

Research report

Lone Parent Obligations: work, childcare and the Jobseeker's Allowance regime

by Pippa Lane, Jo Casebourne, Lorraine Lanceley
and Malen Davies

Department for Work and Pensions

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Lone Parent Obligations: work, childcare and the Jobseeker's Allowance regime

Pippa Lane, Jo Casebourne, Lorraine Lanceley and Malen Davies

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Contents

| | |
|--|------|
| Acknowledgements..... | vii |
| The Authors..... | viii |
| Abbreviations..... | ix |
| Glossary..... | x |
| Summary..... | 1 |
| 1 Introduction and methodology..... | 7 |
| 1.1 Background and policy context..... | 7 |
| 1.1.1 <i>Lone parents in the UK</i> | 7 |
| 1.1.2 <i>Lone parents and employment</i> | 7 |
| 1.1.3 <i>Child poverty in lone parent households</i> | 7 |
| 1.1.4 <i>Employment support for lone parents</i> | 8 |
| 1.1.5 <i>LPO</i> | 8 |
| 1.1.6 <i>Universal Credit</i> | 9 |
| 1.2 Evaluating Lone Parent Obligations..... | 9 |
| 1.2.1 <i>Research aims and objectives</i> | 10 |
| 1.2.2 <i>Methodology</i> | 10 |
| 1.2.3 <i>Analysis process</i> | 11 |
| 1.3 Report structure..... | 11 |
| 2 Work readiness..... | 12 |
| 2.1 Typology of lone parent claimants..... | 12 |
| 2.1.1 <i>High parenting orientation</i> | 12 |
| 2.1.2 <i>Strong work attachment</i> | 13 |
| 2.1.3 <i>Critical life event</i> | 14 |
| 2.2 Social networks and the role of the absent parent..... | 15 |
| 2.2.1 <i>Role of the absent parent</i> | 16 |
| 2.3 How work ready are these lone parents and how are they different from lone parents in previous research on Lone Parent Obligations?..... | 17 |
| 2.4 Summary..... | 18 |

| | | |
|-------|--|----|
| 3 | Childcare..... | 19 |
| 3.1 | Use of, and attitudes to, formal childcare | 19 |
| 3.1.1 | <i>Attitudes to formal childcare</i> | 19 |
| 3.1.2 | <i>Breakfast and after-school clubs</i> | 20 |
| 3.1.3 | <i>Not needing formal childcare</i> | 21 |
| 3.1.4 | <i>Affordability of formal childcare</i> | 22 |
| 3.1.5 | <i>Availability of formal childcare</i> | 23 |
| 3.1.6 | <i>Childcare advice from Jobcentre Plus</i> | 23 |
| 3.2 | Summary..... | 25 |
| 4 | Reflections on youngest child starting school | 26 |
| 4.1 | Lone parents who were triggered into starting work or preparing for work when youngest child started school | 26 |
| 4.1.1 | <i>Moved into work</i> | 26 |
| 4.1.2 | <i>Moved into learning or volunteering</i> | 26 |
| 4.1.3 | <i>Thought about or tried to move into work</i> | 27 |
| 4.2 | Lone parents who were not triggered into starting work or study when youngest child started school..... | 28 |
| 4.2.1 | <i>Already in work when youngest child started school</i> | 28 |
| 4.2.2 | <i>Experiencing a critical life event</i> | 28 |
| 4.2.3 | <i>Parenting as a choice</i> | 29 |
| 4.3 | Implications for the next roll-out..... | 30 |
| 4.4 | Summary..... | 30 |
| 5 | Looking for work | 31 |
| 5.1 | Attitudes to balancing work and family | 31 |
| 5.2 | Length of time looking for work | 33 |
| 5.3 | Type of work lone parents looked for | 34 |
| 5.4 | Work-search activities | 35 |
| 5.5 | Difficulty finding work..... | 36 |
| 5.6 | Summary..... | 37 |

| | | |
|-------|---|----|
| 6 | Experiences of Jobseeker’s Allowance | 38 |
| 6.1 | Jobseeker’s Allowance regime for lone parents | 38 |
| 6.2 | Claiming JSA | 39 |
| 6.2.1 | <i>Making a JSA claim</i> | 39 |
| 6.2.2 | <i>Problems with Jobseeker’s Allowance payments</i> | 40 |
| 6.2.3 | <i>Understanding of the Jobseeker’s Allowance regime</i> | 41 |
| 6.2.4 | <i>Meeting the requirements of the Jobseeker’s Agreement</i> | 42 |
| 6.2.5 | <i>Attending Back to Work sessions</i> | 43 |
| 6.3 | JSA flexibilities for parents..... | 43 |
| 6.3.1 | <i>Awareness and application of flexibilities</i> | 44 |
| 6.3.2 | <i>Restricting availability for work to part-time or school-hours work</i> | 45 |
| 6.3.3 | <i>Restricting sign-on appointments to their child’s normal school hours</i> | 46 |
| 6.4 | Support | 47 |
| 6.4.1 | <i>The Jobcentre Plus Offer for lone parents on Jobseeker’s Allowance</i> | 47 |
| 6.4.2 | <i>Support being provided by Jobcentre Plus</i> | 48 |
| 6.4.3 | <i>Support from providers</i> | 50 |
| 6.4.4 | <i>Additional support needs</i> | 51 |
| 6.5 | Sanctions and disentitlements within the Jobseeker’s Allowance regime..... | 52 |
| 6.5.1 | <i>Lone parents’ understanding of sanctions and disentitlement</i> | 53 |
| 6.5.2 | <i>Experiences of being sanctioned</i> | 54 |
| 6.5.3 | <i>Experiences of being disentitled</i> | 55 |
| 6.5.4 | <i>Financial impact of sanctions and disentitlement</i> | 56 |
| 6.5.5 | <i>Views of sanctioning and appealing sanctions</i> | 57 |
| 6.6 | The effect of the JSA regime on lone parents’ attitudes to work | 58 |
| 6.6.1 | <i>Lone parents’ overall views on claiming JSA</i> | 58 |
| 6.6.2 | <i>The effects of the JSA regime on lone parents’ attitudes to work</i> | 60 |
| 6.7 | Summary..... | 61 |
| 7 | In work experiences | 63 |
| 7.1 | Type of work..... | 63 |
| 7.2 | Hours of work | 64 |

| | | |
|------------|---|----|
| 7.3 | Experiences of being in work..... | 64 |
| 7.4 | Likelihood of having to stop work | 65 |
| 7.5 | Summary..... | 66 |
| 8 | Conclusions and recommendations..... | 67 |
| 8.1 | Work readiness and looking for work..... | 67 |
| 8.2 | Attitudes to balancing work and parenting..... | 68 |
| 8.3 | Childcare..... | 68 |
| 8.4 | Supporting lone parents on Jobseeker’s Allowance | 68 |
| 8.5 | Sanctions..... | 69 |
| 8.6 | Implications for the roll-out of Lone Parent Obligations to lone parents with a youngest child aged five and over | 69 |
| 8.7 | Implications for Universal Credit..... | 70 |
| 8.8 | Recommendations..... | 70 |
| Appendix | The lone parent interviews..... | 71 |
| References | | 76 |

List of tables

| | | |
|------------|---|----|
| Table A.1 | Lone parent claimants and the type of JSA claim made | 71 |
| Table A.2 | Achieved interviews by case study area..... | 71 |
| Table A.3 | Lone parent claimants by ethnicity | 72 |
| Table A.4 | Gender of lone parents interviewed by lone parent claimant type..... | 72 |
| Table A.5 | Achieved interviews by health problem or disability | 72 |
| Table A.6 | Achieved interviews by children’s health problem or disability..... | 73 |
| Table A.7 | Achieved interviews by claimant type and housing tenure | 73 |
| Table A.8 | Level of highest qualification by claimant type | 73 |
| Table A.9 | Achieved interviews by claimant status at interview | 73 |
| Table A.10 | Achieved interviews by claimant type and length of time on JSA..... | 74 |
| Table A.11 | Achieved interviews by lone parent claimant type and age group | 74 |
| Table A.12 | Achieved interviews by lone parent customer type and number of children | 74 |
| Table A.13 | Achieved interviews by age of youngest child | 75 |

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Abbreviations

| | |
|-------|--|
| BOC | Better Off Calculation |
| BtWS | Back to Work session |
| CV | Curriculum vitae |
| DWP | Department for Work and Pensions |
| ESA | Employment and Support Allowance |
| IS | Income Support |
| JRFND | Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal |
| JSA | Jobseeker's Allowance |
| JSAg | Jobseeker's Agreement |
| LPA | Lone Parent Adviser |
| LPO | Lone Parent Obligations |
| WFI | Work Focused Interview |

Glossary

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| Child Benefit | Child Benefit is 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 Maintenance Options Service | The Child Maintenance Options Service is a delivery body of the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission. It provides information and support to help parents make informed choices about child maintenance. |
| Child poverty | The Child Poverty Act sets four targets on child poverty to be met by 2020. To summarise these are: (1) relative low income: less than ten per cent of children living in households with income of less than 60 per cent of median income; (2) combined low income and material deprivation: less than five per cent of children living in households with an income of less than 70 per cent of median income and experience material deprivation. (3) absolute low income: less than five per cent of children living in households with an income less than 60 per cent of an adjusted base amount; and (4) persistent poverty: less than a specified percentage of children having lived in a household with an income of less than 60 per cent of median income during the past three years. For more information please see: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/9/contents |
| Child Tax Credit | Child Tax Credit is 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. |
| Disentitlement | Lone parents can be disentitled from Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) 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. Before April 2010, a lone parent would lose entitlement to JSA i.e. their award would end, if they failed to attend their fortnightly job-search review appointment without demonstrating good cause. Subsequent to this date they receive a fixed sanction if they make contact with Jobcentre Plus within five days and cannot show good cause. |
| Employment part-time – mini-job | A mini-job is a job of fewer than 16 hours of work per week. |
| Employment part-time | Part-time employment is a job of 16 to 29 hours of work per week. |

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| Employment full-time | Full-time employment is a job of 30 hours or more of work per week. |
| Employment and Support Allowance | From 27 October 2008, ESA replaced Incapacity Benefit (IB) and Income Support (IS) paid on incapacity grounds for new claimants. ESA provides financial assistance as well as personalised support for people with an illness or disability to help them move into suitable work. |
| Formal childcare | Formal childcare is Ofsted-registered childcare, including day nurseries, out-of-school clubs, pre-school play groups and childminders. |
| Income Support | IS is a means-tested benefit for those who do not have to sign-on as unemployed. This includes some lone parents, who are not subject to Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) or are exempt from them. |
| Informal childcare | Informal childcare is 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. |
| Jobseeker's Allowance 16-hour rule | An adult is ineligible for JSA if they participate in an activity of more than 16 hours per week. The activity can be employment or training. An individual must be available for work to be eligible for JSA. |
| Jobseeker's Allowance | JSA is the main benefit for people of working age who are out of work, work fewer than 16 hours per week on average and are available for and actively seeking work. |
| Jobseeker's Agreement | This is an agreement that must be in place in order to claim JSA. It sets out the claimant's availability to work and the ways in which they will search for a job. The JSAG usually includes details on area and hours that claimants are available for employment, as well as any restrictions, a description of the type of work that is being sought, and planned action and number of activities. |
| Lone parent – generic definition | A lone parent is a 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. |

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| Lone Parent Obligations | Changes to entitlement conditions for lone parents claiming Income Support, introduced from November 2008. Most lone parents with a youngest child over the threshold age are no longer eligible for IS solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. Instead they must claim either JSA if they are able to work or ESA if they are eligible because of having a health condition or disability. The change was 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. |
| Jobseeker's Allowance flexibilities for lone parents | Additional flexibilities have been incorporated in the JSA regime for lone parents (with some applying to other parents). These flexibilities include the hours that lone parents are available to work and whether appropriate/affordable childcare is available. Other flexibilities involve Jobcentre Plus staff following up lone parents if they fail to attend interviews before benefit entitlement becomes affected. |
| New Deal for Lone Parents | New Deal for Lone Parents was launched nationally in October 1998. It was a voluntary programme that aimed to help and support lone parents to improve their job readiness for a move into employment. The programme came to an end in March 2011. |
| Rapid re-claim | Rapid re-claim is available to all JSA and IS claimants who reclaim the same benefit within 12 weeks of entitlement ceasing on their previous claim and whose circumstances have not changed 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 because a claimant has not complied with conditions placed on benefit receipt. |
| Self-employed | A person who works on their own account, whether or not they have employees, in their main job. |
| Universal Credit | In an effort to simplify the benefit system and improve work incentives, Universal Credit is set to replace the present benefit structure. Subject to the passage of the Welfare Reform Bill, changes would take effect from 2013. Universal Credit will simplify the benefits system by bringing together a range of working-age benefits into a single streamlined payment. |

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| Work Focused Interview | As a way of engaging with lone parents on benefits, it became a requirement from April 2001 to participate in lone parent Work Focused Interviews (WFI) as part of making a claim for IS. The WFI 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. Lone parents entitled to IS take part in mandatory lone parent WFIs every six months, until the year before their IS eligibility is due to end (based on the age of their youngest child) when they become quarterly (i.e. every three months). |
| Work Programme | In 2011 the existing welfare-to-work provision, including Flexible New Deal and Pathways to Work, were replaced by a single integrated Work Programme. The Work Programme supports workless lone parents into employment, alongside other workless people, using an outcome-based, staged entry point model. |
| 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, from October 2010, the age of the youngest child has been reduced to seven and over, and the coalition government announced in the June 2010 Emergency Budget that, subject to passage of the Welfare Reform Bill 2011, these obligations would be extended to lone parents with a youngest child aged five and over from 2012. 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 lone parents, for example, in the hours of work they are required to seek.

The aim of this study is to evaluate the effect of LPO on lone parents whose youngest child is aged seven or eight.¹ It also aims to inform the delivery of the roll-out of LPO to lone parents with a youngest child aged five or six.

The findings presented in this report are based on qualitative fieldwork with 60 claimants across three case-study areas. The findings focus on the work readiness of lone parents, their experiences of childcare, reflections on when their youngest child started school, how they look for work, experiences of JSA and of moving into work.

Work readiness of lone parents

A typology of three broad categories of lone parents interviewed in this research was developed, based on their work and benefits histories: those with a high parenting orientation; those with a strong work attachment; or those who had experienced a critical life event.

High parenting orientation: lone parents in this group identified primarily as parents rather than workers. It was common for lone parents in this group to have not worked since becoming a parent. Some had claimed benefits from this point, while others had been supported by a partner.

Strong work attachment: lone parents in this group were the most work ready. They were out of work because of redundancy or because of inflexibility of employers or unsuitable childcare. Some in this group had retrained and were looking for work in their new industry or occupation.

Critical life event: lone parents in this group had experienced a critical life event. These included relationship breakdown, arrival in the UK and not speaking English, the onset or worsening of a health condition, and experiencing homelessness. Some lone parents in this group were not work ready, as they were dealing with the consequences of this event. Others had experienced the event some time in the past and were now ready to move into work.

In terms of social networks, it was common for interviewees to have lived in the same area for much of their lives and to have friends and family close by. Strong social networks were a potential asset in moving into work: lone parents with strong social networks often reported having family members (usually a mother or sister) who would help them with childcare and could be called upon at short notice.

¹ Lone parents who had experienced a sanction had children up to the age of nine.

Lone parents in this study were asked about the role in parenting, childcare and payment of child maintenance of their child or children's absent parent(s). Lone parents reported a range of practical involvement of the absent parent from completely uninvolved to heavily involved on a daily basis, though this was rarely understood to be 'childcare'.

Childcare

The reluctance to use formal childcare was less strongly reported by this group of lone parents compared with lone parents with older children in previous evaluations of LPO. This appears to be because the children of these lone parents were eligible for, and went on to have positive experiences of, free early years education, unlike those in previous phases of LPO. These families also reported positive experience or attitudes towards breakfast and after-school clubs.

Previous research has shown that breakfast and after-school clubs were by far the most commonly used type of formal childcare for lone parents with children of this age. There were some very positive attitudes about before and after-school clubs found in this research, and these were based on good previous experiences of them. The learning and activities which children undertake at these clubs were perceived as a very positive aspect.

Some lone parents did not feel that they needed to use formal childcare. This was because they only wanted to work part-time/in school hours and/or because they had a good support network of family, friends, current partners or their children's other parent who they used for informal care.

Lone parents interviewed did not usually express concern about the cost of childcare. For some this was because they were not planning to use it, even if they moved into work, so it was not felt to be a concern for them. For others it was because they felt it was affordable and the financial and non-financial benefits of working out-weighed the costs.

As with affordability, availability was not an issue for those who did not plan to use formal childcare and neither was it a major issue for others. This was linked to the past and current use of childcare, which meant that many lone parents knew what type of childcare they would use, often breakfast and after-school clubs.

Lone parents in the qualitative research who had spoken to staff at the Jobcentre Plus office about local childcare often said that they were given a leaflet about local childcare. This was generally found to be useful. A few lone parents we interviewed said that Jobcentre Plus staff had never spoken to them about childcare but they would have liked them to.

Reflections on youngest child starting school

Previous research has shown that for many parents, particularly lone parents, the point at which their youngest child starts school is a key point of return to the labour market. Given the planned roll out of LPO to include those with a youngest child aged five from 2012, lone parents in this study were asked to reflect back to the time when their youngest child started school.

Some lone parents that we spoke to did feel that the point at which their youngest child started school was relevant to their plans about work. Those lone parents who moved into work at this point were mostly from the 'strong work attachment' or 'critical life event' groups. Some of those in the 'high parenting orientation' group started voluntary work or moved into learning when their youngest child started school.

For other lone parents we spoke to, the time when their youngest child started school was not a trigger to move back into work. Those who did not find it a trigger and who were in the strong work attachment group were already in work at the time their youngest child started school. Those who were in the group who had experienced a critical life event and who didn't find it a trigger were either in work, or were experiencing their event at the time their youngest child started school and so were concentrating on that rather than moving into work. Those in the high parenting-orientation group, who did not find their youngest child starting school a trigger to think about work and parenting, told us that they were not interested in working or felt that they still had too many parenting tasks to start work at this time.

Looking for work

The lone parents in this study were generally very positive about work and the benefits that it would bring to them and their families. Lone parents felt positive about work for both financial and non-financial reasons. It was common for claimants to believe that they would be financially better off in work. This was the case both for those with recent work experience and for those who had been on benefits for many years. Claimants also spoke of benefits of working that were not financial. These included: being a good role model to their children; interacting more with other adults; and no longer having to claim benefits.

Lone parents also described downsides to working as a lone parent. These included particular concerns about their older children when moving into work.

Most of the lone parents that we spoke to had been looking for work for between four and six months. This reflected the length of time that they had been claiming JSA. Some lone parents, however, reported that they had been searching for a job since before they claimed JSA, in some cases for several years.

It was common for lone parents to be primarily looking for work with part-time hours that fitted around their parenting responsibilities. Others were motivated more by the job role itself.

Almost all the lone parents we spoke to reported that they used a variety of work-search activities. These included: internet searches; approaching employers directly; looking in local newspapers; asking friends and family; searching at Jobcentre Plus; and signing up with agencies.

Generally, lone parents reported finding that their job search was much more difficult than they anticipated. This included those who had been in work recently and those who hadn't worked for many years. Lone parents reported feeling frustrated at having applied for a large number of jobs and not being invited to interviews, or being invited to very few interviews.

Experiences of Jobseeker's Allowance

In general, lone parents found the process of claiming JSA to be unproblematic. Once the JSA claim started, claiming JSA was usually a smooth process. Lone parents were asked what they were expected to do as part of their claim and, in general, they had a good knowledge and understanding of the requirements of the JSA regime. They also generally reported understanding what they had to do and finding it easy to meet the requirements of their Jobseeker's Agreement (JSAg).

Lone parents in this research commonly showed no awareness that any of the list of flexibilities were being applied to them when prompted. However, it was usual to see when discussing their case that Jobcentre Plus staff had in fact applied the flexibilities to them. The main example of this was lone parents restricting their availability to work to part-time and in some cases school-hours work.

However, there was a group of lone parents who felt that they were being pressured by Jobcentre Plus staff to apply for jobs that they considered inappropriate, as these would have involved their working more than 16 hours, despite the flexibility to restrict work to 16 hours, and despite what they had signed up to in their JSAg. There were a few cases where interviewees were not identified as lone parents until they asked to change their sign-on time.

Whether or not lone parents were seeing staff who were specifically trained in lone parent issues varied, and it was just as common not to be seeing such staff as to be seeing them. Whether they were seeing such staff was a key influencer of the level and quality of support that lone parents felt they had received while on the JSA regime, and their attitude to Jobcentre Plus staff.

Where lone parents were not seeing staff trained in lone parent issues, it was common to feel that they were not receiving any support at all while on JSA. Where lone parents were seeing staff trained in lone parent issues they received a range of support through longer sign-on appointments, Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) and caseload interviews.

It was clear that awareness of the support available through the Jobcentre Plus Offer could be improved among lone parents. Claimants in this research were unaware of the range of support that could be provided under the Jobcentre Plus Offer. Lone parents were not routinely told about the support they could receive as part of the Jobcentre Plus Offer and often had to ask for help in order to receive support. It was more common for lone parents to be receiving support when they were seeing staff trained in lone parent issues while on JSA, but even then they did not know that they could receive a wider range of support, which they sometimes felt they needed and which could have been provided through the Jobcentre Plus Offer. Short sign-on appointments for those not seeing staff trained in lone parent issues were felt to be too quick for them to be able to ask for help.

In line with their good understanding of the requirements of the JSA regime in general, lone parents understood that if they did not comply with these requirements that their benefit could be stopped or they could be sanctioned. Awareness of the possibility of sanctions meant that some interviewees reported trying hard to make sure that they would not be sanctioned.

There is a very low incidence of sanctioning of lone parents on JSA according to Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative data. Because an aim of the research was to explore the experiences of those that had been sanctioned or disentitled, all lone parents with a youngest child aged between seven and nine who were shown to have experienced a sanction or disentitlement according to DWP administrative data were selected for interview. In the end, seven of these lone parents (out of the total 60 lone parents interviewed in this research) were interviewed. A further three reported being 'sanctioned' when interviewed (they had in fact been disentitled and had subsequently made a new claim for JSA).

According to administrative data, the reasons the seven lone parents were sanctioned or disentitled were for failure to attend appointments, failure to attend Back to Work sessions (BtWS) and for not actively seeking employment. Lone parents themselves, however, were not always clear about what the reason had been, or gave a different reason from the administrative data. Lone parent interviewees who had been sanctioned or disentitled reported struggling financially during this period.

Across the different groups of lone parents on JSA there was a strong dislike of claiming JSA. Negative attitudes to claiming JSA meant that JSA often gave lone parents a 'push' towards work. JSA seemed to have the greatest effect on attitudes to work for those with a high parenting orientation. Claiming JSA often gave these lone parents a direct push to look for work because they had to do so as part of the JSA regime. For those who had a strong work attachment, their often recent work experience and high work orientation meant that they generally felt that being on JSA had no effect on their attitude to work. Those lone parents who had experienced a critical life event were more varied in their opinions of whether JSA had affected their attitudes to work.

In-work experiences

A small group of lone parents that we interviewed had moved into work of more than 16 hours per week at the time of interview, although all had been claiming JSA when their contact details were selected for this research. This meant that these lone parents had only been in work for short periods of time. The longest period that a lone parent had been in work was four months, while many had been in work for weeks or even days. This limited the amount of reflection that lone parents had on their in-work experience. Those who moved into work tended to be either in the strong work attachment group or those with high parenting orientation.

Lone parents in work at the time of interview had moved into a range of jobs. Most of these were low-skilled and low-paid positions, such as cleaning, waitressing, low-level clerical and administrative work, and retail positions.

Generally, lone parents we spoke to were working between 16 and 29 hours per week, often within school hours. Some lone parents were working exactly 16 hours per week.

Lone parents in the group with strong work attachment were more likely to be working full-time or very close to full-time hours. Lone parents in the high parenting orientation were more likely to be working between 16 and 29 hours per week and were also more likely to have increased the hours of a mini-job.

Lone parents reported that work had a positive impact on themselves and their families beyond the financial impact of work.

Implications of this research for future Lone Parent Obligations roll-out

Subject to the passage of the Welfare Reform Bill 2011, the next roll-out of LPO will affect lone parents with a youngest child aged five. Many lone parents will have moved into work before their youngest child started school or at this point without the push of JSA. JSA claims by these lone parents are likely to be because of redundancy, inflexible employment or a lack of appropriate childcare. There was some evidence in this study that lone parents in work needed additional flexibility at work when their youngest child started school. These lone parents may need relatively little support, or support more in line with that provided by Jobcentre Plus redundancy support, than other lone parents on JSA.

Other lone parents are likely to consider work seriously for the first time in many years as a result of the JSA regime. Many of these lone parents, particularly those with high parenting orientation, are likely to express a strong preference for school-hours work. The difficulty finding such work that lone parents in this study reported is likely to be exacerbated as more lone parents are required to look for work. The JSA flexibility allowing lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or under to restrict their availability for work to school hours is in line with the work aspirations of many lone parents in this research. However, the limited availability of these jobs 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-hours jobs may be a sufficient reason for them to remain on benefits. Generating part-time vacancies will be key to moving many lone parents from JSA into work.

Recommendations

- Promote and facilitate the increased use of staff trained in lone parent issues within Jobcentre Plus in the delivery of the JSA regime for lone parents.
- Improve awareness and uptake of the Jobcentre Plus Offer among lone parent claimants.
- Ensure all Jobcentre Plus staff have a leaflet which they give to parent claimants about childcare in their local area. This could be either a list of local childcare providers or a leaflet from their local Family Information Services. It would also be useful if this identified where parents should go for advice about finding childcare for children with a disability or behavioural problems.

1 Introduction and methodology

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

1.1 Background and policy context

1.1.1 Lone parents in the UK

There are an estimated two million lone parents in the UK who care for 2.6 million children (Labour Force Survey Household Datasets, Q2, 2011). Lone parents now make up one-quarter of all families, and the UK has proportionately more lone parents than most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. The median age for a lone parent is 38 and only 1.4 per cent of lone parents are teenagers. Thirteen per cent of lone parents come from ethnic minority communities and eight per cent of lone parents are fathers (Labour Force Survey Household Datasets, Q2, 2011).

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 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 57.3 per cent (Labour Force Survey, Q2, 2011) and well over one million lone parents are in work. This rate increased steadily over a number of years owing to a combination of policy initiatives, changes in the characteristics of lone parents over time and more general improvements in employment rates in the UK. In recent years, however, the lone parent employment rate has levelled off.

Lone parents' experiences of employment are varied. A recent survey of lone parents receiving Income Support (IS) whose youngest child was seven or eight found that lone parents had either not worked since the birth of their oldest child (28 per cent), or had worked since having children but were not working at the time of the survey (37 per cent), had never worked (24 per cent) or were currently working (ten per cent) (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011).

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. In the UK, 20 per cent of all children and 28 per cent of children in lone parent families were in relative poverty in 2009/10.² Analysis of the Families and Children Study by Philo *et al.* (2009) found lone parent families were more than three times as likely as couple families to belong to the lowest

² Households Below Average Income 2009/10

income quintile (37 per cent and ten per cent, respectively). A child of a lone parent that works part-time is almost three times less likely to be living in poverty than a child of a lone parent who is not working, and a child of a lone parent that works full-time is five times less likely to be living in poverty.³ Further to this, lone parent families along with couple families where no parent worked were more likely to experience material deprivation.

1.1.4 Employment support for lone parents

Given that worklessness is a large determining factor of child poverty, increasing parental employment is one of the key means of reducing child 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 (WFI) for lone parents claiming IS; voluntary employment support for lone parents to help with a move from benefits into work⁴ and Lone Parent Obligations (LPO).

Since April 2011, Jobcentre Plus districts can offer lone parents who are not yet required to take part in the Work Programme (see below) access to support through the Jobcentre Plus Offer, which includes adviser support and a menu of flexible support options. Lone parents may have access to Jobcentre Plus provision or approved activities (contracted and non-contracted), financial incentives, the range of 'Get Britain Working'⁵ measures and help with expenses (for example, childcare, replacement care, travel or course costs) through a delegated flexible support fund, which reflects district priorities and needs.

Excluding specialist disability programmes, all Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) funded welfare-to-work provision, including Flexible New Deal, was replaced by a single integrated Work Programme from June 2011. The Work Programme assumes the task of supporting workless lone parents into employment, alongside other workless people. Lone parents who move onto Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) will generally be able to access the Work Programme 12 months after claiming JSA.⁶

1.1.5 LPO

LPO was introduced from November 2008 and meant that lone parent claimants 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 coalition government announced in the June 2010 Emergency Budget that these obligations would be extended to lone parents with a youngest child aged five and over. In February 2011 the Welfare Reform Bill was introduced to Parliament. The Bill confirmed measures announced in the Emergency Budget that lone parent benefit conditionality was to be extended. From 2012 (subject to the passage of the Bill) lone parents will lose their eligibility to IS when their youngest child

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Until April 2011, this was provided through the New Deal for Lone Parents and since then through the Jobcentre Plus Offer and work-preparation support.

⁵ These include Work Clubs, Work Together, Work Experience (for those aged 16–24), New Enterprise Allowance, Enterprise Clubs and Sector Based Work Academies.

⁶ Lone parents aged under 25 will be referred to the Work Programme nine months from the start of their JSA claim. Lone parents claiming IS in England can enter the Work Programme voluntarily.

reaches five. It is estimated that this change will result in 20,000 to 25,000 extra lone parents in work, which in turn could help reduce child poverty.⁷

When IS eligibility on the grounds of being a lone parent ends, those able to work are able to claim JSA and are required to be available for and actively seeking employment. Lone parents with health problems or disabilities may, if eligible, claim Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).

Some lone parent claimants who have another reason for being entitled to IS, such as foster carers or those in receipt of Carer's Allowance, are exempt from LPO and continue to be eligible to claim IS. In addition, some groups of lone parent claimants are offered transitional protection and are entitled to continue to receive IS for a limited period of time. These groups include: lone parents on IS who are in full-time study or following a full-time course on an approved training scheme. This transitional protection applies only 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 applies 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 claimants. They were anticipated to affect around 300,000 existing lone parent claimants (those with a youngest child aged seven or over) who claim IS because they are lone parents. The *Welfare Reform Bill Impact Assessment* estimates that around 75,000 lone parents per year in steady state will be affected when the age is reduced to five.⁸

In August 2011, there were 123,805 lone parents in receipt of JSA, of which 50,715 had a youngest child aged between seven and nine.⁹

The findings from this stage of the LPO research are relevant to the ongoing changes and will help inform the further roll-out of LPO to lone parent claimants with a youngest child aged five and over. The concluding chapter of this report (Chapter 8) considers what implications the findings may have for the government's future plans for welfare-to-work policy.

1.1.6 Universal Credit

The Welfare Reform Bill 2011 also sets out plans to reform the welfare system by introducing a Universal Credit. Universal Credit will provide a new system of means-tested support for working-age people who are in or out of work. Support for housing costs, children and childcare costs will be integrated in the new benefit. It will also provide additions for disabled people and carers. Existing means-tested benefits that will be replaced by Universal Credit include income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related ESA, Income Support, Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit and Housing Benefit. Universal Credit is to be rolled out from 2013, subject to the passage of the Bill.

1.2 Evaluating Lone Parent Obligations

The evaluation of LPO has been ongoing as the policy has rolled out. The first evaluation report focused on the first roll-out group, which was lone parents who had a youngest child aged between 12 and 15 years old. It also examined the IS regime for lone parents with a youngest child aged one

⁷ *Conditionality Measures in the 2011 Welfare Reform Bill*, <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/conditionality-wr2011-ia.pdf>

⁸ *Conditionality Measures in the 2011 Welfare Reform Bill*, <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/conditionality-wr2011-ia.pdf>

⁹ The figures are for Great Britain.

to six years. The study focused on the claimant's experience of IS eligibility ending, before they had moved to another benefit or status. The communications used to inform them of the changes of this aspect were a specific focus, as was the support received in preparation for the changes (Gloster *et al.* 2010).

The second evaluation report focused on a variety of destinations that lone parents moved to after losing eligibility to IS (including claiming JSA, claiming ESA, unknown destinations, being exempt from LPO and moving into work). For JSA, the study included both new and repeat JSA claimants, as well as lone parent claimants who had recently been moved from IS to JSA because of LPO. It examined the effectiveness of the JSA regime for these groups of lone parent claimants. The lone parents in the study had a youngest child aged between 12 and 15 (the first roll-out group) (Casebourne *et al.* 2010).

In addition to this qualitative research, a survey was conducted with lone parents whose youngest child was approaching the LPO threshold of seven or eight (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011). The survey will be followed up in early 2012 to explore outcomes for lone parents a year after their claim for IS ended.

1.2.1 Research aims and objectives

The aim of this study was to evaluate the effect of LPO for lone parents who lost entitlement to IS from October 2010 and whose youngest child was aged seven or eight. Also, because these lone parents had younger children than those affected by previous phases of LPO, it aimed to inform the delivery of the further roll out of LPO, to those with a youngest child aged five or six.

The research explored:

- work readiness and support needed to move into work;
- work-search priorities;
- JSA flexibilities and fulfilling the requirements of the JSA regime;
- sanctions and their implications;
- social networks to help support a move into work;
- issues relevant to those with younger children;
- childcare.

1.2.2 Methodology

The findings presented in this report are taken from qualitative interviews with lone parent claimants. Qualitative research is useful for understanding how and why things happen or how and why people respond to changes in certain ways. It helps to illustrate people's experiences but is not statistically representative of the wider population of interest.

Fieldwork was undertaken in three case-study areas mapped to Jobcentre Plus district boundaries. The three case-study areas were chosen to include both urban and rural areas. All case study areas chosen had high proportions of lone parent claimants to ensure there were sufficient volumes from which to recruit individuals for interview. The three case-study areas were: Birmingham and Solihull; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders; and Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth.

Interviews were completed in June and July 2011 with 60 lone parents who had a youngest child aged seven or eight. The 60 lone parents that we interviewed were recruited from a sample of lone parents who had made a claim for JSA between October 2010 and February 2011 and who had a youngest child aged seven at the time of their JSA claim. Thirty-five lone parents who had

transferred from IS onto JSA were interviewed, as were 25 lone parents who were classified as 'new and repeat claimants'. In order to interview a sufficient number of lone parents who had experienced a sanction to be able to report on their experiences, all lone parents who had made a claim for JSA (and had experienced a sanction within the same time period) but whose youngest child was up to the age of ten were also included. Further information on the lone parent claimants interviewed can be found in the Appendix.

1.2.3 Interviewing approach and discussion guides

One discussion guide was used to interview all lone parent claimants. The core areas of the discussion guide included questions about lone parents' education and training, benefit and work history, childcare, experiences of the JSA regime, benefit sanctions, work-search activities and support, including Jobcentre Plus support. Themes covered by the discussion guide are detailed in the Appendix.

The concept of time and changes over time periods were critical to understanding lone parent claimants' 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 destinations research conducted last year (see Casebourne *et al.* 2010).

1.2.4 Analysis process

Lone parent 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 who 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 transcription and notes from each interview were coded and analysed according to a framework of themes agreed with the DWP. Following the coding process, the detailed outputs were reviewed by the report authors and used to write this report.

1.3 Report structure

In the remainder of the report:

- Chapter 2 examines the work readiness of lone parents, including social networks and the role of the absent parent.
- Chapter 3 reports findings of use of, and attitudes to, formal childcare.
- Chapter 4 explores the reflections of lone parents on the time that their youngest child started school.
- Chapter 5 reports findings of the attitudes to balancing work and family, and experiences of lone parents in looking for work.
- Chapter 6 examines the experiences of lone parents on JSA, including experiences of sanctions and disentitlements, and the effect of the JSA regime on lone parents' attitudes to work.
- Chapter 7 reports the experiences of lone parents in work at the time of interview.
- Chapter 8 draws together the main conclusions and recommendations from the research.
- The appendix provide further detail of the sampling and recruitment of lone parents, key characteristics of those interviewed and themes covered by the discussion guide.

2 Work readiness

This chapter examines the work readiness of lone parents on Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). It creates a typology of lone parent claimants based on their work and benefits histories. Social networks and the role of the absent parent are considered as factors that influence work readiness. Finally, the work readiness of this group of lone parents is compared with the lone parents from the last wave of qualitative evaluation.

2.1 Typology of lone parent claimants

This section attempts to draw together different facets of the experiences and characteristics of lone parent customers on JSA in order to explore their work readiness, and the different kinds of support that might be helpful to them. Three broad categories of experience based on work and benefits histories have been identified. Some lone parents' experiences cut across more than one of these categories. We found that whether an individual had transferred from Income Support (IS) to JSA or whether they were a new or repeat claimant was not predictive of which category they best fit. In this research, we found that these three groups were of broadly even size. We will be using these groups, outlined in detail below, throughout the rest of the report and, where appropriate, for the analysis of our findings.

High parenting orientation

Lone parents in this group identified themselves primarily as parents rather than workers. It was common for lone parents in this group not to have worked since becoming a parent. Some had claimed benefits from this point, while others had been supported by a partner.

Strong work attachment

Lone parents in this group were the most work ready. They were out of work because of redundancy, inflexibility of employers or unsuitable childcare. Some in this group had retrained and were looking for work in their new industry or occupation.

Critical life event

Lone parents in this group had experienced a critical life event. These included: relationship breakdown, arrival in the UK and not speaking English, the onset or worsening of a health condition, and experiencing homelessness. Some lone parents in this group were not work ready as they were dealing with the consequences of this event. Others had experienced the event some time in the past and now felt ready to move into work.

2.1.1 High parenting orientation

Previous research has identified attitudes to work and parenting as strongly linked to decision making around entering and sustaining employment (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011; Tamaszewski *et al.* 2010; Bell *et al.* 2005). In this study, one group of lone parents' experiences were marked by their high parenting orientation. These lone parents had tended to stop working when they became mothers (none of the lone fathers that we interviewed were in this group). Some had been on benefits since motherhood or shortly afterwards, while others had been supported by a partner for some of this time. New and repeat claimants in this group tended to have separated from a partner recently and made their first benefits claim, but had not worked for many years.

Case study 1 – Ms G

Ms G made a claim for JSA in February 2011 when her partner left her. She had an eight year old son and hadn't worked since he was born. Ms G left school without any qualifications and wished that she had paid more attention at school because she believed that her lack of qualifications held her back. Before becoming a mother, she had worked at a newsagent and as a cleaner at a hotel. Ms G was looking for cleaning, retail or care work of up to 20 hours per week. She didn't want to use any childcare and so her work search was limited to jobs with hours when her son was in school. Ms G didn't feel that she got enough support from Jobcentre Plus but wasn't sure what support would be useful for her.

Case study 2 – Ms H

Ms H made a claim for JSA in February 2011 as her eligibility for IS ended when her youngest child turned eight years. She had three children, aged 20, 15 and eight. Ms H left school without qualifications. She thought about doing a childcare qualification while she was on IS but the course was outside school hours and she didn't want to use childcare. Before becoming a parent she worked at a take-away restaurant and as a cleaner. She briefly returned to work after having her first child but found this a struggle and hadn't worked since.

Ms H was looking for cleaning or shop work that is within school hours so she didn't need to use childcare. At the time of interview she was about to start two jobs that together totalled more than 16 hours per week so that she could come off JSA. One was a crossing patrol position (lollipop lady) for 12 hours per week and the other was a dinner lady for five hours per week. She thought this would be ideal, as her daughter would be able to go to school with her in the morning and then meet her at the crossing after school. She wouldn't be working in the school holidays.

2.1.2 Strong work attachment

A second group of lone parents in this study were claiming JSA because of a constraint directly related to work. These included: those made redundant, those who had retrained and were looking for work in their new occupation and those who had not managed to sustain work because of inflexible employers or problems with childcare. Lone parents in this group tended to be closest to the labour market, often with higher levels of qualification and recent work experience. Customers who had claimed IS before transferring to JSA in this group had successfully combined work and parenting before making their claim for IS.

Case study 1 – Mr B

Mr B was a lone parent with two children aged eight and 12. He became a lone parent five years ago. Mr B left school with some CSEs but had job offers before he left and so didn't concentrate on study. He worked full-time in facilities for a social housing provider for 25 years before being made redundant four years ago. He quickly found another job as a glazier but was made redundant from that job two years before the interview. Mr B used a combination of formal and informal childcare while working full-time as a lone parent and was confident in doing that again when he moved back into work. After losing his last job, Mr B went to sign on for JSA but was told that he was eligible for IS because he was a lone parent. While on IS, Mr B studied a gas engineering course, which he paid for himself. He had been doing voluntary

Continued

Case study 1 – Mr B (continued)

work to build up a portfolio of work so that he could get his Gas Safe card and then apply for jobs as a gas engineer. He found his experience of JSA positive, even though he was fearful that he would have his benefits stopped because of doing voluntary work for his portfolio when he transitioned over to JSA. However, his adviser was pragmatic and aware that he was very close to getting his Gas Safe card when he first made his JSA claim. He said *'I think they do a sterling job to be honest'*. He was applying for full-time jobs as a gas engineer at the time of interview, ideally for a large servicing company where he could continue his training. His previous jobs had had a salary of around £25,000 and he thought he would earn a similar salary as a gas engineer.

Case study 2 – Ms W

Ms W was a lone parent with a seven year old son. She had been a lone parent ever since her son was born. Before becoming a mother she worked in a range of jobs in the hospitality industry, such as waitressing and bar work. She claimed IS for two years after her son was born. At this point she did some temporary work for six months and then started a degree in hospitality and leisure management.

Throughout her degree she worked part-time doing a range of jobs in hotels, including waitressing, bar work and being a housekeeping supervisor. Towards the end of her degree she used an after-school club for childcare. When she had night shifts, her son's father would care for him. After Ms W finished her degree she worked at a restaurant. This job was minimum wage but she enjoyed it as they allowed her to use her ideas and skills to develop the business.

While working, Ms W continued to use the after-school club. Unfortunately, her shifts at the restaurant often ran late and she was unable to leave on time every day. This meant that she was sometimes late to pick her son up from the after-school club and was being given £15 penalties for being late. As Ms W couldn't afford this and her work was inflexible, she was unable to continue and so left the job and made a claim for JSA. This was slightly complicated because she had not been fired or made redundant and so there was a delay of a few weeks before her first JSA payment. This was presumably owing to a delay in the application of the lone parent flexibility regarding suitable childcare.

She was looking for full-time work of 37 hours per week at the time of interview. Ms W was open to working a range of jobs, including catering or an administrative role within the hospitality industry. She had been offered and turned down one job because the shifts were at night and this had not been clear in the advertisement.

2.1.3 Critical life event

Another group of lone parents made a claim for JSA because of an event not directly related to work but which affected their ability to work. These included: recent relationship breakdown, newly arriving in the UK and not speaking English, or a crisis, such as bankruptcy or the onset or worsening of a health condition. This group also included grandparents who had taken on responsibility for their grandchildren. In these cases the lone parent needed time to address the consequences of the event before they could move into work. Some of these claimants had spent some time addressing these issues and were close to being able to move into work at the time of interview, while others had experienced the critical life event shortly before the interview and had significant constraints that needed to be addressed before being able to move into work.

Case study 1 – Ms C

Ms C was a lone parent with a seven year old son. She became a lone parent when her son was born. Ms C worked in a range of jobs before becoming a mother, including working as a fitness instructor, in a care home and in retail security. After becoming a mother, Ms C didn't return to her old job and instead worked full-time for a cleaning company where she worked her way up from cleaning supervisor to cleaning manager to contracts manager. Ms C used a combination of full-time nursery and help from friends and family to cover her childcare needs.

Things started to go wrong for Ms C when her father died and she suffered a nervous breakdown and lost her job. This resulted in her becoming bankrupt and losing her home. Ms C moved onto IS and claimed this for 11 months before making a claim for JSA when her son turned seven. This time on IS gave her some time to sort out her housing situation and her mental health. Ms C began to look for work towards the end of her time on IS and was looking for full-time work in the leisure industry at the time of interview.

Case study 2 – Ms R

Ms R was a lone parent with three children, aged 14, 12 and seven. Her relationship with her ex-partner had been on and off and since becoming a mother she had spent about half her time in work and half on IS or as a stay at home mother supported by her partner. Ms R had worked in a range of jobs, including retail and care work. Over several years her ex-partner became more aggressive and eventually physically violent. Two years before the interview she left her ex-partner, quitting her part-time care role and moving herself and her children to a different area. She initially claimed IS and made a claim for JSA in January 2011. The time after leaving had been difficult, as she had had to settle the children into new schools and find accommodation. Ms R began looking for part-time or full-time care work when she moved onto JSA. Three months into her JSA claim she saw an advertisement for a part-time position with her last employer. She applied and was successful in getting this job. Ms R was planning to use breakfast and after-school clubs to cover her childcare needs. At the time of interview she was looking forward to starting work soon.

2.2 Social networks and the role of the absent parent

Previous waves of qualitative research into Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) have found that many lone parents have strong social networks. It was common for lone parents in these studies to have lived in the same area for much of their lives and to have friends and family close by (Gloster *et al.* 2010; Casebourne *et al.* 2010). These findings have been replicated in this wave of research. Strong social networks were a potential asset in moving into work. As shall be seen in Chapter 3, some lone parents had a strong preference for informal childcare. Other lone parents worried that they might not be able to stay in work if they could not find a flexible enough employer who would allow them time off work to care for their children when they were sick. These concerns could be minimised by the presence of rich social networks. Lone parents with strong social networks often reported having family members (usually a mother or sister) who would help them with childcare and could be called upon at short notice. For example, one lone parent who had had lived in her village all her life and had rich social networks said:

'Yeah I'm quite lucky that way, my family would help out – my mum and my dad – and I've got an older daughter – she would help out – and I've got a sister, so I should be OK.'

(JSA new and repeat lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

However, not all lone parents we spoke to had strong social networks. It was relatively common for respondents to have moved back to the area where they grew up after many years away. In some of these cases this increased their access to social networks and support, but in others these individuals were still relatively isolated. For example, one lone parent had lived in the south of England for ten years before moving back to Edinburgh nine years ago. When asked whether she had friends and family living nearby she said:

'Most of my parents and grandparents have all passed on, so it's just kinda me. I've got my sisters, but one lives in Aberdeen and the other one lives on the other side of Edinburgh and they all work full-time, so I don't see them.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Other lone parents had moved to their area recently. In some cases this was linked to traumatic experiences, such as domestic violence or experiencing homelessness, others were recent arrivals to the UK. There were also a small number of lone parents who had lived in their area for a number of years but had not formed rich social networks in that time. Those lone parents with weak social networks often described their lives as marked by isolation. For example, one lone parent explained that he was no longer close to his family and could no longer call on them to help with his children:

'They're spread around...we used to be like close but now everybody's like "Ahhh I don't care, I have got my own stuff to look after"'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

2.2.1 Role of the absent parent

Lone parents in this study were asked about the role in parenting, childcare and payment of child maintenance of their child or children's absent parent(s). Lone parents reported a range of practical involvement of the absent parent from completely uninvolved to heavily involved on a daily basis, though this was rarely understood to be 'childcare'. For example, one lone parent whose ex-partner looked after their daughter on a regular day each week said that he played no role in childcare.

In those cases where the absent parent was involved, this was found to be useful by the lone parent. For example, one lone parent in Edinburgh said:

'He's hands on when I need him, really, to offer support.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Sometimes the involvement of the absent parent was regular assistance with parenting tasks. For example, the ex-partner of a lone parent with an autistic son took this child to school each day and stayed with him until he settled. This enabled the lone parent to take the other two children to school. More often the absent parent cared for the child or children on regular days each week or fortnight. For example:

'They've each got a school bus pass so they can go to his or mine but they are usually with me in the week and then Friday night is optional with him or me and then Saturday night they are with him.'

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

The *Lone Parent Obligations survey* found that when lone parents were using the absent parent as a form of childcare, they provided a large number of hours of childcare (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011). Results of this wave of qualitative evaluation offer a possible explanation for this large number of hours. Where absent parents were heavily involved in parenting, they often cared for their children on regular days.

These cases were rare, however, and it was far more common for lone parents to report that the absent parent was not involved or was only occasionally involved. Sometimes it was the lone parent who had cut off contact with the absent parent. This was typically in cases where domestic violence had occurred, or in one case because the lone parent feared that her ex-partner would abduct the children and take them overseas. In other cases it was the absent parent who had ceased contact with the children. In these cases, it was often many years since the absent parent had been in contact, or the absent parent had never been in contact. For example, one lone parent in Birmingham reported that her ex-partner had had no role in parenting their son. She said:

'I mean, he's been to see him a couple of times, but he's been and gone.'

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

Many lone parents told us that the absent parent was occasionally involved. This was often felt to be frustrating because the involvement was unreliable and couldn't be planned for. For example, one lone parent had secured a work experience placement three days per week and the absent parent had agreed to help look after the children while she was at her placement. He helped on the first day but then failed to show up on subsequent days. She said:

'Well, two weeks ago he didn't come. He'll say OK, or he'll say he's got something else to do. It's not like I can say "Yeah, he's a person who will be there."'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

In line with findings from the last qualitative evaluation of LPO it was rare for respondents to be in receipt of child maintenance (Casebourne *et al.* 2010). Where this was received, it was often very small amounts of money. Some absent parents did contribute informally by buying things for the children on an occasional basis. For example:

'Oh child maintenance, I know about that. Not really, like he'll just come like if I need anything, he'll just give it. Especially when the kids miss him so much and he comes and visits, he'll just get something for the kids, or for the shopping, or something.'

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

As with social networks more generally, a supportive relationship with the absent parent may help lone parents move into work. While lone parents whose children spent regular days or times with the absent parent didn't always think of this as childcare, the regularity and reliability of this meant that there was a possibility for work to be planned around these times. The quantitative study of LPO suggested that childcare or shared care with the non-resident parent might be encouraged through the Child Maintenance Options Service (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011). Nonetheless, based on the experiences of many lone parents in this study, greater involvement of the absent parent was either unrealistic or undesirable.

2.3 How work ready are these lone parents and how are they different from lone parents in previous research on Lone Parent Obligations?

The lone parents in this study had a wide range of work readiness. Compared with the last wave of qualitative evaluation of LPO, we found far fewer lone parents with complex and health-related barriers. This was largely because, this time, the lone parents selected for the research only included those who claimed JSA, rather than lone parents who moved from IS to a variety of destinations.

As with the quantitative evaluation, we found that lone parents were diverse in terms of their level of qualification. Some lone parents had strong social networks that provided support with childcare which could help them move into work more easily. In some cases, this included a supportive relationship with the absent parent. In many more cases, however, absent parents did not provide childcare or were seen as unreliable in their involvement with their children.

Generally, the lone parents in the group we categorised as having a strong attachment to work were very work ready, often with qualifications and many years of work experience. They required little support in order to move back into work. The other two groups were often less work ready. Some of the lone parents with high parenting orientation did not have a strong desire to work and would only consider school-hours work. This limited the number of jobs for which they could apply. Generally, lone parents in this group had not worked for many years, usually since they became parents. It must be noted, however, that in comparison with the last qualitative wave of research, these lone parents tended to have been out of work for less time, as they had younger children. This group would require support to encourage the use of formal childcare and consideration of jobs outside school hours. The third group of lone parents that we identified – those who had experienced a critical life event – displayed a range of work readiness. Some were very far from being work ready and were dealing with major issues, such as homelessness or a recent crisis that needed to be addressed before they could move into work. Others had experienced their event some time before and were now ready to move back into work.

2.4 Summary

- A typology of three broad categories of lone parents interviewed in this research was developed, based on their work and benefits histories: those with a high parenting orientation, those with a strong work attachment or those who had experienced a critical life event.
- **High parenting orientation:** lone parents in this group identified primarily as parents rather than workers. It was common for lone parents in this group to have not worked since becoming a parent. Some had claimed benefits from this point, while others had been supported by a partner.
- **Strong work attachment:** lone parents in this group were the most work ready. They were out of work because of redundancy or because of inflexibility of employers or unsuitable childcare. Some in this group had retrained and were looking for work in their new industry or occupation.
- **Critical life event:** lone parents in this group had experienced a critical life event. These included relationship breakdown, arrival in the UK and not speaking English, the onset or worsening of a health condition, and experiencing homelessness. Some lone parents in this group were not work ready as they were dealing with the consequences of this event. Others had experienced the event some time in the past and were now ready to move into work.
- In terms of social networks, it was common for interviewees to have lived in the same area for much of their lives and to have friends and family close by. Strong social networks were a potential asset in moving into work: lone parents with strong social networks often reported having family members (usually a mother or sister) who would help them with childcare and could be called upon at short notice.
- Lone parents in this study were asked about the role in parenting, childcare and payment of child maintenance of their child or children's absent parent(s). Lone parents reported a range of practical involvement of the absent parent from completely uninvolved to heavily involved on a daily basis, though this was rarely understood to be 'childcare'.

3 Childcare

This chapter explores lone parents' use of, and attitudes to, formal childcare. It includes use of different childcare provision, as well as where no childcare was used. This chapter also looks at affordability and availability of childcare, as well as advice that lone parents received about childcare.

3.1 Use of, and attitudes to, formal childcare

3.1.1 Attitudes to formal childcare

The previous wave of qualitative evaluation of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) found that lone parents were reluctant to use formal childcare and lone parents with children aged between 12 and 15 restricted their availability to work to fit around school hours and informal childcare (Casebourne *et al.* 2010). This reluctance to use formal childcare was also found 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. Other research has shown that the greater use of informal childcare by lone parents is related to the greater likelihood that children in lone parent households spend time with the non-resident parent (Smith *et al.* 2010).

The reluctance to use formal childcare was less strongly reported by this group of lone parents compared with lone parents with older children in the previous evaluations of LPO and in other lone parent research. This appears to be owing to the age of the children (youngest child age seven, eight or nine), positive experiences of free early years education, and positive experience or attitudes towards breakfast and after-school clubs.

It was common for parents to have used nursery provision, often the free early years provision when their children were three and four years old,¹⁰ and they reported being happy with this. Reasons for using nursery in the high parenting-orientation group included: because it was free, convenient and/or their children enjoyed it. For example, one lone parent in this group who had not worked since the birth of her second child reported a very positive experience for both her and her children of using free early years provision:

'All my girls went there. I know the teachers. It is a good nursery and they were learning and mixing with other children. They loved it.'

(Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) from Income Support (IS) lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Parents who had a strong work attachment had more experience of using a combination of nursery, after-school clubs, and friends and family to look after their children in the past than those who were in the high parenting orientation group. This is unsurprising given that they tended to have more recent and extensive work histories than other parents and were, therefore, more likely to have needed to use formal and informal childcare to cover the time they were in work. For example they had used full-time nursery rather than just the free early years provision, or their children had started nursery before the age at which free provision starts.

¹⁰ Parents in this research were entitled to 12.5 hours free early years education when their child was aged three or four. In September 2010, this was increased to 15 hours per week for three and four year olds.

A few parents mentioned that their children did not enjoy the childcare they tried, for example a nursery or an after-school club. In these cases, the parents either only used the childcare for a very small number of hours, tried different types of childcare until they found one the child would settle in, or decided not to use formal childcare but to look after the child themselves, or rely on family or friends. This has important implications for the future roll out of LPO to lone parents with a youngest child aged five, as those who have difficulties settling their children into formal childcare or making informal childcare arrangements may need support during this period. For example, Jobcentre Plus staff may need to be willing to work with parents to find the most appropriate childcare arrangements for their particular needs.

Negative attitudes towards formal childcare were rare and tended to be because of hearing negative stories about childminders in the media, which resulted in the mistrust of using formal childcare. However, on its own this was not necessarily a barrier to employment, for example if the lone parents had friends or family who could look after their child or if they were looking for a school-hours-only job.

Case study: Negative attitude towards some types of formal childcare

An accident before the birth of her eight year old son had left Ms S unable to work and claiming Incapacity Benefit (IB). She had not worked since then. At the time of the interview, she was well enough to work and was looking for school-hours work while claiming JSA.

Ms S was keen not to use childminders, as she did not trust them, having read and seen negative stories about them in the press, and thought they were too expensive:

'I wouldn't use a childminder, I'm not going to have some strange person take my son. I've seen things on the telly, some of them can be quite wicked.'

In spite of this, Ms S was not against all forms of formal childcare and had considered after-school and breakfast clubs. However, she believed there were waiting lists for these in her local area. Despite having immediate family near where she lived she was not intending to use informal childcare either. She was keen to work only during school hours but felt there was a lack of this type of job. Despite describing the staff at Jobcentre Plus as 'nice and helpful', she felt she was being pushed into looking for work outside school hours.

3.1.2 Breakfast and after-school clubs

Breakfast and after-school clubs

Breakfast and after school clubs cover a wide range of activities including extra-curricular activities. These may include sports, such as football, or activities, such as art or cooking. Others are homework clubs where children may get support with their homework. Some after-school clubs provide a meal or snack and they can be located either at a school or off-site, for example in a local hall. Off-site after-school clubs often provide transport to collect the children from school. It is therefore not surprising that these clubs were often used because of the activities on offer, not just as childcare for the children of working parents.

Previous research has shown that breakfast and after-school clubs were by far the most commonly used type of formal childcare for lone parents with children of this age, used by 23 per cent of lone parents (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011).

There were some very positive attitudes about before and after-school clubs found in this research, and these were based on good previous experiences. The learning and activities which children undertake at these clubs were perceived as a very positive aspect. This was also additional to the activities that other forms of childcare offered, such as childminders or baby sitters. The convenient location (typically at their child's school), and the fact that clubs would collect children from school if they are not based on school premises and provide meals or snacks, were all aspects of the clubs that parents were positive about.

Only two of the parents we interviewed who were in work used formal childcare of any sort, and this was breakfast and after-school clubs. For both of these parents the breakfast and after-school clubs provided the care they needed during the hours they needed it, to cover time spent working full and part time. For further discussion of lone parents' experiences of moving into work, see Chapter 7.

A handful of parents we interviewed used after-school clubs, even while they were not working. This included both occasional and regular usage. There were a few reasons for using the breakfast and after-school clubs. For some it was because they had used them in the past when in work or learning and their child enjoyed them, for example the sport activity undertaken at the club. Others found them a convenient form of childcare, for example when they were doing voluntary work. Some felt it was beneficial for the child's education. For example, one lone parent had previously used nursery, an after-school club and help from an older child for childcare for her youngest son. However, while between jobs and claiming JSA she was still using the after-school club because she felt it was helping with her son's schooling:

'They charge £8 a day...I am struggling with it, but because they help him in such a lot of different ways I let him go like twice a week, maybe three times a week...He loves it...I let him do it because he...is very bright, he is a very bright kid and I don't want him to fall back. Not because of my downfalls I just want him to keep on going. You know, things that I didn't get the privilege of when I was younger I want him to have it.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

The very positive attitudes towards breakfast and after-school clubs meant they were often cited as examples of the formal childcare that parents who were out of work when interviewed were considering using when returning to work.

3.1.3 Not needing formal childcare

Reasons for not using formal childcare in the past tended to be related to the fact that the parents felt there was no need to. For example, some parents cared for their children themselves because they could and they wanted to. This included those who were married or in a relationship when their children were pre-school age, or were out of work so did not need childcare, or worked as a childminder (so were able to look after their own children while minding other children). Others had lived in the area all their life and had a strong network of family and friends, so always counted on a family member (see Section 2.2), such as the child's grandmother, to look after their child(ren) before they were old enough to start school.

Lone parents out of work when interviewed and not using any formal childcare, including breakfast or after-school clubs, explained this was because they did not feel they needed to at this time. It was not necessarily a reflection of a bad experience of childcare in the past, in either nursery or after-school clubs. Nor was it typically because of a lack of awareness of after-school clubs or a lack of availability.

Those lone parents in work when interviewed who were not using any formal childcare also explained that this was because they did not need to. Some were only working during school hours or working at their child's school. By working in a school-based job, holiday care was also not an issue. Others had a good support network of family, friends, current partners or their children's other parent who they used for informal care (see Section 2.2 for further discussion of the role of absent parents). For some lone parents, this support network meant that they did not have to consider formal childcare, even if they were open to the possibility of using formal childcare in the future.

Case study: Example of a lone parent who did not need formal childcare while working

Ms D had one son aged eight years old. She had lived in the area for eight years and had family who lived nearby. She started claiming JSA three years before the interview and got a mini-job within one year of this. For the four months running up to the interview she had stopped claiming JSA as she had been working at two cleaning jobs, one in the morning (during school hours) and one in the evening. During the evening she relied on a friend to look after her son and also during the school holidays. She preferred to use her friend who helped out free of charge, rather than formal childcare. She had no plans to use formal childcare in the future:

'I'm not sending the child to the childcare. I don't go for that. I have a friend who keeps them for me in the evening and I come home and pick him up.'

As discussed in Section 5.3, many lone parents who were still on JSA when interviewed were looking for part-time work to fit around their parenting responsibilities. This included those looking for part-time work during school hours and work within schools. As well as enabling parents to balance work and family life, at a practical level it also meant that there was less, if any, need for formal childcare.

Not surprisingly, those with negative attitudes towards formal childcare were not planning to need to use it, either by working part-time in school hours, or using family and friends to look after their children when they were in work. This included those with concerns about: the safety of their children when in formal childcare, the cost of formal childcare and its availability.

3.1.4 Affordability of formal childcare

Lone parents interviewed tended not to express concern about the cost of childcare, although it was a significant issue for some. For some, this was because they were not planning to use it, even if they moved into work, so they did not feel it was a concern. For others, it was because they felt it was affordable, and the financial and non-financial benefits of working out-weighed the costs (see Section 5.1 on attitudes to balancing work and family).

While not commonly reported among this group of parents, concern about the cost of using formal childcare was a significant issue for some. This included parents who were considering informal arrangements as an alternative. For example, one lone parent who was keen to return to work and planned to use family members for childcare, as she had in the past, explained that this was owing to the cost of childcare:

'Private childcare costs an arm and a leg. You're talking anything up to £25 an hour for two of them. After school clubs are a nightmare as well. They are £15 for registration for two and then £20 each per day.'

(JSA new and repeat lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Uncertainty about the financial benefits of working tended to be linked to uncertainty about what financial support lone parents may be entitled to for formal childcare when they moved into work.

Other lone parents who had used childcare in the past, or were doing so at the time of the interview, expressed concern that their childcare costs were increasing. This appears to be a reflection of the cost of some childcare going up, as well as the decrease in financial support available towards childcare.¹¹ For parents who mentioned this, no action had yet been taken and it did not mean that they felt childcare was, as yet, unaffordable. It was more something that they were aware of and that could become an issue in the future.

This suggests that it is crucial to ensure that parents moving into work are aware of any childcare support they may be eligible for and how to claim it.

3.1.5 Availability of formal childcare

As with affordability, availability was not an issue for those who did not plan to use formal childcare and neither was it commonly a major issue for others, although it was a problem for some. This was linked to the past and current use of childcare, which meant that many lone parents we interviewed knew what type of childcare they would use, often breakfast and after-school clubs, because they had used it in the past or at the time of interview.

Some lone parents expressed concern about a lack of available childcare. This tended to be owing to waiting lists for after-school clubs, or a lack of availability for children with behavioural issues. For some, this was a significant barrier to employment, particularly for those with children with behavioural problems.

Case study: experience of lone parent struggling to find childcare for a son with behavioural problems

Mr J was a lone parent with two sons, the youngest was aged eight. He had worked all his life but following the death of a relative who cared for one of his sons he found it difficult to combine work and family life. He therefore stopped work and had been claiming benefits since then – JSA at the time of interview.

He used a childminder for one of his sons. However he had struggled to find childcare for his second son who had behavioural problems. This was proving to be a significant barrier that he felt he needed to overcome before returning to work.

His lone parent adviser at Jobcentre Plus gave him a childcare information leaflet for his local area. He called some of these childcare providers but could not find anyone willing to take his son with behavioural issues:

‘I’ve been phoning up people to see if they will be willing to take my son. When I explain how difficult his behavioural problems are they don’t want him. I need to find a specialist childminder but it’s quite difficult.’

Mr J had also asked the childminder of his other son to recommend people, but had had no luck at the time of interview. He was keen to work again but did not think it would be possible unless he could find suitable care for his son outside school hours.

¹¹ In April 2011, the amount of childcare support available to working parents through the tax credit system dropped from a maximum of 80 to 70 per cent of eligible costs.

3.1.6 Childcare advice from Jobcentre Plus

The survey of lone parents found that, before losing their IS eligibility, around 18 per cent of lone parents recalled receiving advice or help with finding local childcare from Jobcentre Plus staff (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011 p.60).¹² Of those who had received advice, most (75 per cent) found it useful. However, respondents with a child with a long-standing illness or disability were less likely to find the advice useful (32 per cent of whom described it as 'not useful'). This was reflected by the experiences of lone parents in this research who had moved off IS onto JSA or into work.

The lone parents who had spoken to staff at Jobcentre Plus about childcare often said that they were given a leaflet about local childcare. This was generally found to be useful. Having received the leaflet the lone parents then contacted the childcare providers to find out more about this provision as and when they needed it.

Case study: positive experience of receiving childcare information from Jobcentre Plus staff.

Ms L had two children aged eight and 11. She had never used childcare in the past because she had looked after her son while her husband worked. She became a single parent six months before the interview after the breakdown of her relationship. Despite looking for work during school hours and therefore not needing childcare, she was very open to the possibility of using formal childcare in the future. She was particularly interested in after-school clubs. She had spoken to staff at Jobcentre Plus about childcare and recalled being given a leaflet by the adviser. This provided information about the different types of childcare available to her locally. She found the leaflet helpful:

'It was quite helpful actually because some of the information that they gave me I didn't realise existed, so it was quite beneficial. As I say, on the leaflet they gave me there was lots of these different websites, local websites that I knew nothing about and that was quite helpful.'

Experiences of childcare conversations and receiving this childcare information leaflet did not appear to vary by whether or not claimants saw staff trained in lone parent issues while on JSA.

A small number of lone parents who had spoken to Jobcentre Plus staff reported not finding the information they were given helpful. However, this tended to be a reflection of a problem with childcare locally rather than the information from Jobcentre Plus staff. For example, when they contacted the childcare providers they found they were full.

A few lone parents we interviewed said that Jobcentre Plus staff had never spoken to them about childcare but they would have liked them to. This was not common, but it included some parents on JSA who had never used childcare before, so did not know where to start, one who had been given a leaflet (not from Jobcentre Plus) but found that the contact details were out of date when she phoned them and a couple of claimants with children with behavioural problems. For these lone parents a leaflet of local childcare information, like other parents reported receiving, would have been helpful, and some specifically mentioned this. It also appears that it would be useful if this leaflet identified where parents should go for advice about finding childcare for their child with a disability or behavioural problems.

¹² It should be noted that Jobcentre Plus staff are not allowed to recommend specific childcare providers and so refer people to Family Information Services for more detailed information on local provision.

For some lone parent claimants not discussing childcare with a Jobcentre Plus adviser was not necessarily a problem, as they felt they either had enough information about local childcare from other sources, such as child's school, friends or previous childcare providers. Others knew where to go to find out more and some did not think they would need further advice, as they had already planned what formal childcare they would use in the future.

There were a few instances of lone parents reporting that the information that they had been given about financial support for childcare was incorrect, or that they did not understand what financial support was available. As discussed above in Section 3.1.3, some lone parents were concerned about the cost of childcare and that it might be increasing. Together, this suggests that ensuring parents moving into work are aware of any childcare support they may be eligible for and how to claim it remains crucial.

3.2 Summary

- The reluctance to use formal childcare was less strongly reported by this group of lone parents compared with lone parents with older children in previous evaluations of LPO. This appears to be because of the age of the children (youngest child aged between seven and nine), positive experiences of free early years education, and positive experience or attitudes towards breakfast and after-school clubs.
- Previous research has shown that breakfast and after-school clubs were by far the most commonly used type of formal childcare for lone parents with children of this age. There were some very positive attitudes about before and after-school clubs found in this research, and these were based on good previous experiences of them. The learning and activities which children undertake at these clubs were perceived as a very positive aspect.
- Some lone parents did not feel that they needed to use formal childcare. This was because they only wanted to work part-time or in school hours and/or because they had a good support network of family, friends, current partners or their children's other parent who they called on for informal care.
- Lone parents interviewed did not usually express concern about the cost of childcare. For some, this was because they were not planning to use it, even if they moved into work, so it was not felt to be a concern. For others, it was because they felt it was affordable and the financial and non-financial benefits of working out-weighed the costs.
- As with affordability, availability was not an issue for those who did not plan to use formal childcare and neither was it a major issue for others. This was linked to the past and current use of childcare, which meant that many lone parents knew what type of childcare they would use, often breakfast and after-school clubs.
- Lone parents in the qualitative research who had spoken to staff at the Jobcentre Plus office about local childcare often said that they were given a leaflet about local childcare. This was generally found to be useful. A few lone parents we interviewed said that Jobcentre Plus staff had never spoken to them about childcare but they would have liked them to have done.

4 Reflections on youngest child starting school

This chapter explores the reflections of lone parents on the time when their youngest child started school. It looks at whether lone parents were motivated to move into or prepare for work at that time and their support needs at that time. Finally, implications for the further roll-out of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) are considered.

Previous research has shown that, for many parents, particularly lone parents, the point at which their youngest child starts school is a key point of return to the labour market (see, for example, Sims *et al.* 2010, Ritchie *et al.* 2005, Ridge and Millar, 2008). Research on women's employment has found that the time when a youngest child enters school marks both a time of entry and exit from work: *'School entry marks both the last years of unusually high exit from work for women and the first years of unusually high entry into work which, combined, leads to a time of unusually high change in women's work participation'* (Brewer and Paull, 2006). Given the planned roll-out of LPO to include those with a youngest child aged five and over from 2012, lone parents in this study were asked to reflect on the time when their youngest child started school. There was a broadly even split between those for whom the youngest child starting school was a trigger to move into work or prepare for work and those for whom it was not a trigger. The reasons for whether this was a trigger or not aligned closely to which group in the typology of lone parents the respondent fitted closest to. Lone parents were also asked about changes to their routine when their youngest child started school and potential barriers to starting work at this point.

4.1 Lone parents who were triggered into starting work or preparing for work when youngest child started school

Many of the lone parents that we spoke to did feel that the point at which their youngest child started school was relevant to their plans about work. Those lone parents who moved into work at this point were mostly those with a strong work attachment and those who had experienced a critical life event. Some of those in the high parenting orientation group started voluntary work or moved into study when their youngest child started school.

4.1.1 Moved into work

Relatively few lone parents that we spoke to moved into work when their youngest child started school. Some lone parents had expected that they would move into work when their youngest child started school and had studied in the period leading up to this in order to prepare. For example, one lone parent had studied for her degree in social sciences when her son was pre-school aged. She started support work for a housing association shortly after her son started school. The main change to her routine was that she had more time to herself once her son was in school and this had a direct impact on her move back into work: *'I had more time in the day to look for work'*. (In work lone parent; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth) These lone parents were work orientated and moved into work without external support.

4.1.2 Moved into learning or volunteering

It was more common for lone parents to move into learning or voluntary work when their youngest child started school. This was particularly common among those with a high parenting orientation.

Sometimes the learning and voluntary work that claimants undertook was not directly linked to future work plans. For example, one lone parent reported that she was bored at home after her youngest child started school. She studied a cake-decorating class and volunteered at her church at this point.

‘I was kind of getting bored at home. That is why I went onto that cake-decorating course because I wasn’t working and so I thought “OK I am going to start a course now they are at school.”’

However, this lone parent did not actively look for paid work until she transferred onto Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA).

‘Yeah because when your children turn seven that is when you have to start looking for jobs. That is what the law says. So that is what I started doing.’

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

These lone parents would need support to direct the urge to do something outside the home during school hours into a focus on employment.

4.1.3 Thought about or tried to move into work

Perhaps of most relevance to the continued roll-out of LPO were the lone parents who felt that their youngest child starting school was a trigger to move into work, but who did not make that transition. For some in this group, the trigger was not strong enough to encourage them to actually search and apply for jobs, while others looked for work but were only prepared to apply for a very limited range of jobs and did not find any of these to apply for.

‘Just like when they started school kinda thing, then I could probably get school hours, if I could get a job in the hours. And I had looked to try and get something but it was difficult.’

(JSA from Income Support (IS) lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

‘Yes I started thinking about “I want to do something. I don’t want to live on benefits.” I got fed up. But I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I had thought “When that one starts full-time I will start a little part-time job.”’

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

One lone parent thought about moving into work but didn’t think she would be better off financially because she was unaware of financial support for childcare.

‘When I signed at the jobcentre, they did say they do pay for childminders. Had I known that earlier I probably would have started a job earlier.’

(In work lone parent; Birmingham and Solihull)

For others in this group, the trigger was strong enough to encourage them to apply for jobs, but after being unsuccessful they gave up.

‘I did apply for a few jobs. I applied for a cleaning job in his nursery, I didn’t get that. Then I applied for care assistant job but I got sick and instead of phoning and rearranging an interview I left it. I always regretted that, because that was round the corner from me, really handy. So I done that and then not much else really.’

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Birmingham and Solihull)

It is likely that this group of lone parents, for whom the youngest child starting school was a trigger but not a strong enough trigger to push them into work, would be helped into work by the support of the JSA regime. In particular, they would benefit from job-search advice and encouragement to consider work outside school hours. These lone parents were found across each of our groups in the typology of lone parents.

4.2 Lone parents who were not triggered into starting work or study when youngest child started school

For many of the lone parents we spoke to, the time when their youngest child started school was not a trigger to move back into work. The reason that this was not a trigger matched closely to which group in the typology they fitted.

4.2.1 Already in work when youngest child started school

Those who did not find it a trigger and who were in the strong work attachment group were already in work at the time their youngest child started school. This was the most common experience of the strong work attachment group and is in line with research showing that many lone parent mothers will return to work after their maternity leave (La Valle *et al.* 2008). This category also included the lone fathers that we spoke to. Some in this group had always worked or had only taken maternity leave and returned to work straight away. Others in this group found that their youngest child starting nursery was the trigger to move back into work. This group had a strong work orientation. For example, one lone parent who had worked since his children were born and then cycled between benefits and work since his relationship breakdown said:

'It's not made me think "He's at school, now I can go out and work." Generally I've always been looking for work. I don't like sitting on my backside.'

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

Some lone parents in work found that their routine had to change slightly once their youngest child started school. This was because of differences between childcare hours and school hours. For example, this lone parent's routine became more complicated once her child started school, but because of her employer's flexibility, this was manageable.

'I had to try and change work hours, because obviously he'd start at 8.50 and the private nursery I could drop him any time after seven and then obviously making sure I was there to pick him up from school, because at the time I hadn't realised they had school clubs, but luckily my manager at the time was quite good and allowed me to come in 15 minutes late as long as I stayed 15 minutes later.'

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

4.2.2 Experiencing a critical life event

Those who were in the group who had experienced a critical life event and who didn't find it a trigger were either in work, or were experiencing their event at the time their youngest child started school and so were concentrating on that rather than moving into work. As discussed in Section 2.13, there were a wide range of constraints following a critical life event. Some lone parents were struggling to overcome these at the time that their youngest child started school. For example, the following lone parent was in the process of leaving her violent partner and moved out of work at this point:

'That's when things started to get not good at home. At that time I went to my manager and said I'm having lots of personal difficulties. I don't know if I can manage juggling home life and working. I handed in my notice at that point.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Another lone parent experienced a worsening of her depression at this time, and so she felt that she needed to deal with that before moving into work:

'I always wanted to work actually, but I just never felt ready and at the time [my youngest child started school] I was going through hard times and like being alone here with everything, I was going through a rough time, so it was like I never wanted to leave [the house], I didn't even want to go and pick the kids up from school, because I was going through depression.'

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

It is possible that some lone parents will be undergoing a major life event at the time they are affected by LPO. Where this is health-related, it is possible that they will claim Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) rather than JSA. Some lone parents on JSA, however, are likely to require broader support than just job search and employability. While broader support is not the direct responsibility of Jobcentre Plus staff, there is a role here for signposting lone parents to the appropriate agencies and for partnership working.

4.2.3 Parenting as a choice

Those in the high parenting orientation group who did not find their youngest child starting school a trigger to think about work told us that they were not interested in working or felt that they still had too many parenting tasks to start work at this time. Those who were partnered at the time seemed most prepared to say outright that they were not interested in working. For example:

'I wasn't doing nothing because my kid's dad was at work and he was providing for us, so I was just bringing my son up.'

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

'I don't really know if I did back then, to be honest with you. I mean, I know loads of people do work when they've got bairns and, I don't know, I just never felt the need to, I just felt like I'd rather be at home.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Some lone parents in this group did acknowledge that they had more time once their children were in school, although they still felt that they wanted to be at home:

'You start feeling like kind of depressed that you don't have nobody anymore to look after and you want to do something with your own life. But at the same time it was like "How can I do that? Who will pick them up and take them to school?" I did enjoy these last couple of years with my kids.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

These lone parents had the least work orientation and similar lone parents in the next roll-out will need encouragement to consider work as a positive option for them.

4.3 Implications for the next roll-out

The lone parents in this study included only those who made a claim for JSA, whereas the lone parents who will be affected by LPO in 2012, as in previous phases, will include those who move to a variety of destinations, including ESA. Therefore, the experiences of lone parents in this study might not reflect all those who will be affected. Nonetheless, their reflections on the time that their youngest child started school do have some implications for the further roll-out of LPO. It appears that many lone parents who are close to the labour market will have moved into work before their youngest child started school or at this point without the push of JSA. Some lone parents who were otherwise keen to work before or when their youngest child started school were unable to because of a major event in their life, such as the onset of a health condition or relationship breakdown. For these lone parents, they are likely to move back into work more quickly if they can get support to help overcome this event. Lone parents with high parenting orientation will need job-search support and help with practical measures associated with a return to work, such as organising childcare, as many in this group will be seriously considering work for the first time in many years.

The lone parents across each of our identified groups who thought about or tried to move into work but gave up will benefit from the support and push of JSA. Those lone parents who moved out of work at the time their youngest child started school did not do so because of difficulties managing this transition. However, there was some evidence of needing additional flexibility at work at this time, and it is likely that some lone parents with inflexible employment may leave work at this point and need support to return.

4.4 Summary

- Previous research has shown that, for many parents, particularly lone parents, the point at which their youngest child starts school is a key point of return to the labour market. Given the roll-out of LPO to include those with a youngest child aged five from 2012, lone parents in this study were asked to reflect back to the time when their youngest child started school.
- Many of the lone parents that we spoke to did feel that the point at which their youngest child started school was relevant to their plans about work. Those lone parents who moved into work at this point were mostly from the strong work attachment group or those who had experienced a critical life event. Some of those in the high parenting orientation group started voluntary work or moved into learning when their youngest child started school.
- For many of the lone parents we spoke to, the time when their youngest child started school was not a trigger to move back into work. Those who did not find it a trigger and who were in the work-related barrier group were already in work at the time their youngest child started school. Those who were in the group who had experienced a critical life event and who did not find it a trigger were either in work, or were experiencing their event at the time their youngest child started school and so were concentrating on that rather than moving into work. Those in the high parenting orientation group who did not find their youngest child starting school a trigger to think about work and parenting told us that they were not interested in working or felt that they still had too many parenting tasks to start work at this time.

5 Looking for work

This chapter examines lone parents' experiences of looking for work. It begins by examining lone parents' attitudes to balancing work and family, as these often underpinned work aspirations. It goes on to look at how long lone parents had been looking for work, what work they were looking for and what activities they were undertaking in order to find work. Finally, difficulty in finding work is examined.

5.1 Attitudes to balancing work and family

Lone parents were asked about their attitudes to work and parenting, exploring what they felt was positive and what was negative about working as a lone parent. The last qualitative wave of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) evaluation found that those who had worked in the recent past were more positive about the financial benefits of work than those who had been on benefits for many years. It found that, overall, most lone parents did want to work for both financial and other reasons (Casebourne *et al.* 2010). The quantitative evaluation of LPO found that lone parents on Income Support (IS) with a youngest child aged seven or eight were more work focused than the lone parent population as a whole and mothers with partners (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011). This study confirms these earlier findings. Most lone parents we spoke to felt positive about the prospect of being a working parent.

Lone parents felt positive about work for both financial and non-financial reasons. It was common for claimants to believe that they would be financially better off in work. This was the case both for those with recent work experience and for those who had been on benefits for many years. The previous wave of qualitative research found that some groups of lone parents (both those in and out of work) were concerned that the better off calculation that they had received was not accurate (Casebourne *et al.* 2010). There was far less evidence of this in this study. Those who had recently worked spoke about the things that they could no longer afford since moving from work to benefits. For example, a lone parent who had recently been made redundant from her social care role said:

'The positive of working is financial freedom. To go on holiday, to pay for him to go to extra-curricular classes. To be able to have more choices.'

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

Lone parents who had claimed benefits for many years also spoke of things that they would be able to afford once they were working and that they were missing out on while they were on benefits. For example, one lone parent who hadn't worked for 11 years said:

'Everybody likes to take their kids on holiday. If I can get a job, I'd like to take him abroad.'

(Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) from IS lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Claimants also spoke of benefits of working that were not financial. These included being a good role model to their children, interacting more with other adults, and no longer having to claim benefits. Many lone parents felt that they would be a better role model to their children if they were working and that this was important to them. For example:

'At the end of the day [when you are not working] you are not setting a good example for them. I like to work and I like to show my children that this is the way you get through life, you have to work and nothing is just going to fall in your lap just like that.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

The social aspect of work, getting out of the house and meeting new people were also positive aspects of working described by lone parents. For example one claimant spoke of how she felt isolated at home and was looking forward to socialising at work:

'I'm trapped on my own, I'm in seven nights a week and never go out and I'm kinda wrapped in my own little bubble kinda thing. It would be good for me as well, meeting people and getting out there and stuff, instead of just talking about the kids all the time!'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Some claimants saw the key positive of moving into work as no longer having to claim benefits (see also Section 6.6 on the effects of JSA on attitudes to work). For example:

'I've hated being on benefits since day one, I've absolutely hated it. I suppose it helped at first but it's starting to get really frustrating. It starts to get you down.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Lone parents also described downsides to working as a lone parent. A very small number of claimants did not believe that they would be better off in work. These lone parents were unaware that they could receive financial support for childcare and so did not think that they would be better off in a job that included hours outside school time or that was not very well paid. For example, the following lone parent who worked at a school explained why she felt that she could not take a job that included work in school holidays:

'I mean then again you just think about the long summer holidays just like now. How much would it cost if you go and put your child into childcare? That would be basically your whole wages you are talking so really it is not worth working [outside of school hours]. That is the way I look at it.'

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

Many lone parents felt that the downside of working was having less time to spend with their children. For example, one lone parent who had worked recently and used an after-school club for childcare said:

'I would find that I am putting him in an after-school club and then when I picked him up from there at 6 o'clock and he has to come home, eat his dinner and go to bed within an hour of getting in the house.'

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

For some, this was what underpinned their desire to work only during school hours. For example, one lone parent (in school-hours work) whose four children all had after school activities felt that she would not consider work in the afternoon as this would limit her children's chance to take part in these activities:

'There is always one of them that does something in the evening so it means they would have to stop it. They do football, ballet and violin and Jane has a few things at the high school as well. I think it is quite important to have that. I don't want them sitting in front of the telly.'

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

See Section 3.1.2 for more detail on lone parent experiences of using before and after-school clubs.

Some lone parents had particular concerns about their older children when they moved into work. Others, whose children were still in primary school, had concerns about what would happen when their children got older. This is in line with the previous wave of qualitative research and other research,¹³ which found that lone parents with older children did not feel that their children were old enough to be left alone, but that they were too old for ‘childcare’ (Casebourne *et al.* 2010). In this study, some lone parents feared that older children could get into trouble or mix with the wrong people while the lone parent was at work. For example one lone parent felt that she would not want to work outside school hours when her children were older:

‘I would still want to finish at a reasonable time. I don’t want them on the street. It’s getting too bad out there. I want to be at home.’

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

These generally positive attitudes towards work are in contrast to findings from a recent study of families and worklessness where many were concerned about the financial risks of moving into work and that ‘previous efforts to ensure that substantial financial benefits are associated with moving into work have failed to convince’ (Bashir *et al.* 2011). It may be that the work of Jobcentre Plus staff through quarterly Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) in the IS regime, and within the JSA regime for lone parents, has convinced this group of lone parents of the financial benefits of work.

5.2 Length of time looking for work

Most of the lone parents that we spoke to had been looking for work for between four and six months. This reflected the length of time that they had been claiming JSA. Some lone parents, however, reported that they had been searching for a job since before they claimed JSA, in some cases for several years.

There was no clear link with our typology and whether a lone parent began looking for work once they claimed JSA or before this time. However, the reason for beginning to look for work did vary between groups. The group with strong work attachment were the clearest. Lone parents in this group had started their job search after they finished their previous job or training. This often coincided with their claim for JSA.

The group with high parenting orientation had often been motivated to look for work because of their transfer onto JSA or since making a claim for JSA after relationship breakdown. Some of this group reported having looked for work for a while before claiming JSA, but had increased the intensity of their work search since claiming JSA. For example:

‘I’d actually been looking when I was on Income Support, but not as much, a more relaxed approach to it like if something did come up then fair enough, but not as much.’

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Whether the group who had experienced a critical life event were motivated to look for work because of moving onto JSA or before this time was much more mixed. Some reported looking for work for a significant length of time but had been hampered in their search because of the consequences of their event. Others who had claimed IS had experienced their event some time in the past and were then motivated to look for work by the transfer to JSA.

¹³ See, for example: Hosain, M, and Breen, E. (2007), *New Deal Plus for lone parents evaluation*, Research Report 426: Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

5.3 Type of work lone parents looked for

Lone parents were asked about the type of work they were looking for. It was common for lone parents to be primarily looking for work with part-time hours that fitted around their parenting responsibilities. Others were motivated more by the job role itself. Many of those who were primarily motivated by part-time hours were looking for work within school hours. Some specified that this meant jobs with hours such as ten in the morning until two in the afternoon, while others defined this as jobs in schools such as teaching or catering assistants. These latter jobs were particularly attractive because they allowed the lone parent to be home in the school holidays as well as before and after school.

It was common for lone parents to be looking for work that was exactly 16 hours per week. This was because 16 is the minimum number of hours at which lone parent claimants transition from out of work benefits onto in-work financial support such as tax credits and In Work Credit. One lone parent told us that she was looking for a mini-job, even though this would not be enough to meet the requirements of her jobseeker's agreement. These findings have implications for Universal Credit, which will remove the 16 hours rule and will instead combine and taper in and out of work financial support. Depending on the application of in-work conditionality, it seems likely that some lone parents may choose to work fewer hours under Universal Credit.

Some lone parents were looking for full-time work or very slightly less than full-time work, such as nine in the morning until four in the afternoon. These lone parents were less motivated by the hours than the nature of the job and were more likely to be looking for higher paid, higher skilled jobs. Some lone parents were pragmatic about work hours and were prepared to accept either part-time or full-time work.

'If they can offer me full-time hours I can take them. If not, part-time is suitable as well.'

(JSA new and repeat lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Two lone parents had initially looked for full time work but had reduced this to part-time. These lone parents claimed that they had been told that they would only get in-work financial support if they worked part-time. For example:

*'So if you do full-time they're not paying [for childcare]. If you do part-time they'll pay it. So it just feels like you can't win, because you want the full-time but you can't.'*¹⁴

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

It was not clear whether these lone parents had been incorrectly advised or misunderstood advice at Jobcentre Plus or whether they had heard this from friends or family.

While some lone parents were primarily motivated by the hours of work and relatively open to a range of industries and job roles, other lone parents had specific job roles that they wished to move into. These ranged from low paid, low skilled work such as retail, cleaning and care work, through to higher paid and higher skilled work such as credit control, and being a medical secretary or gas engineer. This is in line with the diverse range of qualifications found among our interviewees. Some lone parents were looking for similar work to what they had done in the past or had recently qualified for. For example:

¹⁴ Lone parents in work of more than 16 hours per week are entitled to claim up to 70 per cent of childcare costs with a maximum cost of £175 a week for one child and £300 a week for two or more children.

'I'm a qualified social worker. That's what I'm looking for.'

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

Another lone parent working part-time in an office taking orders over the phone, had been looking for office work because of her past work experience:

'Mainly looking for office work because of what I used to do.'

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

Other lone parents were looking for work that was different from what they had done in the past. In these cases, lone parents were actively seeking to avoid work that they had not enjoyed previously, or did not think they would enjoy. For example, a lone parent who had moved into work as a concierge said that she had avoided applying for retail jobs because of her previous experience in that sector:

'Now I would go for retail but the thing is I wouldn't want to stand on my feet for hours, I have had retail jobs in the past.'

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

'I mean if you want to be a cleaner or something like that, there's loads of jobs, but I don't want to be too fussy, but I'm not doing cleaning, no way.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

5.4 Work-search activities

Lone parents were asked about the activities they were undertaking in order to find work. Generally, lone parents reported that they used a variety of work-search activities. These included: internet search, approaching employers directly, looking in local newspapers, asking friends and family, searching at Jobcentre Plus and signing up with agencies. The LPO early findings report (Gloster *et al.* 2010) and the previous wave of qualitative research (Casebourne *et al.* 2010) found that internet searching was more common for new and repeat claimants and those who were successful in their job search. In this study almost all claimants were using the internet for job search, regardless of whether they had moved from IS to JSA, were new or repeat claimants, or whether they had succeeded in finding work. There were a very small number of claimants who reported difficulties with accessing the internet but in each of these cases they had overcome these. For example a lone parent without internet access at home and who was a bus journey from her local library had found a cheap internet cafe:

'There's no local library around here and it's cheaper for me to go to the internet cafe than it is to take the bus to the library. I can spend more time at the cafe than spending the bus fare [just to go to the Library].'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Another lone parent found it difficult to use the internet but was helped by her daughter:

'Anything especially retail you have to apply by internet. I even tried in the shop but they said internet. It's a nightmare.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Those who were in work at the time of interview had undertaken a similar range of job-search activities as those on JSA at the time of interview. The previous wave of qualitative research found that many lone parents had found their job through informal networks and through internet searches (Casebourne *et al.* 2010). In this wave, those in work¹⁵ found their jobs through one of three broadly even groups of job-search methods. One was through an intermediary, either Jobcentre Plus, a provider or recruitment agency. The second was through direct application, either responding to an advertisement online, in a newspaper or through hearing about an opportunity through informal contacts. The third was through becoming self-employed, returning to a previous job, or increasing the hours of a mini-job they were already in.

5.5 Difficulty finding work

Many lone parents reported finding that their job search was much more difficult than they had anticipated. This included those who had been in work recently and those who had not worked for many years. Many lone parents reported feeling frustrated at having applied for a large number of jobs and not being invited to interviews, or very few interviews. For example, a lone parent who had worked since her son was 18 months old until being made redundant said:

‘Over the last couple of months I’ve been applying for anything that’s reasonably suitable and a lot of them I haven’t heard back from.’

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

Some lone parents had responded to their lack of success in getting to interview stage by widening their job search to include jobs that they had initially not wanted to do.

‘I did work at Housing Advice Centre in [place] for two months as voluntary work and after that I did work in the GP office. So I did apply for a good time for office work and things like that, but it didn’t happen, so I started to apply for working in shops, still not happening and now I’m applying for cleaner again, because nothing is happening. So last week I spoke to the lady in the jobcentre, I said I’m going to start applying to clean schools and things like that, because it’s not happening.’

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Several lone parents had tried to enter a new industry or job role but had given up on this. For example, one lone parent had worked as a childminder for many years and had hoped to move into a different childcare-related job outside the home.

‘I was on Jobseeker’s and to be honest I just couldn’t wait to get off it. I was looking for work, I’d got loads of experience but the jobs that were out there I had too much experience for and a lot of the money that they were offering wasn’t a great deal, so I decided, “Well my best option is to do what I was doing originally and stick with my childminding.”’

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

These descriptions of difficulty finding work were likely to be linked to the length of time that lone parents had been claiming JSA (usually four to six months). As noted in the findings from the LPO survey (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011), the limited availability of part-time and school-hours jobs, and the strong preference for these jobs among lone parents, mean that there is potentially stiff competition for these roles. Encouraging lone parents to broaden the range of jobs that they are willing to apply for, as well as explaining in-work financial support for those in full-time work, might help lone parents to move into work more quickly.

¹⁵ There were 17 lone parents in this study who had moved into work of more than 16 hours per week at the time of interview.

5.6 Summary

- The lone parents in this study were generally very positive about work and the benefits that it would bring them and their families. Lone parents felt positive about work for both financial and non-financial reasons. It was common for claimants to believe that they would be financially better off in work. This was the case both for those with recent work experience and for those who had been on benefits for many years. Claimants also spoke of benefits of working that were not financial. These included:
 - being a good role model to their children;
 - interacting more with other adults, and
 - no longer having to claim benefits.
- Lone parents also described downsides to working as a lone parent. These included: particular concerns about after school and other care arrangements for their older children when the parents moved into work.
- Most of the lone parents that we spoke to had been looking for work for between four and six months. This reflected the length of time that they had been claiming JSA. Some lone parents, however, reported that they had been searching for a job since before they claimed JSA, in some cases for several years.
- It was common for lone parents to be primarily looking for work with part-time hours that fitted around their parenting responsibilities. Others were motivated more by the job role itself.
- Almost all the lone parents we spoke to reported that they used a variety of work-search activities. These included:
 - internet search;
 - approaching employers directly;
 - looking in local newspapers;
 - asking friends and family;
 - searching at Jobcentre Plus; and
 - signing up with agencies.
- Generally, lone parents reported finding that their job search was much more difficult than they anticipated. This included those who had been in work recently and those who had not worked for many years. Lone parents reported feeling frustrated at having applied for a large number of jobs and not being invited to interviews, or being invited to very few interviews.

6 Experiences of Jobseeker's Allowance

This chapter examines lone parents' experiences of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). It sets out the JSA regime for lone parents, lone parents' experiences of making a claim and of JSA flexibilities. It then goes on to look at the support that lone parents received while claiming JSA before considering experiences of sanctions and disentanglements and the effect of JSA on attitudes to work.

Around half of lone parents interviewed in this research were new or repeat lone parent claimants and around half had previously been on Income Support (IS) and had moved to JSA when their IS eligibility ended. In most cases lone parents had been claiming JSA for four to six months when interviewed.

6.1 Jobseeker's Allowance regime for lone parents

Lone parents on JSA are subject to the same legal regulations as other jobseekers, including being required to complete a jobseeker's agreement (JSAg), being available for work 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.

The way the JSA regime operates has changed in recent months. Before April 2011, JSA claimants were expected to follow a set journey, with distinct stages that had different expectations and requirements of them and different levels of support available. Once they had been on JSA for a specific period of time, they would be referred to external providers to provide more intensive support. This process was known as the Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND). Since April 2011, Jobcentre Plus offices have been able to provide much more flexible, personalised support to claimants based on individual need, known as the Jobcentre Plus Offer.

Given the timing of this research, lone parents interviewed were likely to have had experience of both regimes, although it may have taken some time for the changing culture and claimant experience that is expected to be achieved through the Jobcentre Plus Offer to have filtered through to all Jobcentre Plus offices. Therefore, the findings presented in this chapter will include a mixture of experiences from both the 'old' and 'new' regimes.

As mentioned earlier, the Jobcentre Plus Offer is a personalised and flexible advice and support package available from Jobcentre Plus. It consists of core elements that must be undertaken (such as fortnightly signing for JSA claimants) as well as flexible support. This flexible support consists of three elements:

- Regular contact with a personal adviser.
- Access to 'Get Britain Working' measures, such as Work Clubs, Work Together, Work Experience, Enterprise Clubs, New Enterprise Allowance and sector-based work academies (from August 2011).
- Access to additional support where needed, such as help with expenses (for instance help with travel, childcare and training costs) through the flexible support fund and specialist help available from external providers, through the Jobcentre Plus Support Contract.

Claimants are referred to the Work Programme once eligible, which is usually after 12 months on JSA, but is earlier for younger lone parents and some other disadvantaged groups. Lone parents in this research were sampled when they had been claiming JSA for between two and four months, so would not have been mandatorily referred to the Work Programme.

All jobsearch reviews for lone parents should be conducted by dedicated jobsearch review staff, who receive training to deal with lone parents, including staff who were formerly Lone Parent Advisers¹⁶, if resources permit.

6.2 Claiming JSA

6.2.1 Making a JSA claim

As described within the Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) early findings report (Gloster *et al.* 2010), lone parents whose IS eligibility is ending because of LPO are invited to an interview with an adviser trained in lone parent issues and a 'benefit switching' process (to JSA or Employment and Support Allowance (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.

In general, lone parents found the process of claiming JSA to be unproblematic. Lone parents who transferred to JSA from IS were told about LPO while on IS. They found advisers helpful, understood the change, were prepared for it and experienced a smooth transition with few problems occurring. For example:

'It was pretty smooth actually to be honest with you. I had a really good adviser and I still actually speak to her, she was really good and she made sure everything was sorted out beforehand so then if anything there was only maybe a few days to a week's gap where I didn't get my money but otherwise it was quite a smooth transaction.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

One lone parent considered making a claim for ESA when her IS eligibility ended, as she had depression, but she reported that her adviser told her that it would be like 'opening up a can of worms' because she would have to 'fight for it' so she decided not to.

There were, however, instances of errors in the claim process being reported that led to payment gaps and financial hardship. These included a case where a lone father who transferred from IS had a five week payment gap, as his JSA was initially paid to the wrong bank account and it took time to identify the problem and to sort it out. His JSA was back-dated and he was advised he could get a crisis loan, but he did not want one so his sister helped out financially in that period.

In another case a lone parent's Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claims were reported to have stopped in error but were then reinstated and backdated after she had sorted it out, a process that she found stressful:

'That really did mess me up. They messed up my Housing Benefit, they stopped paying it. I said it wasn't my fault. When I went to the jobcentre and I asked "Is it going to affect my Housing Benefit?" They said "No", they would contact them. I did the chasing. If I didn't do it I would have been really behind.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

¹⁶ The specific job role of Lone Parent Adviser no longer exists within Jobcentre Plus.

Some new and repeat lone parent claimants had made a claim for IS in the past and so were expecting to claim IS when they approached Jobcentre Plus to claim benefits. They were then told they were no longer eligible for IS because of the age of their youngest child and that they would need to claim JSA. This was not usually perceived as a problem by lone parents. Others were making a new claim for the first time so did not know which benefits they would be entitled to until they spoke to Jobcentre Plus and were told it would be JSA. Again these lone parents usually found making a claim unproblematic. For example:

'I found it quite straightforward, everything that I needed to know was there and quite normal process where you just went in filled in your forms, told them the information and within a week or so you had the money in your account.'

(Re-partnered, not working or claiming; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

However, problems were experienced by some lone parents making a new claim for JSA. Although these errors were not caused by the LPO process, but rather the JSA claiming process more generally, they were nonetheless an important part of the experience of the JSA regime for the lone parents they affected. There were cases of lone parents:

- initially being told they would be claiming IS and then told it would be JSA because of the age of their youngest child;
- having English as a second language, not being able to understand the paperwork, finding it hard to follow and reportedly not being offered an interpreter;
- waiting longer than they had anticipated, and longer than they reported being told, for the first payment to come through;
- having problems making a claim having left a job voluntarily because childcare arrangements broke down, and the delay of receipt of the first payment;
- being advised to claim IS for a very short time until IS eligibility ended, the IS claim reportedly not being closed down properly so that JSA payments were paid in a lump sum by which time they were already working (this lone parent was claiming for less than one month before moving into work).

6.2.2 Problems with Jobseeker's Allowance payments

Once the JSA claim started, claiming JSA was usually a smooth process. However, in a few cases, lone parents reported experiencing problems with their JSA payments. Again, while these were not caused by the LPO process, they were an important part of the experience of the JSA regime for lone parents they affected.

Problems with JSA payments

JSA payments were reported to have been stopped in error because the lone parent was receiving child maintenance. The problem was sorted out and the money was back dated and the lone parent used Child Benefit, Child Tax Credit and child maintenance to manage financially while waiting for JSA to be re-instated.

JSA payments were stopped in error because the lone parent moved address, despite reportedly contacting Jobcentre Plus before moving home to tell them. Payments were re-instated.

Problems with JSA payments (continued)

JSA payments stopped after reportedly being told by an adviser to put that she was self-employed on a form even though she was only doing one hour of self-employment per fortnight trying to build up a beauty therapy business. She had appealed and was waiting for her hearing when interviewed having been without JSA for two months. This has put her off doing 'mini-jobs' in future: *'When you do declare it you get penalised for declaring it. You don't really win to be fair.'* (JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Birmingham and Solihull). She managed financially by reducing the money that her children got for their school dinners and giving them sandwiches, and by walking the children to school and picking them up in order to save bus fares. This lone parent reported phoning Jobcentre Plus every day and having to speak to different people and to have to re-explain her situation repeatedly.

JSA payments were not paid when they should have been reportedly because of administration errors by Jobcentre Plus. This lone parent reported no explanation for why the money had not been paid into her account and having to phone Jobcentre Plus several times to let them know that her payment had not been processed. There was also confusion over payments to her water company for arrears. Money had been deducted from JSA for the water company but the water company said that it had not received it. This lone parent had gone to the Citizen's Advice Bureau to get help with sorting it out.

JSA payments were stopped because the lone parent failed to inform Jobcentre Plus of a change of address. Payments were re-instated and backdated after the claimant's error but she went into arrears with Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit, had to borrow money from a friend and found it stressful.

While these cases were rare, they are important to note, as they caused stress and financial hardship for the lone parents involved.

6.2.3 Understanding of the Jobseeker's Allowance regime

Lone parents were asked what they were expected to do as part of their claim and, in general, they had a good knowledge and understanding of the requirements of the JSA regime. These included:

- the need to attend fortnightly job-search review appointments;
- an understanding of being 'available for work';
- the need to seek work (and provide evidence of doing so);
- completing a JSaG, including the need to be looking for a variety of types of work.

Lone parents were told what they had to do as a condition of claiming when they first made a claim for JSA. The information lone parents were given was felt to be clear and lone parents understood that they had to sign on and were required to look for work and complete their JSaG to give evidence of this.

Despite lone parents generally having a good understanding of the regime, there were a few cases where lone parents were sanctioned for missing appointments (see Section 6.5). There was also one case where a lone parent was sanctioned because she felt that the requirements of the regime were not adequately explained to her at the beginning when she moved from IS to JSA. She did not understand how to give evidence of her work-search activity and was sanctioned early in her claim. This lone parent felt that Jobcentre Plus staff should be more understanding of new claimants who genuinely do not understand what they have to do. She reported making a complaint about this sanction but said that she got no response to her complaint.

6.2.4 Meeting the requirements of the Jobseeker's Agreement

The JSAg is an agreement that sets out the claimant's availability to work and the ways in which they will search for a job. The JSAg usually includes details on the area in which and the hours for which claimants are available for employment, as well as any restrictions, a description of the type of work that is being sought and planned action.

Lone parents were asked about the requirements of the JSAg. They generally reported understanding what they had to do and finding it easy to meet the requirements. Lone parents were easily able to describe the hours that they had agreed that they were available for work, the fact that they had to look for usually three jobs per week, and the fact that they had to document their job search. For example:

'You get an agreement when you first sign on and you tell them what jobs you want to do and you have to look for them. You have to fill your diary in and then you obviously have to write down what you have done to look for work and how you have done it, whether you have filled your application online or sent off a CV, things like that, and then you have to explain to them what you have done.'

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

In some cases, lone parents reported having to complete the JSAg as a useful part of their job search. In a few other cases, lone parents described advisers taking a pragmatic approach to what had been agreed in the JSAg. One was worried that there were not enough suitable jobs to apply for in order to meet the number of jobs they had agreed to apply for per week and was concerned that she could be sanctioned, but reported that her adviser understood the local labour market and suggested she show her the changes that she had done to her CV instead. Another also discussed the pragmatism of their adviser:

'Well, I actually explained it to them in the jobcentre that it always seems like I have done exactly the same each week to find work and I said "I do a lot but I forget what I've done and don't put it down." They said "As long as it looks like you do the looking it is fine."

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

It was rare for lone parents to have problems giving evidence in their JSAg. One new claimant was unsure how to provide evidence in her JSAg having looked online for jobs. One lone parent claimant who had moved from IS to JSA had been disentitled for failing to adequately give evidence of what she was doing to look for work:

'They said I didn't give them enough information that I am actively seeking work so they cut me off. I had to get an emergency crisis loan and then they cut off my Housing Benefit.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

She reported that she was reinstated on the day she was 'sanctioned', had lost benefit for two weeks and had appealed but had not had a response. Having initially been confused about exactly what needs to be written down in her JSAg she is now very careful to ensure that it does not happen again by keeping lots of records, and getting photocopies of everything she does.

As well as these rare cases of lone parents having problems giving evidence in their JSAg, there were also rare cases of lone parents finding it hard to look for the number of jobs they had agreed to in their JSAg. Lone parents found it hard to look for the required number of jobs per week if there were not many vacancies or because jobs advertised had requirements (such as a driving licence) which

they did not meet. In a couple of cases when lone parents had not managed to look for the number of jobs outlined in their JSaG (in one case, six jobs per week) lone parents were warned that if it happened again they would be sanctioned. In one of these cases the lone parent had already been sanctioned for not attending an appointment when her children were ill and so was very worried about this.

There were also instances of lone parents reporting being pressurised by Jobcentre Plus staff to apply for inappropriate jobs. These are discussed below in the section on JSA flexibilities.

6.2.5 Attending Back to Work sessions

Before April 2011, Back to Work Sessions (BtWS) were mandatory group sessions run for jobseeking claimants, including lone parents in stage 1 of the JSA regime. Since April 2011, claimants may be mandated to attend a session through a jobseeker's direction.¹⁷ BtWS provide information, support and advice to claimants to help them find work or improve their chances of securing employment. While lone parent interviewees were not asked about these specifically, in a few cases lone parents described attending these sessions, where they reported discussing job-search techniques (e.g. putting up advertisements in shops and taking on voluntary work) and the benefits of moving into work. As found in the previous research, the perceived usefulness of the BtWS varied according to individual lone parents. While some found it a useful refresher, where they received a lot of helpful information:

'I found it useful, yeah, it did sort of refresh and it did make me feel "Yeah it's not too bad, I'm going to keep looking."'

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

Others viewed it as less useful, describing them as 'useless' or as 'stupid back to work things' that they felt they did not get anything out of.

6.3 JSA flexibilities for parents

As part of LPO, additional flexibilities were introduced to the JSA regime to meet the specific needs of lone parents who were 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:

- limiting the hours they are available for work to a minimum of 16 hours a week based on their caring responsibilities;
- showing good cause if they refuse or leave a job because appropriate childcare is not available;
- being treated as available and actively seeking work up to four times in any 12 month period for a maximum of 11 weeks in certain circumstances where a bereavement or domestic emergency has occurred;
- being treated as unavailable for work in the school holidays if they are unable to find appropriate childcare during that time;

¹⁷ A jobseeker's direction is an activity that is intended to help claimants find work or improve their prospects of securing employment.

- restricting their availability if they are subject to a parenting order or have entered into a parenting contract;
- restricting their availability if their child is excluded from school and no other reasonable childcare arrangements are available;
- taking up a job offer within 28 days or attending a job interview within seven days if they would experience difficulty in arranging appropriate childcare any earlier;
- for lone parents with children aged 12 or under, restricting their availability for work to their child's normal school hours.

As well as these regulatory safeguards there are the following operational ones:

- signing on by post during the school holiday period where an adviser agrees that no appropriate short-term childcare is available to cover the attendance at a fortnightly jobsearch review;
- having travel time taken into account for the purposes of good cause based on their caring responsibilities (i.e. include any reasonable time required to drop off and pick up children from school or childcare).

As all jobsearch reviews for lone parents should be conducted by dedicated jobsearch review staff, who have received training to deal with lone parents, this should ensure that staff are aware when a claimant is a lone parent, and can ensure that flexibilities are applied where appropriate.

6.3.1 Awareness and application of flexibilities

Staff indicated in the previous research on LPO (Casebourne *et al.* 2010) that they apply the flexibilities where appropriate but do not typically inform lone parent customers about the flexibilities. Staff indicated that this was because they wanted to maintain control over decisions about when flexibilities should apply, and were concerned that claimants 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 that they could still attend appointments.

Lone parents in this research commonly showed no awareness that any of the list of flexibilities were being applied to them when prompted. However, it was usual, as it was in the previous research (Casebourne *et al.* 2010), to see when discussing their case that Jobcentre Plus staff had in fact applied flexibilities to them. The main example of this was lone parents restricting their availability for work to part-time and, in some cases, school-hours work.

There were also more isolated examples of other flexibilities being applied, including postal signing on in holidays and when children were ill, being given a week to attend a job interview, being able to extend the timescales to take up a job offer to 28 days to have time to arrange childcare, and refusing a job offer if the hours (e.g. night shifts) meant that they could not arrange childcare.

Once the flexibilities were explained to lone parents during the research interviews, some said that they would have liked postal signings in holidays if they had known that was an option, particularly as they had had to take children into the Jobcentre Plus office with them in the holidays and sometimes waited a long time to sign on. For example:

'I had to go and sign on last Tuesday, I was like "Oh God I'm going to have to take all the kids with me." It's OK taking the kids, but it's the bus fares as well, because I've got to get two buses there to the jobcentre, so that's me and two kids, it's quite a lot of money to be paying out.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

6.3.2 Restricting availability for work to part-time or school-hours work

Since the previous research was conducted in early 2010, a new flexibility has been introduced. From April 2010, lone parents receiving JSA who have a child 12 and under have been allowed to restrict their availability for work to school hours. This flexibility exists alongside one that already existed before this time, which states that lone parents can restrict the number of working hours to a minimum of 16 hours per week. Lone parents frequently cited looking for part-time work and often in school hours (as detailed in Section 5.3 in the looking for work chapter), showing that they were in fact aware of these flexibilities. These were by far the most widely and commonly cited flexibilities.

However, there were a group of lone parents who felt that they were being pressured by Jobcentre Plus staff to apply for inappropriate jobs that would have involved working more than 16 hours, despite the flexibility to restrict work to 16 hours, and despite what they had signed up to in their JSAg. This was the case both where claimants were receiving support from staff trained in lone parent issues and where they were not.

Where lone parents did not receive support from staff trained in lone parent issues there were cases of some staff at sign-on appointments telling them they had to look for work of 16 hours a week while others were telling them that they had to look for full-time work. One lone parent wanted to put her availability for work from 9.30am so she could drop her daughter at school at 8.45am before going to work but was not allowed to do so. Another lone parent was told by a member of sign-on staff that she had to look for full-time work, even though she had expressed concerns about childcare. Another reported having to remind staff on two separate occasions that she had children, which was why her work search was restricted to part-time hours, despite a note on the system saying that.

Where lone parents received support from staff trained in lone parent issues there were also cases where lone parents felt that advisers were pushing them to apply for inappropriate jobs. These included cases where:

- jobs started at 7am;
- an adviser encouraged one lone parent to apply for a job with unsuitable hours and then to tell the employer at interview stage what hours she could and could not do;
- vacancies were still suggested to lone parents that would mean working outside school hours, despite JSAg agreements they could work in school hours only, as they did not want to use childcare:

'Well they were alright about it but you know what I mean, "Go work in a shop or work in a chemist" or do, you know, stuff like that. And really I don't want to do that, basically, because then I am not going to be here for them coming out of school and stuff like that. They would have to go into after-school clubs, you know and I don't want them to do that. I think they are at school long enough.'

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

'As far as the jobs were concerned, I don't think they were being flexible because, as I said, they just kept, you know, whenever they looked up on the computer, they kept "How about this? How about this?" and I said "But it's nursery work" and it was like, you know, 40 hours a week and more.'

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

- a lone parent had to remind her adviser that she only had to apply for six jobs a fortnight if they fitted with her availability. This lone parent had been told to apply for a job by staff at sign-on appointments and later found out it was a full-time position. When she called the member of staff to tell her it was full-time, she was told to write in her evidence log that she applied for it anyway as they would not check. She was concerned about this so phoned her lone parent adviser (LPA), who told her not to apply for it and not to lie about it. The LPA also removed it from the system for her.

As some of the above examples show, there were clearly some instances where lone parents were only seeking work in school hours and where advisers were encouraging claimants to extend their hours of eligibility. This was felt by these lone parents to be pressurising them to seek work that was not appropriate.

6.3.3 Restricting sign-on appointments to their child's normal school hours

While not technically a flexibility in terms of regulations, an operational flexibility is that lone parents are not expected to attend an interview at a time when there is an agreement to restrict their availability. This means that lone parents with children aged 12 and under can restrict sign-on appointments to their child's normal school hours. Interviewees reported flexibility over their sign-on times being applied to them to take account of a range of circumstances, including appointments being changed because they had problems with childcare, when children were sick, to fit around voluntary work and to take into account being homeless, which meant attending a number of other housing-related appointments.

However, there were a number of cases where lone parents felt that they were made to sign on at inappropriate times. They reported finding that staff were not very accommodating when they asked to change their sign-on times because of their parental responsibilities, which meant that sign-on appointments conflicted with picking up children from school or dropping them off. For example:

'They will ask me to come and sign on at like 9am, I say "Well I've got to take my son to school". Then they will ask me to come and sign on at quarter past three when I've got to pick him up and so obviously they don't care.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

'Because I went in early round about 2.30 and it did work fine, but they certainly weren't flexible to begin with, when I mentioned it, I was more or less told that I didn't really have a choice.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

One lone parent was once late to sign on during the school holidays, as her autistic son was 'being difficult'. She reported being threatened with a sanction having been five minutes late, but was allowed to sign on.

In some instances, it was only when lone parents asked to change their sign-on time because of childcare issues that they were identified as lone parents. A new or repeat claimant reported that it was only when she asked if she needed to sign the week her daughter was on holiday that she was identified as a lone parent and sent to see someone trained in lone-parent issues (she had been seeing a different person for sign-on appointments each time until that point) and was then allowed to do postal signing. She was also able to explain to the adviser trained in lone-parent issues that staff had been suggesting she apply for jobs that finished at 5pm and were an hour away by bus. Her new adviser agreed that she did not need to apply for jobs that did not fit with childcare. In

another case, a lone parent who moved from IS to JSA reported that the first person on JSA did not identify her as a lone parent:

'He didn't put down I had children. So when I'd gone to my new adviser and he went...and he wouldn't change the time for me to sign on, he used to put me down for 9.40am.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

When she started seeing her new adviser she told the adviser that she would not be able to make an appointment because she had to pick up her children from school and her new adviser told her she was not marked as having children on the system. He was able to change her sign on time straight away and told her about the other flexibilities.

6.4 Support

6.4.1 The Jobcentre Plus Offer for lone parents on Jobseeker's Allowance

From April 2011, lone parents have had access to the Jobcentre Plus Offer which includes work preparation support.

In addition to jobsearch reviews for lone parents being conducted by dedicated jobsearch review staff who have received training to deal with lone parents, lone parents may also be offered work-focused caseload interviews by Jobcentre Plus advisers. Personal advisers then work with lone parents on a one-to-one basis offering a package of advice and support tailored to meet their individual needs. If a lone parent agrees to join an adviser's caseload, they may be offered the following support through the Jobcentre Plus Offer.

Jobcentre Plus Offer for lone parents – flexible support menu of options, including:

- One-to-one personalised support from an adviser trained in lone parent issues (e.g. childcare/care options).
- A realistic action plan detailing steps to be taken to assist the lone parent to find work.
- A better off calculation.
- Advice on in-work benefits, Tax Credits and access to financial incentives to ease the transition from benefits to work, including In Work Credit or Return to Work Credit.
- Help to overcome financial barriers when looking for work or starting full-time work, including up-front childcare costs.
- Pre-employment support, including help with job search and finding suitable vacancies.
- Advice on childcare/replacement care options.
- Advice on training opportunities.
- Access to Jobcentre Plus approved activities, including Jobcentre Plus Support Contract provision, non-contracted provision (that is, where there is a contract in place between externally funded provider and Jobcentre Plus district) and one-off contracted provision – through the Flexible Support Fund.

Jobcentre Plus Offer for lone parents (continued) – flexible support menu of options, including:

- Access to Work Trials – through the Flexible Support Fund.
- Access to Childcare Assist – through the Flexible Support Fund.
- Access to Childcare Subsidy – through the Flexible Support Fund.
- Access to Get Britain Working measures.
- In-work emergency payments.
- Job Grant.
- In-work advisory support.

Lone parents interviewed in this research had, in most cases, been claiming JSA for four to six months when interviewed in June and July 2011. This meant that it was common for them to have experienced the new regime in which the Jobcentre Plus Offer had existed from April 2011, as well as the previous regime where lone parents could work with lone parent advisers through New Deal for Lone Parents while claiming JSA.

Lone parents were asked a number of questions to determine the support that they were receiving on JSA. They were asked what support they had had to look for work (probing for the range of possible support under the Jobcentre Plus Offer), whether they were referred to any external training or courses, what had been useful/less useful, how the support they received compared with support they had received in the past (e.g. under New Deal for Lone Parents), if they were getting what they needed from Jobcentre Plus and what, if any, other help they would like.

It was clear that awareness of the support available through the Jobcentre Plus Offer could be improved among lone parents. Claimants in this research were generally unaware of the range of support that could be provided to them. Lone parents were not routinely told about what was on offer and often had to ask for help in order to receive support. It was more common for lone parents to be receiving support when they were seeing staff trained in lone parent issues while on JSA, but even then did not know that they could receive a wider range of support, which they sometimes felt that they needed. Short sign-on appointments for those not seeing staff trained in lone parent issues were felt to be too quick for them to be able to ask for help. These issues are discussed further below.

6.4.2 Support being provided by Jobcentre Plus

Whether lone parents were seeing staff trained in lone parent issues was mixed, and it was just as common not to be seeing such staff as to be seeing them. It was not always clear whether lone parents were seeing such staff or not. There was no relationship between whether a lone parent had moved to JSA from IS, or was a new or repeat claimant and whether they were seeing lone-parent trained staff. However, whether they were seeing lone-parent trained staff was a key influence on the level and quality of support they felt they had received while on the JSA regime and their attitude to Jobcentre Plus staff (see also Section 6.6.1 on overall views on claiming JSA).

Whether lone parents had received advice about childcare from Jobcentre Plus staff is discussed in Section 3.1.6.

Lone parents not seeing staff trained in lone parent issues

Where lone parents were not seeing staff trained in lone parent issues, it was common for them to feel that they were not receiving any support at all while on JSA. These lone parents often saw a different member of staff each time they signed on who, therefore, did not know their situation. Even in cases where they had been told they would see the same member of staff each time, this did not happen where there were backlogs. One lone parent had been told they could see a lone parent adviser but then reported being told that they were not eligible for that support, as they were on JSA.

These lone parents had often expected to get more direction, help and support when they started claiming JSA, but found that they just had sign-on appointments where it was difficult to get help with job search or ask for help, as appointments were so brief. For example:

'The occasional time I've been to sign on and they've had a whizz through the jobs on their website, but a lot of them are the ones I've already seen myself.'

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

'To be honest I don't know. They don't seem to have a lot of time because... I think it's because they are so busy and there isn't enough staff they haven't really got enough time to actually sit and chat and do anything, they just get you in to sign and then you are gone and the next one is in, that's what it is like.'

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

Those who had previous experience of claiming IS compared JSA unfavourably with support provided on IS through Lone Parent Advisers, who they felt were more knowledgeable and supportive, and through New Deal for Lone Parents. For example, one lone parent reported having to explain to staff what she thought she needed to do:

'I need to get back into voluntary work, but I was the one that had to tell my adviser that. I said "Look I need to do some voluntary work". "Oh why's that?" "Because I haven't got enough references."'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

One lone parent in Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth complained of not being allowed into the Jobcentre Plus office unless they had an appointment, which meant only being able to use job points once a fortnight.

It was uncommon for lone parents to report receiving support if they were not seeing lone parent trained staff. It was also rare for lone parents not seeing lone parent trained staff to be referred to external provision through the Jobcentre Plus Offer (see Section 6.4.3). One lone parent found a leaflet advertising such support but had not been told about it by sign-on staff. In instances where lone parents had received some support, this included: being referred to a job club, being given websites to look at for job search, and seeing an adviser when they had found a job to help them with in-work financial support for lone parents. In a couple of cases lone parents described attending work preparation interviews, which they said that they did not find helpful, as they were told how to do a CV when they already had one, or where supported job search found jobs they had already seen.

Lone parents seeing staff trained in lone parent issues

Where lone parents were seeing staff trained in lone parent issues they received a range of support through longer sign-on appointments or by having caseload interviews. The support included being helped with job search, including being given a list of websites to search for work, being given advice on CVs and application forms, discussing childcare (see Section 3.1.6), being helped to organise work experience, having a Better Off Calculation (BOC) and being told about in-work support, advisers phoning them to tell them about new job opportunities, having CVs and application forms posted on their behalf and being referred to providers (see Section 6.4.3). These lone parents were very positive about this support that they had received from advisers, describing the advice they had had as 'brilliant' and 'fantastic'. One lone parent described how she still saw the same adviser as she had when claiming IS, who she had a good relationship with and found very helpful:

'Every fortnight my lone parent adviser, she's absolutely fantastic, she's helped me when I've needed help she's given me her own number, her direct line number, for any questions that have come up, certainly with online applications they were all new to me so she's helped me with that and she's been fantastic.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Another new or repeat claimant described support she had had:

'Yeah my adviser, she's a nice lady. She is good and she helps me a lot and provides some new ideas. You know, I wasn't aware of the after-school club and she told me about this, that it is possible you can put your son in a school club.'

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

The positive attitudes of lone parents who had seen staff trained in lone parent issues are also discussed in Section 6.6.1.

6.4.3 Support from providers

Part of the Jobcentre Plus Offer for lone parents is access to Jobcentre Plus Support Contract provision. A group of lone parents interviewed in this research was referred to providers to access this provision, usually when they were receiving support from staff trained in lone parent issues while claiming JSA. Not all of those took up the offer of attending external provision because it was after school hours or because they were happy to look for jobs without help. It was more common for lone parents in Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth to have been referred to external providers than it was in the other two areas, particularly compared with Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders.

Where lone parents did attend external provision, this was most commonly help with CVs, application forms, job search, interview skills and IT skills. Lone parents generally found this very helpful, some saying it was the most helpful support they had had so far, and one saying it helped her get the job she had moved into. The advisers at those providers were seen to be very helpful and supportive. In a rare case a lone parent found attending provision difficult to fit around her mini-job but reported being told she had to attend or she could be sanctioned (she subsequently increased the hours of her mini-job and left JSA).

It was very rare for lone parents to have received support for looking for work from any other organisations. There were isolated examples of receiving help with a CV from a housing association or from Nextstep, and of going to Careers Scotland and Edinburgh Action for advice about the social-care sector.

6.4.4 Additional support needs

Lone parents were asked if there was anything else Jobcentre Plus or others should be providing that would help them move into work. Whether interviewees had additional support needs did not vary by whether lone parents had previously claimed IS or were new and repeat customers. It also did not vary by the different groups of lone parents on JSA (those who has a strong work attachment, had a high parenting orientation or had experienced a critical life event). Not everyone needed support. For example:

'I feel quite capable of going and looking for my own jobs and I'm quite happy to do that and just get on with stuff, but I suppose it depends on the people too and what they feel they need.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

A very wide range of support needs were articulated. In rare cases, lone parents requested support that they could not access, as they were not yet eligible for it. For example, in one case a lone parent was disappointed to discover that she was not eligible for the full range of in-work support (including Job Grant and In Work Credit) as her benefit claim was not long enough. In another case, a lone parent wanted support with a business plan to become self-employed but reported being told that she would have to wait until she had claimed for six months before being able to access this help (she had been claiming for five months when interviewed).

Another group of lone parents wanted financial help with training to get specific jobs or advice about how to get into a particular profession. For example, they wanted to have courses to become teaching assistants, child development officers and healthcare assistants funded for them. In addition, one male lone parent wanted financial support for a gas engineer course, and another male lone parent wanted financial support to gain a Construction Skills Certification Scheme card or a Security Industry Authority licence. These latter two lone parents had been told that Jobcentre Plus could not offer this financial help for training.

However, in most cases the additional support needs that lone parents said that they had could have been met under the Jobcentre Plus Offer. For example, help with becoming self-employed, help with job interview skills, IT skills development, more rapid support when first made redundant, help with application forms, help with computers, 'English as a second or other language' training, confidence building, CV development, childcare advice, benefits advice, work placements, and more tailored job-search support were all requested. The fact that these needs were not being met suggests that lone parents were not aware of the range of support available to them. This was the case whether or not they were seeing staff trained in lone parent issues while claiming JSA.

Where lone parents were not seeing staff trained in lone parent issues while claiming JSA, they would have liked more tailored support than possible in short sign-on appointments, which some felt were too quick for them to be able to ask for help. For example:

'If they spoke to you a bit more or said to you "If you are going to go back into work we can help you with this or that" but they don't, they just say "Have you done this?" and sign your thing and you are gone.'

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

'They could give you an interview maybe once a month, for half an hour, even if it's not the day you sign on. They could speak to you and see what you are doing to get a job and how it's going and how they can say "Maybe you're doing it wrong and maybe you should come at it from a different angle, do it this way." It might help. If they can give you some advice that sounds like a good idea. They don't do stuff like that.'

(JSA new and repeat lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

Where lone parents were receiving support from staff trained in lone parent issues while claiming JSA, they were clearly not aware that they could ask staff that they saw on JSA (and that they might have been already receiving some form of support from) for this additional support, and that it could be provided through the Jobcentre Plus Offer.

6.5 Sanctions and disentitlements within the Jobseeker's Allowance 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 6.3) 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.

A lone parent can be disentitled from JSA if they fail to meet the basic labour market conditions of the benefit. When a claimant is disentitled their award of JSA ceases. The labour market conditions of entitlement include: being available for work, actively seeking work and having a signed and up-to-date JSAG. In addition to disentitlement, a benefit sanction may also be applied to a lone parent for not meeting labour market requirements. A sanction is a withdrawal of the claimant's benefit for specified temporary periods. Sanctions can be imposed for a number of reasons: for example, where the claimant has contributed to their unemployment, left a job voluntarily or refused employment. 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.

From April 2010, a fixed one-week sanction has been applied where it is determined that a jobseeker did not have good cause for non-attendance¹⁸ of an interview (before April 2010, they would have been disentitled and their claim would have ended). For a second, and any subsequent failures to

¹⁸ 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.

attend, a fixed two-week sanction would be applied. For other sanctions (such as failing to carry out a jobseeker's direction) a fixed two-week sanction will be applied, and for a second, and any subsequent failures, a fixed four-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 claimants do have the opportunity to apply for hardship payments (a reduced award of benefit to give a minimum level of financial support). Having fixed sanctions for failing to attend an interview removes the need for lone parents to make a new claim for JSA after failing to attend an interview, as their claim automatically continues (unlike under the previous system, where their JSA claim would have ceased). The exception to this is where lone parents do not contact Jobcentre Plus within five days of failure to attend an interview, where they are disentitled and their claim ends. In summary and in relation to the cases discussed below:

- Failure to attend an interview without good cause when contact is made with Jobcentre Plus within five days leads to a fixed sanction.
- Failure to actively seek employment or be available for work leads to disentanglement.
- Failure to attend an interview and contact Jobcentre Plus within five days leads to disentanglement.

6.5.1 Lone parents' understanding of sanctions and disentanglement

In line with their good understanding of the requirements of the JSA regime in general (see Section 6.2.3), lone parents understood that if they did not comply with these requirements their benefit could be stopped or they could be sanctioned. It was common for interviewees to say that this was explained to them and given to them in writing in their first appointment when they started claiming JSA. This reflects findings from the previous research on lone parents on JSA (Casebourne *et al.* 2010 and Gloster *et al.* 2010).

There was less awareness of the hardship payment that lone parents could receive if they were sanctioned. This reduced payment of income-based JSA exists for claimants to apply for when they lose their benefits through being sanctioned. However, one lone parent who had not been sanctioned did remember having this explained:

*'If the decision-maker says I am somebody not seeking work they told me I can go to this hardship thing to ask for a crisis loan.'*¹⁹

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Despite a general good understanding of the existence of sanctions there were rare cases of misunderstanding of the sanctions regime. For example, one lone parent thought that if they turned down a job that their benefits would be stopped for three years (perhaps misunderstanding the parent flexibilities, as well as confusing the current sanctions regime with discussions in the media about possible future changes).

Awareness of the possibility of sanctions meant that some interviewees reported trying hard to make sure that they would not be sanctioned. They described phoning the Jobcentre Plus office if they were running late for appointments, arriving early for appointments, phoning if they could not attend an appointment, and attending appointments even when they were ill. Where lone parents had been sanctioned in the past (there were a few reported instances of lone parents being sanctioned in the past while on IS), or knew others who had been sanctioned, they were particularly careful to avoid sanctioning:

¹⁹ Hardship payments during the period of a sanction are different from crisis loans given by the Social Fund.

'I follow the rules. I know what I'm supposed to do.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

While being sanctioned on JSA was rare, there were cases where interviewees described having almost been sanctioned and being given informal warnings or warning letters. These cases occurred when lone parents were late for appointments or appointments were missed (because they were ill, they forgot to attend, or they had other appointments about housing at the same time).

6.5.2 Experiences of being sanctioned

There is a very low incidence of sanctioning of lone parents on JSA according to Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative data. Because an aim of the research was to explore the experiences of those that had been sanctioned or disentitled, we selected all lone parents who had made a claim for JSA between October 2010 and February 2011 with a youngest child aged seven to nine, and who were shown to have experienced a sanction or disentitlement from the administrative data, for interview (to increase their numbers in the sample). In the three case-study areas, there were 35 lone parents who the administrative data marked as having been sanctioned or disentitled. We contacted all of these lone parents on a number of occasions and were only able to set up 11 appointments. Of these 11 appointments we achieved seven interviews (as four did not keep the appointment).

Previous research on lone parents who had been sanctioned on IS (Goodwin, 2008) found that lone parents who had been sanctioned had fairly chaotic lives. For this research, interviewing just seven of the lone parents that we tried to contact for an interview, suggests that we are unlikely to have interviewed sanctioned lone parents with the most chaotic lives. As the JSA regime has more requirements of lone parents than the IS regime, it is also likely that sanctions on JSA may affect a broader group of lone parents, rather than most commonly affecting those whose lives are so chaotic that they find any engagement difficult. This may explain differences in our findings from earlier research.

Of the 60 lone parents interviewed, as mentioned above, seven were shown in administrative data to have experienced a sanction or disentitlement. A further three reported being 'sanctioned' when interviewed. In these three cases, lone parents had in fact been disentitled and had subsequently made a new claim for JSA.

According to administrative data, the reasons the seven lone parents were sanctioned or disentitled were for failure to attend appointments, failure to attend BtWS and for not actively seeking employment. Lone parents themselves, however, were not always clear about what the reason had been, or gave a different reason from the one recorded on the administrative data.²⁰

Lone parents who the administrative data reported having had experience of a fixed sanction because they failed to attend an interview or a BtWS all remembered what had happened and knew why it had happened. In some of these cases it appeared from the recollections of interviewees that they had been sanctioned for failure to attend an interview rather than a BtWS. These cases are detailed below.

²⁰ It may be that the reason had been incorrectly recorded on the administrative system.

Failing to attend an interview or Back to Work session

One lone parent found it difficult to remember which day her sign-on appointments were and was sanctioned when she went to sign on a day late.

Another lone parent reported being confused about the date for their first JSA signing appointment and came a day late and was told she would have a one-week sanction. She then reported continuing to sign regularly but noticing after a few weeks that her income had dropped substantially. She then reported asking at a signing appointment whether she was being paid and was advised that she was. After four months she reported asking again and her adviser checked and was apparently shocked that she had not been receiving JSA for four months. The lone parent reported being told that she would receive backdated payments but had not received them at the time of interview (as the problem had only been identified a week before the interview). In this case she was marked on the administrative data as being sanctioned because she failed to attend a BtWS but a query regarding the sanction had subsequently been raised on the administrative data.

A third lone parent was marked on administrative data as having been sanctioned twice because she failed to attend a BtWS. She reported being late to sign on just before Christmas when her bus was delayed in traffic and said she was then sanctioned a second time when she had a job interview at the same time as a signing appointment. She reported telephoning to say that she could not sign and that she was told to come and sign in the afternoon. She reported that when she went to sign in the afternoon they said that she had not properly explained that she had a job interview in the morning and would be sanctioned. In total she reported losing benefit for three weeks. She reported asking what she needed to do to get her benefits reinstated but not being able to get the information, and is now very careful about being early for signing appointments.

A fourth lone parent was marked on administrative data as being sanctioned because she failed to attend a BtWS. She reported being sanctioned after failing to attend an appointment at Jobcentre Plus and said that she had telephoned in advance to say she had a job interview but that it was not noted down on the system.

6.5.3 Experiences of being disintitiled

The other cases were where lone parents had been disintitiled for failure to actively seek employment. These cases are detailed below.

Failure to actively seek employment

One lone parent reported being 'sanctioned' because she felt that the requirements of the regime were not adequately explained to her at the beginning when she moved from IS to JSA (see also Section 6.2.3 on understanding the requirements of the JSA regime). She did not understand how to give evidence of her work-search activity and was disintitiled early in her claim. This lone parent felt that Jobcentre Plus staff should be more understanding of new claimants who genuinely do not understand what they have to do. She reported making a complaint about this but said that she got no response to her complaint.

Another lone parent marked on the administrative data as being disintitiled for not actively seeking employment thought that she had been 'sanctioned' because of being late for a sign-on appointment and had ensured that she has not been late for appointments since.

A third lone parent understood that she had been disintitiled for this reason and reported since being very careful to ensure that she kept lots of records and photocopies of everything she had done to look for work (see also Section 6.2.4 on meeting the requirements of the JSAg).

In addition to the seven lone parents who the administrative data reported as having been sanctioned or disentitled on JSA, a further three reported being 'sanctioned' during the interview. In these cases lone parents had in fact been disentitled, the administrative data showing that their claim ended and a new claim was subsequently made once they realised that their claim had ended. Disentitlement occurred in these cases because claimants did not contact Jobcentre Plus within five days of failure to attend an interview.

Disentitlement because of not contacting Jobcentre Plus within five days of failure to attend an interview

One lone parent was disentitled because she did not attend an appointment because her children had chicken pox. She could not find anyone to come and look after them while she attended the appointment and could not telephone the Jobcentre Plus office because she had no credit on her mobile phone. She thought that she would miss out on a payment for failing to attend but did not realise that they would completely stop her claim. She said that if she had known, she would have taken her sick children into the Jobcentre Plus office with her. She reported that she did not know that her claim had been stopped until she went in to sign on the next fortnight:

'You see I didn't think they'd suspend it, I just thought I'd lose a payment and I thought fair enough, I can't get up so I'll not get my Jobseeker's Allowance for that fortnight, so I went back up the following fortnight and I couldn't sign on then and it got suspended.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

The second lone parent who was disentitled was not able to sign on because she was attending her aunt's funeral. She reported taking proof to the Jobcentre Plus office in advance that she would not be able to attend the appointment and being advised that it was fine, but when she went in two days later she was told that her claim had been stopped. She reported knowing the rules about signing on and keeping appointments which is why she had taken paperwork down in advance. When she went to see someone who dealt with signing on late they informed her what had happened and she had to do a rapid reclaim which took four weeks, in which time she had no JSA.

The third lone parent who was disentitled reported missing an appointment because she had to go to hospital because of a cancer scare. She reported telling the Jobcentre Plus office about her hospital appointment, but that they still stopped her benefit. She said that she did not know that this was going to happen because they had told her that if she could not make an appointment she should phone them which is what she did. She discovered that her benefit claim had ended when people dealing with her Housing Benefit told her that her payments had been stopped. She reported then going to the Jobcentre Plus office and taking in proof of why she had missed her appointment, and that they did a rapid re-claim.

6.5.4 Financial impact of sanctions and disentitlement

Lone parent interviewees who had been sanctioned or disentitled reported struggling financially during the period with no benefits, which was often stressful and had longer term consequences than the length of sanction would suggest.

The biggest financial problem lone parents who had been disentitled reported was getting into rent arrears. This was because their claims to Housing Benefit stopped as a result of the end of their JSA claim, leading them into severe rent arrears. In one case, arrears were of over £300 which was being

paid back at £3/week, with the lone parent having also been threatened with eviction. The lone parent borrowed money during this period and found it very stressful:

'I survived somehow with great difficulty and I wasn't allowed to apply for a crisis loan, because I wasn't claiming benefit. It was quite upsetting actually, I was very stressed out.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Others got into debt with utility companies and had to borrow from friends, neighbours, family members and their ex-partners to get by financially. Lone parents often reported relying on this kind of borrowing and their Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit while their JSA payments were reinstated. In one case a lone parent sanctioned just before Christmas cut their electricity and gas use and had to manage on £30 for food for their family for three weeks over Christmas. It often took lone parents much longer than the period of the sanction to get back onto an even keel financially:

'Automatically I was short of money. I had to borrow money from my family and whichever way you cut it the money has to go back...it has that domino effect of being short for how many weeks until I could find my way back to a normal level of living.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

In one case a lone parent reported receiving a hardship payment. Another found out about hardship payments from the charity Gingerbread rather than from Jobcentre Plus.

6.5.5 Views of sanctioning and appealing sanctions

Lone parents who had not been sanctioned sometimes felt pressured by the threat of sanctions, which they found stressful, and, as reported above, were keen to ensure that they were not sanctioned. Lone parents who had been sanctioned or disentitled often felt that they had been treated far too severely for a minor infraction and more harshly than their actions deserved. Interviewees indicated that they felt that Jobcentre Plus staff should be more understanding of new claimants who are unused to the rules of JSA and that staff should be more responsible for ensuring that parents with children did not go without money for so long. Some felt that they had not been given enough information about the rules of JSA and the sanctions regime and would have liked the rules to have been explained more clearly. In other cases, lone parents felt that it was not their fault that they had been sanctioned. Indeed, if lone parents are accurately reporting what happened to them, the cases above suggest that these claimants should not have been sanctioned, for example, where lone parents reported telling Jobcentre Plus in advance about having to miss appointments.

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. Where interviewees felt that they had been treated unfairly they sometimes complained or appealed. However, one lone parent lost her appeal, and another said she had heard nothing after making a complaint:

'They have to explain from the beginning how you have not to commit mistakes. How you are to fill in [the jobsearch activity]. Where you have to look for jobs...They have to think about you are new and be a bit more flexible and try to help you. I think they are there to help you not to destroy you and make some mess in your life. I was a bit upset. That's why I made the report [complaint] but I didn't hear anything...I thought maybe they didn't care about my complaint.'

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

Others reported being too stressed by the situation to take it any further. For example:

'To be perfectly honest, I was so annoyed and pee'd off by what they'd done I thought "No, I can't do that." I didn't want to talk to anyone about it. I didn't follow anything up, I didn't complain about it or nothing, I just wanted to forget about it, if I was honest.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

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

6.6.1 Lone parents' overall views on claiming JSA

Across the different groups of lone parents on JSA (those who had a strong attachment to work, had a high parenting orientation and had experienced a critical life event), there was a strong dislike of claiming JSA. While lone parents found the process of initially making a JSA claim to be unproblematic (see Section 6.2.1), lone parents generally found claiming JSA as an overall experience stressful, felt under pressure to find work, which they often felt was misplaced because of a reported lack of jobs where they lived, and often said that they 'hated' claiming JSA. As well as the pressure they felt from the JSA regime itself, they also described not liking the Jobcentre Plus office environment (which one described as a 'man's world' and 'not child friendly'), especially where there was a strong presence of security guards. The Jobcentre Plus environment led to some 'dreading' their regular sign-on appointments. In some cases, the cost of bus fares to attend appointments was another factor in not liking having to regularly sign-on. Lone parents struggled to manage financially on JSA and often felt that they would be financially better off in work (see also Sections 5.1 and 7.3).

Claiming JSA was also a stigmatising experience for lone parents, especially for those who were used to working. For example:

'Well, for a start it's not a great deal of money and I just didn't like, I didn't like the fact that I was claiming it, I mean it might sound silly because I've paid taxes all of my adult life, so obviously if I needed help at the time...I still didn't like it, I don't know, sort of stigma I suppose, you know.'

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

'Well it is quite degrading when you have worked for as long as me. I mean going from £18,000 a year to Jobseeker's, it's a big drop. But at the end of the day it is money that you need to keep living. You just have to get on with it.'

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

'I hate being on benefits and I hate living off the state, I was always the worker so it's been quite frustrating.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

It was also an example that they did not want to set their children:

'I don't want my children brought up with me being on benefits. It gives out the wrong impression to them to say it's okay not to go to work.'

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

It was rare for interviewees to make positive comments about JSA. In these cases, lone parents said that it was good that people are pushed to find work and that it is fair that they have to do something in return for benefits, and that the requirements of the JSA regime were felt to be useful preparation for finding employment.

The attitude lone parents had towards Jobcentre Plus staff varied depending on whether they were talking about security guards, staff at sign-on appointments or advisers trained in lone parent issues. It was commonly reported that security guards and staff at sign-on appointments were rude, had an assumption that the claimant did not want to work, and failed to provide a personalised service, which left interviewees feeling like they had been 'treated like a number' rather than helped to find work. For example:

'I didn't feel I got a great deal of support from the jobcentre. They're just personal I felt, cheeky if you like. One day when I went in and I had actually taken my mobile phone out of my pocket to switch it off and the guy's like "Switch your phone off, no mobile phones!" and I says "I'm just switching it off." They are quite arrogant and abrupt. They just treat everybody the same way.'

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

'I thought they would be supportive in helping you to look for work. It's the other way around, it's "What have you done to look for work?" Every time you sign on you're supposed to give them three things you've done to look for a job, like going into an agency, speaking to them, calling a friend, computer search. How many times can you call a friend or go into an agency? You're not doing enough to look for work, we're going to stop your claim. It's horrible.'

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

One lone parent described an experience she had had with a previous fortnightly jobsearch review, where she said she felt degraded. This lone parent filed a complaint and was moved to see another member of staff.

'I had [name] who was just so rude, he talked to you like you were a bit of a crap at the bottom of his shoe, he was awful, I couldn't stand the man. I used to get really nervous about going to see him, that's how he used to make me feel, it was horrible. It was a horrible experience...The way he spoke to me was just, it was horrible. One day I did come out of there crying my eyes out.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth)

Those who were receiving support from staff trained in lone parent issues while claiming JSA had a much more positive view of their advisers. These advisers were described as sympathetic and understanding, friendly, helpful, approachable, and encouraging rather than pressurising. Lone parents were really glad that they had the opportunity to work with an adviser with lone parent training on JSA. Some examples include:

'We got up a rapport where she knew what I was looking for and she knew what I wanted and what I was doing, yeah I found that quite nice actually...I found them quite helpful, actually. I think all the information down there and what they give you is quite straightforward and if you're quite willing and able and active enough to put in your side of it then you'll get a lot out of it.'

(Re-partnered, not working or claiming; Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders)

'It's fine. They kind of set you goals almost and they get you to think about where do you want to be, they're kind of proactively encouraging you to get into work, as well as being supportive if you've got a master plan yourself almost.'

(JSA from IS lone parent claimant; Birmingham and Solihull)

Where lone parents had been sanctioned this influenced their whole attitude towards claiming JSA. For example, having been initially positive about claiming and excited about the support she felt she would get to help change her life, one lone parent who was sanctioned was subsequently very negative about JSA and felt pressured and no longer liked attending the Jobcentre Plus office.

6.6.2 The effects of the JSA regime on lone parents' attitudes to work

Lone parents usually had very positive attitudes to work and felt that they would be financially better off in work than on benefits (see Sections 5.1 and 7.3). Negative attitudes to claiming JSA detailed above meant that JSA often gave lone parents a 'push' towards work. The effect of JSA on attitudes to work varied, however, depending on whether lone parents had a strong work attachment, had a high parenting orientation or had experienced a critical life event that led to their being on benefits.

JSA seemed to have the greatest effect on attitudes to work for those with a high parenting orientation. Claiming JSA often gave these lone parents a direct push to look for work because they had to do so as part of the JSA regime. Where lone parents had past experiences of claiming IS, the contrast of the JSA regime, where they had more requirements placed on them, along with their dislike of claiming JSA, gave them a strong push to come off benefits and move into work. Where individuals had felt ready to start looking for work because their children were getting older, moving to JSA then gave them the push to actually start looking.

For those who had a strong work attachment, their often-recent work experience and high work orientation meant that they generally felt that being on JSA had no effect on their attitude to work. They were often claiming because they had recently been made redundant, had been retraining or had not managed to sustain work because of inflexible employers or problems with childcare. This meant that they were already highly motivated to find work and said that they would have been actively looking for work even if this had not been a requirement of claiming JSA. However, even in this group, a dislike of claiming JSA in contrast to their experience of working meant that some lone parents felt that JSA was giving them a further 'push' towards work.

Those lone parents who had experienced a critical life event that led to their being on benefits had more varied opinions about whether JSA had affected their attitudes to work. Some felt that it had given them a push to work, while others said that they would have been actively looking for work whether or not they had been claiming JSA.

Across these three different groups of lone parents, there were cases where lone parents did feel that claiming JSA meant that they were being inappropriately pushed towards work – this was the case where lone parents had recently moved or split from their partner and the lone parent was trying to focus on settling their children rather than on looking for work. For those who were working in mini-jobs, it was the 'push' of JSA that directly led them to increase their hours to come off benefits and move into work of over 16 hours per week (see Section 7.1). This was the case, even when ideally they had wanted to find a different kind of work than what they were doing in their mini-job, but the experience of claiming was so negative that they decided to increase the hours of their mini-job so that they could stop claiming as soon as possible.

6.7 Summary

- In general, lone parents found the process of claiming JSA to be unproblematic. Once the JSA claim started, claiming JSA was usually a smooth process. Lone parents were asked what they were expected to do as part of their claim and in general they had a good knowledge and understanding of the requirements of the JSA regime. They also generally reported understanding what they had to do and finding it easy to meet the requirements of the JSAg.
- Lone parents in this research commonly showed no awareness that any of the list of flexibilities were being applied to them when prompted. However, it was usual to see when discussing their case that Jobcentre Plus staff had in fact applied the flexibilities to them. The main example of this was lone parents' restricting their availability to work to part-time and, in some cases, school hours work.
- However, there were a group of lone parents who felt that they were being pressured by Jobcentre Plus staff to apply for inappropriate jobs that would have involved working more than 16 hours, despite the flexibility to restrict work to 16 hours, and despite what they had signed up to in their JSAg. There were a few cases where interviewees were only identified as lone parents when they asked to change their sign-on time.
- Whether or not lone parents were seeing staff trained in lone parent issues varied, and it was just as common not to be seeing such staff as to be seeing them. Whether they were seeing such staff was a key influence on the level and quality of support lone parents felt they had received while on JSA regime and their attitude to Jobcentre Plus staff.
- Where lone parents were not seeing staff trained in lone parent issues it was common to feel that they were not receiving any support at all while on JSA. Where lone parents were seeing staff trained in lone parent issues they received a range of support through longer sign-on appointments or by having caseload interviews.
- It was clear that awareness of the support available through the Jobcentre Plus Offer could be improved among lone parents. Claimants in this research were unaware of the range of support that could be provided to them under the Jobcentre Plus Offer. Lone parents were not routinely told about the offer and often had to ask for help in order to receive support. It was more common for lone parents to be receiving support when they were seeing staff trained in lone parent issues while on JSA, but even then they did not know that they could receive a wider range of support, which they sometimes felt that they needed and that could have been provided through the Jobcentre Plus Offer.
- Short sign-on appointments for those not seeing staff trained in lone parent issues were felt to be too quick for them to be able to ask for help.
- In line with their good understanding of the requirements of the JSA regime in general, lone parents understood that if they did not comply with these requirements their benefit could be stopped or they could be sanctioned. Awareness of the possibility of sanctions meant that some interviewees reported trying hard to make sure that they would not be sanctioned.
- There is a very low incidence of sanctioning of lone parents on JSA, according to DWP administrative data. Because an aim of the research was to explore the experiences of those that had been sanctioned or disentitled, lone parents with a youngest child aged seven to nine who were shown to have experienced a sanction or disentanglement were selected from the administrative data for interview. In the end, seven of these lone parents (out of the total 60 lone parents interviewed in this research) were interviewed. A further three reported being 'sanctioned' when interviewed (they had in fact been disentitled and had subsequently made a new claim for JSA).

- According to administrative data, the reasons the seven lone parents were sanctioned or disentitled were for failure to attend appointments, failure to attend BtWS and for not actively seeking employment. Lone parents themselves, however, were not always clear about what the reason had been, or gave a different reason from the administrative data. Lone parent interviewees who had been sanctioned or disentitled reported struggling financially during the period, with no benefits, which was often stressful and had longer-term consequences than the length of sanction would suggest.
- Across different groups of lone parents on JSA there was a strong dislike of claiming JSA. Negative attitudes to claiming JSA detailed above meant that JSA often gave lone parents a 'push' towards work. JSA seemed to have the greatest effect on attitudes to work for those with a high parenting orientation. Claiming JSA often gave these lone parents a direct push to look for work because they had to do so as part of the JSA regime. For those who had a strong work attachment, their often-recent work experience and high work orientation meant that they generally felt that being on JSA had no effect on their attitude to work. Those lone parents who had experienced a critical life event held more varied opinions about whether JSA had affected their attitudes to work.

7 In work experiences

This chapter explores the experiences of lone parents who were in work at the time of interview. It looks at what type of work they had found, including how many hours a week they were working. The chapter then considers lone parents' experiences of work and their likelihood of staying in work.

Seventeen lone parents that we interviewed had moved into work of 16 hours or more per week at the time of interview, although all had been claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) at the point of sampling. This meant that lone parents had only been in work for short periods of time. The longest period that a lone parent had been in work was four months, while many had been in work for weeks or even days. This limited the amount of reflection that lone parents had on their in-work experience. Those who moved into work tended to be either in the strong work attachment group or those with high parenting orientation. Lone parents in the group with strong work attachment were more likely to be working full-time or very close to full-time hours. Lone parents in the high parenting orientation were more likely to be working between 16 and 29 hours per week and were also more likely to have increased the hours of a mini-job.

Lone parents who had moved into work included those with recent work experience but also some who had not worked for many years. These broadly fitted into four groups, lone parents who:

- were already close to the labour market and had claimed JSA briefly before moving back into work;
- had increased the hours of their mini-job;
- had little and in some case no work experience, but felt pushed to move into work as a direct result of the JSA regime;
- had done some volunteering before finding paid employment. (This was a small group.)

7.1 Type of work

Lone parents in work at the time of interview had moved into a range of jobs. Most of these were low-skilled and low-paid positions, such as cleaning, waitressing, low-level clerical and administrative work, and retail positions. A small number had moved into higher skilled roles, such as a medical receptionist and youth support worker. This finding is in line with the previous qualitative and quantitative evaluations of Lone Parent Obligations (Casebourne *et al.* 2010; Coleman and Lanceley, 2011).

Many lone parents had moved into a role or industry that was new to them. For example, one lone parent had started care work but had previous work experience in administration and marketing. Some saw their job as leading to a new career, such as a lone parent combining one mini-job cleaning and another as a meals supervisor, who felt that this latter job would help her pursue her goal of becoming a teaching assistant:

'In the school I really enjoy what I do. I like to work with children. That is what I want to do in my future. I would like to be a teaching assistant. I have no qualifications here but I am getting some experience. They are all very helpful and kind and they teach me. Every day you can learn many things.'

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

Other lone parents had taken on extra work while continuing in a mini-job, or returned to a previous job. Some of these lone parents were happy to return to or continue in work that they enjoyed. For example, one lone parent had a mini-job in her daughter's school canteen and topped this up with another mini-job as a crossing patrol attendant and was happy with this. Others, however, felt that they had been pushed by the JSA regime into taking work that they didn't particularly enjoy. For example, one lone parent had worked in horticulture before becoming a mother and wanted to return to this line of work. She had also had a mini-job helping elderly people in her village with their shopping and cleaning, and extended this when she couldn't find horticulture work.

'So I was looking for work and I was trying to get a proper job, I mean proper hours employed by somebody but it is just so difficult. I think because I have never had to write out CVs and stuff like that and then I just wasn't getting anywhere at all and half of them went on the fire actually. I just couldn't do it and then I thought I will just ring around and see if anyone else wants a cleaner. I rang around and got a cleaning job at the pub so I kept my other work on as well.'

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

Some lone parents in this situation saw these roles as temporary and indicated that they planned to look for work more in line with their aspirations in the future. For example, one lone parent who had been made redundant from a role had recently returned to this position for less pay than before:

'I won't stay there. I'll be looking for somewhere with more money. I've got over ten years' experience but I haven't got the qualifications and now they want the qualifications.'

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

7.2 Hours of work

It was common for lone parents to be working between 16 and 29 hours per week, often within school hours. Some lone parents were working exactly 16 hours per week. Those who had secured part-time roles were happy with their ability to balance work and family responsibilities. For example:

'I work when they're at school. The boys leave at 8.30am and then I go to work. Come home, walk the dogs, make tea. It's great. I don't even notice that I'm away.'

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

Some lone parents had moved into work of 30 hours or more. These included a mix of lower and higher skilled positions and included: youth support worker, play leader in a school, warehouse assistant, and customer services adviser. Each of the lone parents in full-time work was from the group with strong work attachment in the typology of lone parents. Lone parents in full-time work spoke less about their ability to balance work and family responsibilities but when probed did not envisage difficulties. One lone parent in full-time work, however, was concerned about school holiday childcare. See Chapter 3 for more detail on use and views of childcare.

7.3 Experiences of being in work

Many of the lone parents that had moved into work at the time of interview had only been in their jobs for a very short time. Some of these lone parents had not yet been paid and felt that it was too early to judge whether they would be financially better off in work. Those who had been in work for longer, felt that they were definitely financially better off in work. None of the lone parents we spoke

to felt that they were financially worse off in work, though some felt that they were still struggling. For example:

'Financially we're not that strong. I've still got the mortgage to pay. The money that comes in is just about enough. I don't save anything on the side. I can't buy a car. Me and my three children make do with what we've got.'

(In work lone parent; Birmingham and Solihull)

Most lone parents felt that their transition into work was smooth and they did not experience gaps with no income. Several mentioned the range of support they had received including: benefit run-ons, Job Grants and In Work Credit, Working Tax Credits and Child Tax Credits. For example:

'It has moved on quite far in terms of support. I'm talking Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit, In Work Credits. When you haven't worked for a year you get an extra £50 a week. That really helped when I first went back to work.'

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

Lone parents reported that work had a positive impact on themselves and their families, beyond the financial impact of work. These benefits included: getting out of the house, being able to socialise with other adults and increased self-esteem. For example one lone parent said:

'Brilliant. It's great being back to work. It's getting your life back, getting in amongst the adults doing something for yourself. My life was walking the dogs and meeting friends, shopping. It's pretty boring.'

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

These findings are in line with a number of other recent studies which have found that for lone parents who have experienced worklessness, moving back into work is a positive experience (Casebourne *et al.* 2010; Sims *et al.* 2010). As with perceived financial benefits of work, these non-financial benefits were in line with the attitudes to work found among lone parents in this study who had not yet found work (see Section 5.1).

Lone parents we spoke to felt that their moving into work had a positive impact on their children. This was because the family would be financially better off and that they were providing a positive role model for their children. Some lone parents reported that their children missed them or were upset when they went to work, however, the lone parents did not feel that this was a serious problem. For example, one lone parent in full-time work said:

'They always want to cry before I go to work, but it's not too bad.'

(In work lone parent; Birmingham and Solihull)

7.4 Likelihood of having to stop work

Lone parents we spoke to felt positive about work and were committed to staying in their jobs. This included lone parents who had taken jobs that they had felt pushed into. For example, one lone parent who was in work, but looking for a better paid position explained that she would remain in her current role while searching for work rather than move back onto benefits:

'I wouldn't just leave like that, I want to have a job ongoing, I don't want to be unemployed. It's not nice and I don't think it is a good example for your kids. Even my daughter says it to me "It's not a good example." She likes me working, my daughter.'

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

When asked what might prevent them from staying in work, lone parents did not feel that anything would prevent them from working and thought that they would now stay in work until they retired. One lone parent in a rural area said that if she no longer had access to her car this would mean she could not stay in work.

7.5 Summary

- A small group of lone parents that we interviewed had moved into work of 16 hours or more per week at the time of interview, although all had been claiming JSA at the point of sampling. This meant that lone parents had only been in work for short periods of time. The longest period that a lone parent had been in work was four months, while many had been in work for weeks or even days. This limited the amount of reflection that lone parents had on their in-work experience. Those who moved into work tended to be either in the strong work attachment group or those with high parenting orientation.
- Lone parents in work at the time of interview had moved into a range of jobs. Most of these were low-skilled and low-paid positions, such as cleaning, waitressing, low-level clerical and administrative work, and retail positions.
- Generally, lone parents we spoke to were working between 16 and 29 hours per week, often within school hours. Some lone parents were working exactly 16 hours per week.
- Lone parents in the group with strong work attachment were more likely to be working full-time, or very close to full-time, hours. Lone parents in the high parenting orientation were more likely to be working between 16 and 29 hours per week and were also more likely to have increased the hours of a mini-job.
- Lone parents reported that work had a positive impact on themselves and their families, beyond the financial impact of work.

8 Conclusions and recommendations

The overall aim of this research was to evaluate the effect of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) for lone parents with younger children, who lost entitlement to Income Support (IS) from October 2010 (and whose youngest child was aged seven or eight). Additionally, because these lone parents had younger children, it also aimed to inform the delivery of the planned further roll-out of LPO, to those with a youngest child aged five or six. In particular it sought to explore: work readiness of lone parents and the support they needed to move into work, social networks to support a move into work, work aspirations, experiences of the Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) regime, sanctions and their implications, and childcare.

8.1 Work readiness and looking for work

A typology of three broad categories of lone parents interviewed in this research was developed, based on their work and benefits histories, those: with a high parenting orientation, with a strong work attachment or who had experienced a critical life event. Those with a strong work attachment were generally the most work ready, often with qualifications and recent work experience. They were often highly motivated to move into particular job roles in which they had experience or qualifications. Lone parents with a high parenting orientation were generally less work ready, though some of these lone parents had moved into work at the time of interview. These lone parents had tended to be out of work since becoming parents. They were more motivated to find work with part-time hours than by the job role they were seeking. The third group of lone parents was far more varied. These lone parents had experienced a critical life event, such as the onset or worsening of a health condition, homelessness or moving to the UK and not speaking English. Some of these lone parents were quite work ready and had work experience pre-dating their critical life event, had dealt with the consequences of their event and were now ready to move back into work. Other lone parents in this group had only recently experienced their critical life event and were still dealing with its aftermath.

Lone parents in this study were typically looking for part-time work, with many looking for work of exactly 16 hours per week. For many lone parents looking for part-time work, the hours of the job were more important than the job role itself. Other lone parents, typically those with more established work histories, were looking for work in a particular occupation or industry and were pragmatic about the hours they would be prepared to accept. While some lone parents were actively seeking to avoid work that they had not enjoyed previously or did not think they would enjoy, others had found it difficult to find part-time work in a preferred occupation or industry and had broadened their job search.

Lone parents with a strong work attachment often needed relatively little support in order to move back into work. Many in this group had worked until a recent event such as redundancy and had managed work and childcare successfully. The JSA regime had little effect on this group as they were already highly motivated to find work.

The group with high parenting orientation had often been out of work for several years and moving onto JSA was the first time that they had considered seriously a return to work. This group had support needs around job search and with practical measures associated with a return to work, such as organising childcare. The JSA regime had the strongest effect on this group.

The group who had experienced a critical life event were far more varied. Some needed support in order to deal with the aftermath of their event, such as finding housing and schools in a new area, or help with a health condition. Others were ready for a return to work, some had few support needs while others were similar to those with high parenting orientation. The JSA regime had a mixed impact on this group. Some felt that it had given them a push to work, while others said that they would have been actively looking for work whether or not they had been claiming JSA.

8.2 Attitudes to balancing work and parenting

Lone parents in this study felt positive about the prospect of being working parents. This was because of both the financial and non-financial benefits of work. Almost all lone parents we spoke to thought that they would be financially better off in work. This included both those in work and out of work at the time of interview. This finding was in contrast to the last wave of qualitative evaluation of LPO. Non-financial benefits included setting a positive role model for children, interacting more with other adults and no longer claiming benefits. These stated benefits were similar for both lone parents in and out of work at the time of interview. Negatives associated with working centred around having less time to spend on parenting tasks and concern about older children who were too old for childcare. Limiting work to school hours was seen to lessen or eliminate the downsides to work.

8.3 Childcare

Negative attitudes to formal childcare were less strongly expressed in this study than in the previous wave of qualitative evaluation of LPO. It was common for lone parents in this study to have used the free early years provision for nursery when their children were younger. Those who had worked since their children were born had often used a wide range of childcare, including full-time nursery, in the past. It was also common for lone parents to use an after-school club, even when they were not working. After-school clubs were very popular and it was common for lone parents to feel that they would be happy to use this method of childcare when they moved into work. Some lone parents did not feel that they would use formal childcare. This was because they only wanted to work part-time or in school hours, and/or because they had a good support network of family, friends, current partners or their children's other parent who they relied on for informal care.

8.4 Supporting lone parents on Jobseeker's Allowance

While some lone parents in this study were seeing staff trained in lone parent issues, it was just as common for lone parents not to be seeing such staff. Those lone parents who were not seeing staff trained in lone parent issues often felt that they were not receiving any support at all. On the other hand, lone parents who were seeing such staff reported receiving a wide range of support, including caseload interviews, guided job search or referral to an external provider. The support needs articulated by those who did not feel that they were receiving support were usually in line with the support being received by other lone parents in this study through the Jobcentre Plus Offer. Lone parents in this research were unaware of the range of support that could be provided to them under the Jobcentre Plus Offer. This included those who were receiving support under the Jobcentre Plus Offer, but who were unaware of a wider range of available support. Lone parents were not routinely told about the support on offer and often had to ask for help in order to receive support. Short sign-on appointments for those not seeing staff trained in lone parent issues were felt to be too quick for them to be able to ask for help.

8.5 Sanctions

There is a very low incidence of sanctioning of lone parents on JSA according to DWP administrative data. In order to maximise the number of lone parents we spoke to who had experienced a sanction, we also included lone parents with slightly older children (up to the age of ten) if they had experienced a sanction. Of the 60 lone parents interviewed in this research, seven were shown in administrative data to have experienced a sanction or disentitlement. A further three reported being 'sanctioned' when they were interviewed (they had in fact been disentitled and had subsequently made a new claim for JSA). Lone parents were sanctioned or disentitled for a range of reasons including: failure to attend appointments, failure to attend Back to Work sessions (BtWS) and for not actively seeking employment.

Lone parent interviewees who had been sanctioned or disentitled reported struggling financially during the period with no benefits, which was often stressful and had longer-term consequences than the length of sanction or disentitlement would suggest. For example, it was common for disentitled lone parents to go into debt with utility companies and to borrow money from friends or family. Lone parents who had experienced a sanction or disentitlement often felt negative about Jobcentre Plus and felt that their sanction was harsher than their actions deserved.

8.6 Implications for the roll-out of Lone Parent Obligations to lone parents with a youngest child aged five and over

The next phase planned for LPO will affect lone parents whose youngest child is aged five and over. Based on the experiences of lone parents in this study, some lone parents will have moved into work before or at the point when their youngest child started school without the push of JSA. JSA claims by these lone parents are likely to be because of redundancy, inflexible employment or a lack of appropriate childcare. These lone parents may need relatively little support, or support more in line with that provided by Jobcentre Plus redundancy support, than other lone parents on JSA. There was some evidence in this study that lone parents in work needed additional flexibility at work from their employer, when their youngest child started school because of changing childcare needs.

As with lone parents affected by the earlier phases of LPO, lone parents in the next phase are likely to consider moving into work seriously for the first time as a result of the JSA regime and the more regular and work-focused interventions. Many of these lone parents, particularly those with high parenting orientation, are likely to express a strong preference for school-hours work. The difficulty finding such work that lone parents in this study reported is likely to be exacerbated as more lone parents are required to look for work. The JSA flexibility allowing lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or under to restrict their availability for work to school hours is in line with the work aspirations of many lone parents in this research. Competition for these jobs appears to be high and generating part-time vacancies will be key to moving many lone parents from JSA into work.

Lone parents in this wave of the qualitative evaluation expressed more positive views of formal childcare than lone parents in previous waves. Nonetheless, some parents took some time to find childcare that their children enjoyed. This has important implications for the planned future roll-out of LPO to lone parents with a youngest child aged five, as those who have difficulties settling their children into formal childcare or making informal childcare arrangements may need support during this period. For example, Jobcentre Plus staff may need to be willing to work with parents to find the most appropriate childcare arrangements for their particular needs.

8.7 Implications for Universal Credit

It was common for lone parents in this study to be looking for work of exactly 16 hours per week. This is because 16 hours is the minimum number of hours needed to make the transition from out of work benefits onto in-work financial support, such as tax credits. Although Universal Credit will contain in-work conditionality, it will remove the 16 hours rule. There is a potential, therefore, that lone parents may work fewer hours under Universal Credit than under the current regime.

Claims for Universal Credit will be made online. Lone parents in this study were managing to search for work online, even where they had barriers to internet access. This is potentially positive news for the roll out of Universal Credit, though it must be noted that the lone parents in this study did not include those claiming Employment and Support Allowance, who may have different access barriers.

In contrast to the previous wave of qualitative evaluation of LPO, lone parents in this study were generally confident that they would be financially better off in work. This was owing to good knowledge of in-work financial support, such as In Work Credit and tax credits, including the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. At the time of writing, it has recently been announced that childcare costs will be supported at the current rate for lone parents in work of 16 or more hours per week and extended to those working fewer hours. This is good news, as it is important that Jobcentre Plus advisers are able to continue to demonstrate the financial benefits of work to lone parents under Universal Credit.

8.8 Recommendations

A number of recommendations have come from this research to assist with the formulation of policy for the operation of the JSA regime for lone parents:

- Promote and facilitate the increased use of staff trained in lone parent issues within Jobcentre Plus in the delivery of the JSA regime for lone parents.
- Improve awareness and uptake of the support available through the Jobcentre Plus Offer among lone parent claimants.
- Ensure all Jobcentre Plus staff have a leaflet which they give to parent claimants about childcare in their local area. This could be either a list of local childcare providers or a leaflet from their local Family Information Services. It would also be useful if this identified where parents should go for advice about finding childcare for children with a disability or behavioural problems.

Appendix

The lone parent interviews

A.1 Lone parent claimants sampling and recruitment

Two groups of lone parent claimants were interviewed as part of this research. Lone parent claimants who had made a new or repeat claim for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and lone parent claimants who had made the transition from Income Support (IS) onto JSA when their youngest child turned seven.

Table A.1 Lone parent claimants and the type of JSA claim made

| Type of JSA claimant | |
|----------------------|--------|
| Claimant type | Number |
| JSA from IS | 35 |
| New and repeat | 25 |
| Total | 60 |

Lone parents were recruited from a sample of JSA lone parents in three case study areas: Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth in London; Birmingham and Solihull; and Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders. All lone parent claimants in this sample had a youngest child aged seven when they claimed JSA. For those who were recorded in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative data as having experienced a sanction or disqualification, the age of the youngest child was extended to between seven and nine, to ensure that there were enough of these cases in the sample.

At the time of the interview lone parents who had transferred to JSA from IS, as a result of losing eligibility to IS, would typically have been claiming JSA for between five and seven months. For JSA new and repeat lone parent claimants, they would typically have been claiming JSA for between seven and nine months. New and repeat JSA lone parents would have made a claim from October 2010 to February 2011 and would have had no history of an IS claim within the three months before the start of their JSA claim.

Table A.2 Achieved interviews by case study area

| Lone parents by case study areas | | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------|-----------------------|--------|-------|
| Customer type | Birmingham | Edinburgh and Borders | London | Total |
| JSA from IS | 6 | 14 | 15 | 35 |
| New and repeat | 10 | 5 | 10 | 25 |
| Total | 16 | 19 | 25 | 60 |

A.2 Key characteristics of customers interviewed

This section describes the characteristics of the 60 lone parent claimants who were interviewed during the evaluation. The information used in this section was provided by the lone parents interviewed.

As Table A.3 shows, roughly half of the lone parents identified their ethnicity as white, a quarter as black and the remainder as Asian, mixed or other. This is much more ethnically diverse than the lone-parent population on IS with a youngest child aged seven or eight (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011). This is likely to be because of the case-study sites in London and Birmingham, both cities with large minority ethnic populations.

Table A.3 Lone parent claimants by ethnicity

| Ethnicity | | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Customer type | Asian | Black | Mixed/other | White | Total |
| IS stock | 3 | 10 | 4 | 18 | 35 |
| New and repeat | 2 | 11 | 1 | 11 | 25 |
| Total | 5 | 21 | 5 | 29 | 60 |

Most of the lone parents were female, though nine male lone parents were interviewed. Two of the respondents were grandparents who had become the guardians of their grandchildren.

Table A.4 Gender of lone parents interviewed by lone parent claimant type

| Gender | | | |
|----------------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|
| Customer type | Female | Male | Total |
| IS stock | 31 | 4 | 35 |
| New and repeat | 20 | 5 | 25 |
| Total | 51 | 9 | 60 |

As outlined in Tables A.5 and A.6, in contrast to the last wave of qualitative evaluation of Lone Parent Obligations (Casebourne *et al.* 2010), few of the lone parents we spoke to reported health conditions or disabilities. This is because lone parents in this study had all made a claim for JSA, while the previous wave included lone parents who had made a claim for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). Of those who did report a health condition or disability, the most common condition reported was depression. This is in line with findings from the quantitative study of Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011), and previous research (Casebourne and Britton, 2004), which found that lone parents have poorer mental health than other groups. Few respondents reported that they had a child with a health condition or disability, though several reported that they had a child with behavioural difficulties.

Table A.5 Achieved interviews by health problem or disability

| Claimant health problem or disability | | | |
|--|------------|-----------|--------------|
| Claimant type | Yes | No | Total |
| JSA from IS | 8 | 27 | 35 |
| New and repeat | 7 | 18 | 25 |
| Total | 15 | 45 | 60 |

Table A.6 Achieved interviews by children’s health problem or disability

| Children’s health problem or disability | | | |
|--|------------|-----------|--------------|
| Claimant type | Yes | No | Total |
| JSA from IS | 6 | 29 | 35 |
| New and repeat | 7 | 18 | 25 |
| Total | 13 | 47 | 60 |

In line with lone parents in the recent quantitative study of Lone Parent Obligations (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011), it was most common for the respondents in this study to rent their home from a local authority or housing association. The second most common housing tenure was ‘private rented’, followed by a small number of owner-occupiers. For those renting privately, a desire to move home in the future in order to avoid high rents was common.

Table A.7 Achieved interviews by claimant type and housing tenure

| Housing tenure | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Claimant type | Owner occupied | Social housing | Private rent | Total |
| JSA from IS | 2 | 16 | 17 | 35 |
| New and repeat | 3 | 18 | 4 | 25 |
| Total | 5 | 34 | 21 | 60 |

Table A.8 Level of highest qualification by claimant type

Lone parents on IS with a youngest child aged seven or eight have been found to have a range of qualification levels (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011). This variation was reflected in our study, with some lone parents having no qualifications and qualifications ranging right through to degree level.

| Level of highest qualification | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|--------------|
| Claimant type | No quals | Other qual | Quals below level 2 | Quals at level 2 | Quals at level 3 | Quals at level 4 and above | Not known | Total |
| JSA from IS | 5 | 3 | 6 | 12 | 5 | 4 | 0 | 35 |
| New and repeat | 6 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 25 |
| Total | 11 | 6 | 7 | 16 | 11 | 7 | 2 | 60 |

Table A.9 Achieved interviews by claimant status at interview

| Status at interview | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------|------------|--------------|--------------|
| Claimant type | In work | JSA | Other | Total |
| JSA from IS | 8 | 27 | 0 | 35 |
| New and repeat | 9 | 13 | 3 | 25 |
| Total | 17 | 40 | 3 | 60 |

While most lone parents were on JSA or in work at the time of interview, a small number were classified as at an ‘other’ destination. These included lone parents who had: re-partnered, moved onto IS support because they were pregnant and moved onto ESA because a health condition had worsened.

Table A.10 Achieved interviews by claimant type and length of time on JSA

| Length of JSA claim | | | | | | |
|---------------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------|
| Claimant type | 0-3 months | 4-6 months | 6-9 months | 9-12 months | 12 months + | Total |
| JSA from IS | 2 | 29 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 35 |
| New and repeat | 2 | 17 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 25 |
| Total | 4 | 46 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 60 |

Most lone parents had been claiming JSA for between four and six months at the time of interview. A small number reported claiming for longer than this. Those who reported claiming for less than four months were in work at the time of interview and had only claimed JSA for a short period of time.

Table A.11 Achieved interviews by lone parent claimant type and age group

| Age | | | | | | | | |
|----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|---------|-------|
| Claimant type | 25-29 | 30-34 | 35-39 | 40-44 | 45-49 | 50+ | Unknown | Total |
| JSA from IS | 7 | 4 | 6 | 12 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 35 |
| New and repeat | 5 | 4 | 4 | 6 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 25 |
| Total | 12 | 8 | 10 | 18 | 9 | 2 | 1 | 60 |

This wave of lone parents tended to be younger than lone parents in the previous wave of qualitative evaluation of Lone Parent Obligations (Casebourne *et al.* 2010). In the last wave, 79 out of 202 lone parents were aged over 45 and just two out 202 were aged under 30 years.

Table A.12 Achieved interviews by lone parent customer type and number of children

| Number of children | | | | | |
|--------------------|----|----|----|----|-------|
| Claimant type | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4+ | Total |
| JSA from IS | 10 | 14 | 8 | 3 | 35 |
| New and repeat | 10 | 11 | 4 | 0 | 25 |
| Total | 20 | 25 | 12 | 3 | 60 |

It was most common for lone parents in this study to have one or two children. Very few lone parent families had four or more children.

Table A.13 Achieved interviews by age of youngest child

| Age of youngest child | | | | |
|------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|--------------|
| Claimant type | 7 | 8 | 9 | Total |
| JSA from IS | 14 | 17 | 4 | 35 |
| New and repeat | 13 | 11 | 1 | 25 |
| Total | 27 | 28 | 5 | 60 |

This study was based on the experiences of lone parents who made a claim for JSA when their youngest child was aged seven. The time between making their claim and interview meant that some of these children had turned eight by the time of interview. A small number of lone parents had slightly older children. These lone parents were included in order to increase the number of lone parents who had experienced a sanction or disentanglement in this study.

A.3 Themes covered by discussion guide

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

The discussion guide included questions on the following topics:

- Personal, household and family characteristics.
- Education and training.
- Benefits and work history.
- Experiences of the Jobseeker's Allowance regime.
- Awareness and experience of sanctions.
- Work-search activities.
- Current employment.
- Use of, and attitudes to, childcare.

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Lone Parent Obligations were introduced in November 2008. Since then, based on the age of their youngest child, lone parents have lost entitlement to Income Support (IS) solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. From October 2010, the age of the youngest child was lowered to seven and over.

This report presents findings from qualitative research with lone parents who made a claim for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), either as a new or repeat claimant, or following the transition from IS, when their youngest child was seven. Sixty depth interviews were carried out with lone parents in three case study areas during June and July 2011. The interviews explored issues such as work readiness, childcare, claiming JSA, looking for work and any experience of moving into work. The research was carried out by the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion (*Inclusion*).

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