the weekly ESA scans in the period June to October 2009 were classified as ESA lone parent customers at the time of sampling. Those that appeared in Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs (HMRC) P45 data or, due to the potential six-month lag in the P45 data, appeared in Jobcentre Plus Labour Market System data as having attended an in-work advisory support meeting from April 2009 onwards were classified as in work for 16 hours or more at the time of sampling.

Those who were still claiming IS according to the April 2009 National Benefits Database data, and who also had a live claim to either Incapacity Benefit or Carer's Allowance (CA), were classified as exempt from LPO, or on IS for another reason at the time of sampling. There were also some lone parent customers in the sample who were shown as still claiming IS but for whom there was no administrative data to determine why. These lone parent customers were marked as blank destinations and also classified as exempt from LPO or on IS for another reason at the time of sampling.

Those where there was evidence of a subsequent but non-JSA or ESA benefit claim or evidence of another destination (such as re-partnering) from DWP administration destination returns, following the end of their IS claim, were classified as at other or unknown destinations at the time of sampling. There were also some lone parent customers in the sample for whom there was no evidence from the data of their destination following the end of their IS claim. These lone parent customers were marked as unknown and also classified as at other/unknown destinations at the time of sampling.

The samples for the lone parent customer fieldwork contained just over 12 times the number of lone parent customer records to interviews required. A total of 247 lone parent interviews were booked by recruiters. From these, a total of 202 interviews were completed. The other 45 booked interviews were cancelled by the interviewees prior to the interviews taking place. Within each lone parent customer destination, the team aimed to recruit and conduct an even split of interviews across the five case study areas. While interviewee availability and the 45 interview cancellations made this difficult, overall a similar number of interviews were conducted in each case study area. The number of completed lone parent interviews by case study area and destination at time of sampling are detailed in the table below.

Table A.2 Achieved interviews by case study area and destination at time of sampling

Lone parent customer status at interview	Birmingham and Solihull	Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders	South East Wales	Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth	North and East Yorkshire and the Humber	Total
IS	3	5	3	3	2	16
JSA from IS	8	8	8	9	3	36
JSA new and repeat	4	8	7	8	11	38
ESA	7	6	6	8	6	33
In work	11	4	7	8	11	41
Other destination	6	8	11	4	9	38
Total	39	39	42	40	42	202

A.3 Key characteristics of customers interviewed

This section describes the characteristics of the 202 lone parent customers who were interviewed during this stage of the evaluation. Overall their characteristics were generally in line with lone parent customers from the Early Findings report (Gloster *et al*., 2010), which also focused on lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 to 15.

The characteristics of lone parents and their households

Table A3 shows that the majority of lone parents interviewed were female, with 15 lone fathers interviewed (seven per cent).

Table A.3 Gender of lone parents interviewed by lone parent customer type

Lone parent customer status at interview	Male	Female	Total
IS	1	27	28
JSA new and repeat	6	30	36
JSA from IS	4	33	37
ESA	3	33	36
In work > 16 hrs per week	1	48	49
Re-partnered	0	7	7
Other destination	0	9	9
Total	15	187	202
Percentage	7	93	100

Lone parents interviewed were mostly white British, and there were only a small number of black and Asian lone parent customers. Only a very small number of lone parents described themselves as of mixed or another ethnicity. Table A4 shows that 149 (74 per cent) of the lone parents interviewed were white. That interviewees were generally female and white British reflects the gender and ethnicity profile of the UK lone parent population (Philo *et al*., 2009).

Table A.4 Achieved interviews by lone parent customer type and ethnicity

Lone parent customer status at interview	Ethnicity					
	White	Asian	Black	Mixed/other	Unknown	Total
IS	17	1	3	1	6	28
JSA new and repeat	27	1	2	2	4	36
JSA from IS	29	1	4	3	0	37
ESA	29	3	2	2	0	35
In work> 16 hrs/week	36	5	5	1	2	49
Re-partnered	5	0	2	0	0	7
Other destination	6	1	0	0	2	9
Total	149	12	18	9	14	202
Percentage	74	6	9	4	7	100

Unsurprisingly, given the fact that LPO takes effect once their youngest child is 12 years old, the most common age group for lone parent customers was 40 to 49 years old, followed by a sizeable number of lone parent customers in the 30 to 39 years age group.

Table A.5 Achieved interviews by lone parent customer type and lone parent customer age group

Lone parent customer status at interview	Age 20–29	30–39	40–49	50+	Unknown	Total
IS	1	10	14	3	0	28
JSA new and repeat	0	19	13	4	0	36
JSA from IS	1	9	18	7	2	37
ESA	0	10	19	5	2	36
In work > 16 hrs/week	0	12	29	7	1	49
Re-partnered	0	3	3	0	1	7
Other destination	0	3	6	0	0	9
Total	2	66	102	26	6	202
Percentage	1	33	50	13	3	100

Table A6 shows 133 of the lone parents interviewed (65 per cent) had one or two children.

Table A.6 Achieved interviews by lone parent customer type and number of children

Lone parent customer status at interview	Number of children 1	2	3	4+	Unknown	Total
IS	4	15	7	2	0	28
JSA new and repeat	13	16	4	2	1	36
JSA from IS	9	17	8	3	0	37
ESA	13	8	8	7	0	36
In work > 16 hrs/week	10	21	12	6	0	49
Re-partnered	1	1	2	1	2	7
Other destination	1	4	3	3	0	9
Total	51	82	44	24	3	202
Percentage	25	40	22	11	1	100

Table A7 shows that 77 (38 per cent) of the lone parent customers interviewed reported having a health issue or disability, and 43 (21 per cent) reported that their child suffered from a health issue or disability. There were more lone parent customers who reported having a health issue or disability in comparison with the Early Findings report, reflecting the fact that lone parents on ESA were sampled in this stage of the research (whereas the earlier study focused on those moving from IS to JSA). Most lone parent customers claiming ESA unsurprisingly reported having a health issue or disability. In contrast the child's health issues and disabilities were reported at a very similar level to the Early Findings report. Most lone parent customers cited that their children had no health issues or disabilities. More lone parent customers exempt from LPO cited that their child had health issues or disabilities, as one reason for being exempt is having a child with middle or higher rate Disability Living Allowance (DLA). Previous research shows that disabled children are more likely than others to be living as part of a lone parent family. Around one-third of disabled children live with a lone parent (overwhelmingly, a lone mother) compared with around one-quarter of other children (Clarke & McKay, 2008).

Table A.7 Achieved interviews by lone parent customer type, and lone parent customer and child's or children's health issue or disability

Lone parent customer status at interview	Lone parent customer health issue/disability				Child health issue/disability			
	Yes	No	Unknown	Total	Yes	No	Unknown	Total
IS	4	23	1	28	12	15	1	28
JSA new and repeat	14	22	0	36	5	31	0	36
JSA from IS	7	26	4	37	8	26	3	37
ESA	35	1	0	36	6	30	0	36
In work >16 hrs/week	7	38	4	49	8	39	2	49
Re-partnered	3	4	0	7	1	6	0	7
Other destination	7	2	0	9	4	5	0	9
Total	77	116	9	202	43	153	6	202
Percentage	38	57	4	100	21	76	3	100

Most customers had been lone parents for over four years, and many reported they had been a lone parent for very long periods of time, commonly since the birth of their first child.

Lone parents generally live in rented accommodation, and much of this is social housing (Philo *et al*., 2009). Overwhelmingly the lone parent customers interviewed in this research lived in rented accommodation, which belonged either to a local authority or housing association. A small number of lone parents lived in private rented accommodation and very few owned their own home. In line with the Early Findings report, most lone parents had strong social networks within the local area. For many lone parents that had lived in the same local area for most for their lives, it was common for them to live in close proximity to family and friends, and strong social networks were very common in this circumstance. Only a few lone parent customers reported to have no family or friends nearby, and often this was related to recently moving into the area.

Education and work history

Table A8 indicates 67 (33 per cent) of interviewees reported having no qualifications. Lone parent customers claiming ESA were the most common group for having no qualifications. The proportion of lone parent customers with no qualifications was higher than the Early Findings report, where there was a wider range of qualification levels across lone parent customer type. Lone parent customers in work of more than 16 hours per week tended to have higher qualifications levels.

Table A.8 Achieved interviews by lone parent customer type and qualification level

	Qualification level						
Lone parent customer status at interview	**No qualifications**	**<Level 2**	**Level 2**	**Level 3+**	**Other**	**Unknown**	**Total**
IS	11	7	3	4	2	1	28
JSA new and repeat	14	5	4	8	5	0	36
JSA from IS	11	13	6	3	3	1	37
ESA	16	9	4	2	4	1	36
In work>16 hrs/week	10	9	13	9	7	1	49
Re-partnered	1	2	3	0	0	1	7
Other destination	4	1	0	3	1	0	9
Total	67	46	33	29	22	5	202
Percentage	33	23	16	14	11	2	100

Overall most lone parent customers reported having left school with a small number of GCSEs or O levels, often at low grades. It was typical for them to have participated in education or training since leaving school. For example, many lone parent customers reported having gone back to college to improve their maths and English skills.

For a sizeable group of lone parents there was the assumption that, by improving their qualifications, they may find it easier to find employment, this was especially the case for lone parent customers who had recently moved from IS to JSA, and new and repeat JSA lone parent customers. Specifically there were a high number of lone parent customers who wanted to take part in IT training as this was thought of as a path to employment, not only that, it was also suggested this would allow them to support their children better with their homework and overall education. For a few lone parent customers they felt their age would inhibit them from taking part in any education or training in the future.

Table A9 shows the hours that lone parents worked.

Table A.9 Achieved interviews by lone parent customer type and work status

Lone parent customer status at interview	**Not in work**	**Mini-jobs < 16hrs per week**	**In work 16–29 hrs per week**	**In work 30+ hrs per week**	**Total**
IS	27	1	0	0	28
JSA new and repeat	34	2	0	0	36
JSA from IS	32	5	0	0	37
ESA	35	1	0	0	36
In work>16 hrs/week	0	0	43	6	49
Re-partnered	6	1	0	0	7
Other destination	9	0	0	0	9
Total	143	10	43	6	202
Percentage	71	5	21	3	100

For all types of lone parent customers, previous employment was commonly in professions that were low status, low pay and low skilled. The most common sectors in which lone parent customers had worked in the past included: domestic work, such as care work and cleaning, and factory work. These findings are in line with those from the Early Findings report. It was typical for previous employment to have been part-time, and it was commonly cited that lone parent customers' last job had been before they had had children, most commonly by those who have moved from IS onto JSA. Previous employment was typically found through informal routes, for example, word of mouth, friends and family, and advertisements in shop windows. Overall the most common reason given for leaving previous employment was redundancy, there was also a sizeable group of lone parent customers who left work when they became pregnant.

Benefit history

Lone parent customers in the past had claimed IS, Housing Benefit (HB), Council Tax Benefit (CTB), Child Tax Credit (CTC) and Child Benefit. A small number had experience of claiming DLA and CA; these were mainly IS exempt lone parent customers. In terms of different lone parent customer groups, those that had moved from IS onto JSA and lone parent customers claiming ESA had generally been claiming this set of benefits for an extensive period of time. JSA new and repeat lone parent customers often reported a cycle of moving between different benefits including IS, ESA and, in some cases, employment. Lone parents have been found to be prone to this kind of 'cycling' between work and benefits (see Evans *et al.*, 2004).

It was common for lone parent customers in work of more than 16 hours to be still receiving HB and CTB. However, their IS or JSA was replaced by Working Tax Credit, and IS lone parent customers moved from IS onto JSA. This was also the case for JSA new and repeat lone parent customers who were currently claiming the same set of benefits alongside JSA. IS exempt lone parent customers were currently claiming the same set of benefits including HB, CTB and CTC, alongside IS and CA and in some cases they were also receiving DLA at the medium and highest rate for their children. Those that were identified as not claiming because they had re-partnered were mostly still claiming benefits through a joint claim with their current partner.

A.4 Themes covered by discussion guides

Listed below are the primary topics covered by the discussion guides. For further information, or copies of the discussion guides, please contact DWP.

Lone parent customer discussion guides

Three lone parent customer discussion guides were used in this study: one with lone parents who had lost their entitlement to IS and switched to JSA, one with lone parents who were new and repeat JSA claimants and one with lone parents who had a youngest child aged 12 to 15 who had not moved on to JSA and had either remained on IS or moved to another destination.

All three discussion guides included questions on the following topics:

- personal, household and family characteristics;
- education and training;
- benefits and work history;
- work search activities (as well as any work they might be interested in);
- attitudes and constraints to working;

- current employment(if relevant);
- use of childcare;
- household finance and money management.

In addition, lone parent customers who had moved onto JSA from IS, or straight onto JSA were also asked about the JSA regime (including tailored sections according to stage of regime, experiences of job search review appointments, and disallowance and sanctions).

Lone parent customers who had moved from IS to JSA were also asked about the policy changes and awareness of exemptions.

Lone parent customers who had a youngest child aged 12 to 15 who had not moved on to JSA and had either remained on IS or moved to another destination than JSA were also asked about the following where relevant:

- exemptions to the JSA regime;
- ESA;
- experiences of not working and not claiming benefits;
- experiences of moving into employment.

Staff discussion guides

Four staff discussion guides were used in this study – one with LPO Roll-Out Leads, one with Adviser Service Managers (ASMs) and Jobcentre Managers, one with CPMs and one with LMDMs – plus one focus group discussion guide for use with Personal Adviser (PA) groups.

Questions were consistent across all guides, where appropriate, though differed in part to reflect the different roles and responsibilities of staff interviewed.

Questions asked were in relation to the following topics:

- district structure and performance (LPO Roll-Out Leads only);
- LPO communications, guidance and training (all);
- implementing the JSA regime (all except CPMs and LMDMs);
- childcare provision in the area (all except LMDMs);
- the JSA parent flexibilities (all);
- lone parent sanctions and disallowance on JSA (all);
- internal impact of LPO (all);
- impact of LPO on lone parent customers (ASMs, Jobcentre Managers and PAs only);
- other destinations of lone parent customers (ASMs, Jobcentre Managers, and PAs only).

A.5 Timeline sticker options

The list within the table below was presented to all the lone parent customers interviewed for the research. It is based on the Families and Children Study attitudes and constraints to work model (D'Souza *et al*., 2008), which will also feature in the quantitative element of the LPO 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 A.10 Constraints to work

Health condition/disability	Caring for someone else with a health condition or disability	My child/children wouldn't like me to work
Availability/cost of childcare	My confidence is low at the moment	Children too young
Availability/cost of transport	Low wages	Too stressful combining work and family life
Lack of training/skills/experience	Lack of jobs in local area	Available work not flexible enough
No support to find work/what's available	I am unsure about the move from benefits to work	Motivation to find work
I wouldn't be better off in work than on benefits	Employers aren't very family friendly	I want to look after my children myself
My family/partner wouldn't like it if I worked	Too little time to spend with my children	Personal or family troubles

Sticker options were also used to aid discussions with lone parent customers about their work and benefits histories. This sticker exercise helped to clarify any benefits that lone parent customers were in receipt of and allowed for periods of time, and movement between different benefits and work, to be discussed.

A.6 Roles of staff interviewed

The following are not full descriptions of job roles and responsibilities. Instead they are summaries of the elements of each job role that the researchers were interested in for this research, that is, the elements of each job role that relate to working with lone parents on JSA.

Jobcentre Plus office-based staff

Personal Advisers

Conduct interviews with customers, providing advice and support, and ensure benefit conditions are being met. Often specialise in one customer group (for example, lone parents) or benefit regime (for example, JSA).

Adviser Services Managers

Responsible for overseeing the work of the Lone Parent Advisers (LPAs) and PAs. Make decisions on the flexibilities if referred by an LPA or a PA, referring to the LMDM if they are not straightforward or if there is doubt. Refer potential sanction decisions to the LMDM.

Jobcentre Managers

Responsible for managing the work of the Fortnightly Jobsearch Reviewers who carry out fortnightly job search review appointments with customers on JSA.

Benefit Delivery Centre based 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.

Other staff

Lone Parent Obligation Roll-Out Leads

Oversee activity in relation to LPO in their district. Often work in partnership with the district Change Manager. Responsible for communicating changes and overseeing the roll-out of the LPO phases and the transition of lone parents off IS. Often seconded to role for a fixed period of time or conducting role alongside other duties.

Childcare Partnership Managers

Work with partners around childcare. Duty to report back to local authority the results of the 'childcare conversation' advisers have with parents, in order 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.

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Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) were introduced in November 2008. Since then, most lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over lost entitlement to Income Support solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. The age of the youngest child was lowered to ten in October 2009 and to seven from October 2010.

This report presents findings on the destinations and journeys experienced by lone parents after their youngest child reached the LPO threshold age of 12. The findings are based on qualitative fieldwork in five case-study areas. This included 55 interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff and 202 interviews with lone parent Jobcentre Plus customers split between the following destinations:

- 49 interviews with customers who were in work for 16 hours a week or more;
- 73 interviews with customers who were on Jobseeker's Allowance;
- 36 interviews with customers who were Employment and Support Allowance customers;
- 16 interviews with customers who were at other destinations;
- 28 interviews with customers who remained on Income Support, often because they were exempt from LPO

This forms part of a comprehensive programme of evaluation research, using a mixed methods approach, to assess the effects of LPO. It includes in-depth interviews with customers and staff, a large-scale survey of customers, as well as analysis of in-house and other data sources. The evaluation is being carried out by a consortium of independent research organisations, led by the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion.

If you would like to know more about DWP research, please contact:
Paul Noakes, Commercial Support and Knowledge Management Team,
Work and Welfare Central Analysis Division, 3rd Floor, Caxton House,
Tothill Street, London SW1H 9NA.
http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp

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