

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 524

Options and Choices Events: testing implementation and delivery in Trailblazer districts

Dr. Sarah Jenkins and Richard Lloyd

A report of research carried out by GHK Consulting on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
The Authors.....	viii
Abbreviations.....	ix
Summary	1
1 Introduction	7
1.1 Policy context	7
1.2 Research context	8
2 Methodology	11
2.1 Introduction.....	11
2.2 Objectives of the research	11
2.3 Study Methodology	12
2.3.1 <i>District visits</i>	12
2.3.2 <i>Observation of Options and Choices Events</i>	13
2.3.3 <i>Evaluation forms</i>	13
2.3.4 <i>Focus groups with presenters</i>	14
2.3.5 <i>Telephone interviews with lone parents attending events</i>	14
2.3.6 <i>Telephone interviews with lone parents not attending events</i>	14
2.3.7 <i>Follow-up visit to districts</i>	14

3	Organisation of events	15
3.1	Introduction.....	15
3.2	Delivery models	15
3.3	Initial assumptions and expectations	15
3.4	Choice of venues	16
3.5	Choosing the presenters	17
3.6	Inviting lone parents to the events	17
3.7	Engaging employers	20
3.8	Monitoring	23
3.9	Follow-up with non-attendees	24
3.10	Conclusion	24
4	Staff training and preparation	25
4.1	Introduction.....	25
4.2	Timing.....	25
4.3	Presentation skills training.....	26
	4.3.1 <i>Improvements to the presentation skills training</i>	27
4.4	Additional sales training.....	29
4.5	Additional team meetings.....	29
4.6	Guidance framework	30
	4.6.1 <i>Improvements to the guidance</i>	31
4.7	Conclusion	32
5	Delivering the events.....	35
5.1	Introduction.....	35
5.2	Meeting and greeting lone parents and information packs.....	35
5.3	Attendance.....	36
5.4	Staff at the event.....	36
5.5	The presentation.....	37
5.6	Employer presentations.....	39
5.7	Employment Zone.....	40

5.8	The one-to-ones	40
5.9	Staff reflections.....	41
5.10	Conclusion	42
6	Lone parent feedback	45
6.1	Introduction.....	45
6.2	Evaluation forms.....	45
	6.2.1 Respondent nature and characteristics.....	45
6.3	Event location and venue.....	46
6.4	Reasons for attending the event	48
6.5	The presentation.....	48
6.6	Presentations by others.....	50
6.7	Understanding of messages	51
6.8	One-to-Ones.....	54
6.9	Usefulness of the event.....	54
6.10	Language issues.....	56
6.11	After the event	56
6.12	Outcomes of the events.....	57
6.13	Lone parents who declined the invitation to attend an event.....	58
6.14	Lone parents who accepted an invitation to attend an event but failed to attend.....	59
6.15	Conclusion	60
7.1	Organisation of events.....	61
7.2	Staff training and preparation	62
7.3	Delivering the events	62
7.4	Overall conclusion.....	64

Appendix A	Lone parent case studies.....	65
Appendix B	District visit topic guides	69
Appendix C	Evaluation form	73
Appendix D	Event feedback form responses.....	77
Appendix E	Observation template	85
Appendix F	Presenter topic guide	91
Appendix G	Customer and staff topic guides	93
Appendix H	Telephone follow-up with attendees topic guide	95
Appendix I	Telephone topic guide for non-attendees	99
Appendix J	Follow-up district visit topic guide	103

List of tables

Table 3.1	Number of events held by Trailblazer district.....	23
Table 5.1	Example of parents' transferable skills.....	38
Table 6.1	Age distribution of lone parents completing evaluation forms.....	45
Table 6.2	Distribution of lone parents completing evaluation forms by age of youngest child.....	46
Table 6.3	Responses to statements to test understanding of key messages (n=232).....	52
Table 6.4	Usefulness of events (n=232).....	55

List of figure

Figure 2.1	Summary of study methodology	12
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Abbreviations

ASM	Adviser Service Manager
BOC	Better Off Calculation
DASO	Diary Administration Support Officer
ESOL	English for speakers of other languages
EZ	Employment Zone
FTA	Fail to Attend
GIS	Geographical Information System
IS	Income Support
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
LEP	Local Employment Partnership
LMRA	Labour Market and Recruitment Adviser
LPA	Lone Parent Adviser
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
WFI	Work Focused Interview

Summary

Introduction

Options and Choices Events are targeted at lone parents whose Income Support (IS) eligibility is due to end within a year. Options and Choices Events are group events for between 10 and 15 lone parent customers and attendance at these events is voluntary. They usually consist of two presentations, one given by Jobcentre Plus staff and the other given by an employer. At the end of the event, lone parents are given the opportunity to have a one-to-one conversation with a Jobcentre Plus adviser, sign up for New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) or sign up for another opportunity to help them move closer to the labour market, such as working with an external service provider.

The purpose of the events is to:

- provide lone parents with information on the changes to IS entitlement and provide details of the options available to them, giving them the information they need to make the right choices for their own and their children's future;
- ensure lone parents understand how Jobcentre Plus and their partners can help them prepare for and return to work, and how the local labour market operates; and
- discuss the world of work and promote the benefits of work for lone parents.

Options and Choices Events were introduced in two Trailblazer districts¹ from January 2008, ahead of national roll-out from April 2008. The purpose of early implementation in Trailblazer districts was to learn as much as possible from the experiences of these districts so that design, implementation and delivery processes could be improved in time for national roll-out. This report presents the findings from research focusing on the Trailblazer districts experiences of delivering Options and Choices Events.

¹ The two Trailblazer districts were Birmingham and Solihull, and North and North East London.

The research methodology consisted of: initial district visits to each Trailblazer district; observation of nine Options and Choices Events across the two districts during the first two weeks of delivery; analysis of evaluation forms collected from each event; focus groups with presenters; telephone interviews with lone parents who did and did not attend the events; and a follow-up district visit three months after the districts had started to deliver the events (see Chapter 2).

Organisation of events

The two Trailblazer districts have undertaken the organisation and delivery of the events differently, fitting in with existing roles and delivery models. Birmingham used a centralised model, with the organisation of events happening within a centralised team based within the district. London had a centralised resource coordinating and overseeing the organisation. However, the responsibility for delivering events and getting lone parents to attend was with the lead Jobcentre Plus office within each borough (see Section 3.2).

Despite different delivery models, a similar process was used for identifying and inviting lone parents. An initial contact was made with the lone parent via a telephone call. Once a lone parent agreed to attend the event, they were sent a confirmation letter with details of the event. A follow-up telephone call was made a day or two before the event to remind the lone parent of their attendance (see Section 3.6).

A number of employers have been engaged to support the events from a variety of sectors, including construction, retail and services. In both districts, the National Sales Team have played a role in identifying suitable employers to deliver the Options and Choices Events, however, there were concerns about the sustainability of this, particularly when delivery of the events was rolled out nationally. Moreover, as neighbouring districts began to organise parallel events, there was concern about multiple approaches to large employers in the area, and a recognition of the need to engage local small and medium-sized employers who may not have a suitable venue to host an event (see Section 3.7).

Varying attendance rates were experienced by both districts at events, however, morning events tended to be more popular with both lone parents and employers. To address the variation in numbers, and to meet the customer and employer preference for morning events, both districts were considering the option of combining the two events planned for one day to deliver one larger event.

Staff training and preparation

The two day presentation skills training course was felt to be a good introductory course to help staff deliver a presentation. However, for many staff it did not meet all their needs to enable them to deliver an Options and Choices Event. Most notably, there was no significant time allocated for London staff to put

into practice the presentation skills they developed on the course, this contrasted with Birmingham where practice time away from regular duties was allocated. After the training, London staff struggled to find time as a team to put together their presentation and practice before the delivery of their first event. In addition, staff were provided with no training on how to use the technology involved in delivering the events, for example, laptops, projector or Powerpoint. Moreover, there appeared to be confusion as to the objective of the training. Was it to deliver presentation skills training to staff or was it to prepare staff for delivering Options and Choices Events (see Section 4.3)?

The guidance framework issued to staff set out the content of the presentation to be delivered at the events and was generally considered to be clear and was understood by all staff. However, staff felt that the guidance on the actions and processes that needed to be conducted both before and after the event was missing. Staff stated they would have liked to be able to sign off an event through completion of a checklist of activities required to deliver the event (see Section 4.6).

Delivering the events

Staff and lone parents felt it was important to have a member of staff meeting and greeting lone parents as they arrived at the event. Many lone parents were nervous of attending a venue which they had not previously visited, having someone greet them and explain what to do, put the customers at ease.

Issues arose regarding the supply of information packs containing leaflets and information on the support offered by Jobcentre Plus. This resulted in information packs with differing content being given to the lone parents across the districts (see Section 5.2).

The two Trailblazer districts had differing levels of staff present at the event. London had three Lone Parent Advisers (LPAs) at each event who shared delivery of the presentation and the event. In Birmingham, it was felt that six was the optimum number of staff needed at the event in order to greet the customers and deliver the one-to-ones in greater depth after the presentation (see Section 5.4).

Staff felt that it was important Options and Choices Events were delivered by staff that were good presenters. It was felt that strong presentation skills, demonstrated through confidence and being 'proud and passionate' about working with the customer group could be more important than a knowledgeable presenter. As there was more than one member of staff in the room, it was assumed that one of them would know the answer to any questions being asked by the attendees.

The quality of employer presentations varied. In order to ensure a good employer presentation, it was found to be important that time was spent with employers prior to the event to ensure they understand its nature and what was expected of them. Where a lone parent employee was present at the event, they were often

passionate about working and this came across in their presentation. This element has proven to be a great success at engaging and motivating the customers (see Section 5.5).

The one-to-ones held after the presentation varied in length depending on the number of staff present, actions undertaken and the needs of the customer. In most cases, the primary aim of the one-to-one was to allocate an appointment for the lone parent to meet with an LPA at their local office. Staff and customers felt that it was important to keep the momentum going and ensure that the follow-up appointment was held as soon as possible after the event (see Section 5.8).

Lone parent customer feedback

Location, venue and timing

Events held at employer premises appeared to create considerable interest amongst the lone parents attending. Generally the holding of events away from Jobcentre Plus premises was also viewed positively. Moreover, there was more interest from lone parents in attending morning sessions as during afternoon sessions, staff often observed lone parents checking their watches (see Section 6.3).

Lone parents provided a range of reasons for attending the events including wanting to find out about how the changes to Income Support would affect them, getting information on how to return to work and applying for jobs with any employers present. As would be expected, most lone parents attending the events appeared to have already been made aware of the changes to IS, and in some cases the key motivator for attendance was the opportunity to apply for jobs with employers with vacancies at the events. In these instances, lone parents were often disappointed when just a single employer attended, or where the employer either had no vacancies or no suitable vacancies (see Section 6.4).

Usefulness of the events

The majority of lone parents said they found the events useful, helpful and informative. Many reported learning things they did not know previously; often about the level of support available from Jobcentre Plus and the different initiatives available to them. Importantly, many of the lone parents reported finding Jobcentre Plus staff at the events to be friendly, helpful and approachable (see Section 6.9).

The extent to which the lone parents understood the key messages from the events appeared to vary considerably. The high levels of 'don't know' and inaccurate responses to statements on the evaluation forms suggested that the lone parents may have either misunderstood or misinterpreted the information provided to them. It may have been that the inability to provide precise information on the changes to IS eligibility at the start of the Trailblazer has had an influence here. The post-event interviews with participating lone parents supported this finding and identified that, while the lone parents understood that there would be changes in IS, they were less clear on what these changes would mean for them personally (see Section 6.7).

Follow-up interviews, with lone parents attending events, identified several examples where such follow-up activities had taken place with positive results. These included individuals signing up for NDLP, receiving support following a referral to a training provider to improve CVs or receive specific training (for example, in computer skills) as well as taking a more positive approach to jobsearch overall.

Lone parents not attending events

The lone parents who declined an invitation to attend an event cited a range of reasons for not wanting to attend including; a preference for a one-to-one rather than a group event, inconvenient event timing and having restricting caring responsibilities (see Section 6.13).

The lone parents who failed to attend having accepted an invitation and being booked on to an event provided a series of 'official' reasons, including short notice hospital appointments, child's illness and other personal commitments. However, in some cases deeper probing identified underlying reasons for non-attendance including; concerns and nervousness about entering a group environment or an unfamiliar location, doubts whether a group event could provide information relevant to their needs, and a reluctance to discuss 'personal' information in a group setting (see Section 6.14).

Overall conclusion

Overall, the delivery of Options and Choices Events has been found to be resource intensive to set up, but should be less so once processes are put in place and the events are up and running. The employer presence at the event was considered to complement and add value to the message that Jobcentre Plus were delivering. Employer relationships will require careful management, to ensure they do not receive multiple requests once the events are delivered nationally.

Lone parents have responded positively to the events, often indicating that the location was closer than the Jobcentre Plus office that they usually attended and that they knew the venue already. Lone parents were surprised at the level of support that Jobcentre Plus were able to offer them in finding work, and were often more motivated and enthusiastic about looking for work after the event. The message about the level of support available was felt to be more powerful if delivered by a working lone parent, through the employer involvement. Generally lone parents were more confident in their ability to find work once they had attended an event.

1 Introduction

1.1 Policy context

'Ready for Work: full employment in our generation'² outlined the policy intention that from October 2008,³ lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 years or more will no longer be eligible for Income Support (IS) solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. This will be reduced further in 2009 to lone parents whose youngest child is aged 10 or over and in 2010 to lone parents whose youngest child is aged seven or over. In addition to the existing support available for lone parents, five new initiatives will be offered, providing additional support to help prepare customers for the move from IS either into work or to another benefit, which may include Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). The additional support includes:

- a guaranteed job interview for every lone parent who is looking for and ready for work;
- financial support to fund training for lone parents who move into work;⁴
- greater flexibility in the use of Work Trials, allowing them to be extended to six weeks (where appropriate);
- access to In Work Credit to aid the financial transition from welfare and into work; and
- the offer of a group seminar with employer and other partner organisations for those who are required to attend a Work Focused Interview (WFI).

Group seminars have since been renamed Options and Choices Events. These voluntary events are targeted at lone parents whose IS eligibility is due to end

² The two Trailblazer districts were Birmingham and Solihull, and North and North East London.

³ Implementation has been delayed to late 2008 to ensure additional flexibilities to the JSA regime for lone parents are put in place before the policy change is implemented.

⁴ Now referred to as pre-employment work focused training.

within a year. Options and Choices Events are essentially group events for between 10 and 15 lone parent customers. They usually consist of two presentations, one given by Jobcentre Plus staff and the other given by an employer. At the end of the event, lone parents are to be given the opportunity to have a one-to-one conversation with a Jobcentre Plus adviser, sign up for New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) or sign up for another opportunity to help them move closer to the labour market, such as working with an external service provider.

The purpose of the events is to:⁵

- provide lone parents with information on the changes to IS entitlement and provide details of the options available to them, giving them the information they need to make the right choices for their own and their children's future;
- ensure lone parents understand how Jobcentre Plus and their partners can help them prepare for and return to work, and how the local labour market operates; and
- discuss the world of work and promote the benefits of work for lone parents.

1.2 Research context

It was intended that all five new initiatives would be available nationally from April 2008 and that prior to national roll-out from January 2008, three elements would be implemented and delivered in two Trailblazer districts.⁶ The purpose of early implementation in Trailblazer districts was to learn as much as possible from the experiences of these districts so that design, implementation and delivery processes could be improved in time for national roll-out.

This report presents the findings from research focusing on the Trailblazer districts' experiences of delivering Options and Choices Events. This study was just one of a number of measures put in place to ensure learning from the Trailblazers was effectively captured and communicated. Trailblazer districts' staff experiences and views were also fed back via regular face-to-face and telephone meetings, and also by commenting on all relevant written documentation. The experiences of the Trailblazer districts, including findings from this research have improved national roll-out by directly influencing:

- improvements to national policy design, for example, key assumptions and customer communications;
- initial design and subsequent improvement of staff guidance for organisation and delivery of Options and Choices Events;

⁵ Options and Choices Events: Notes for presenters (Jobcentre Plus staff guidance).

⁶ The two Trailblazer districts were Birmingham and Solihull, and North and North East London.

- initial design and subsequent improvement of staff guidance on the content of Options and Choices Events;
- initial design and subsequent improvement of the Learning and Development Package for staff delivering the events; and
- communicating key messages and lessons learned to other district staff at a national staff launch event.

Chapter 2 provides more detail on the objectives of this study and describes the methodology followed. The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 3 reports on the organisation of the Options and Choices Events;
- Chapter 4 describes the staff training and other preparatory activities;
- Chapter 5 describes the delivery of the events;
- Chapter 6 reviews the views of the lone parents both attending and not attending the events; and
- Chapter 7 provides our policy implications and recommendations.

2 Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the research objectives, and the methodology followed.

2.2 Objectives of the research

The study focused on the Trailblazer Options and Choices Events and aimed to maximise learning from the experiences of the Trailblazer districts so that design, implementation and delivery processes could be improved ahead of national roll-out. Within this, the primary research objectives were to identify and explore potential improvements in effectively informing lone parents about:

- forthcoming changes on Income Support (IS) eligibility;
- the support available to lone parents from Jobcentre Plus and its partners, and encouraging the uptake of such support; and
- promoting the benefits of work to lone parents on IS.

The research set out to understand and analyse the following main areas of interest:

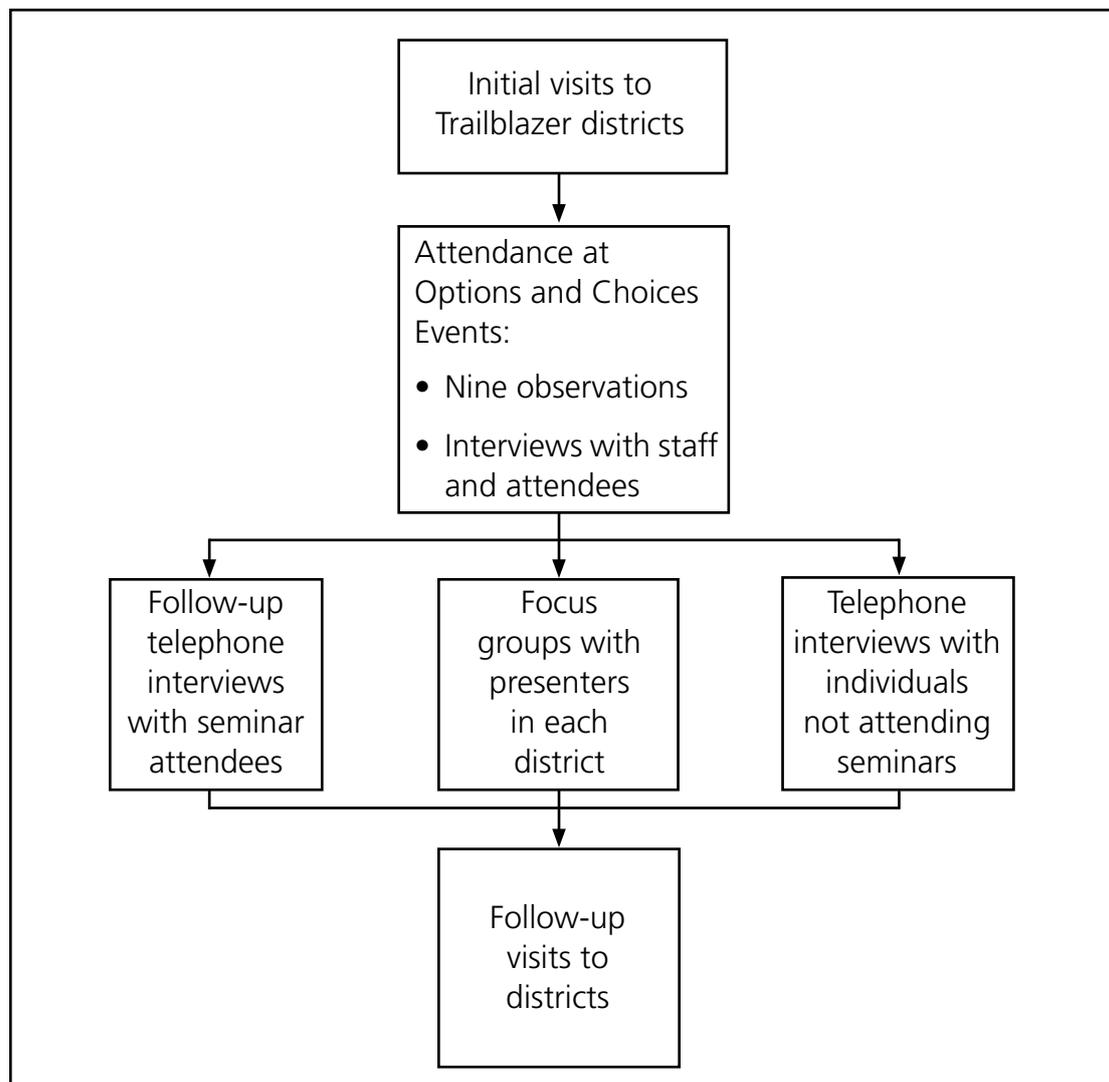
- customer perceptions of the events;
- effectiveness of delivery and appropriateness of contents and format;
- effectiveness and accuracy of information communication;
- customer identification and attendance rates;
- suitability of venues; and
- general management and organisation.

The study also set out to understand why some customers declined invitations to attend or who accepted an invitation but then failed to attend the Options and Choices Events.

2.3 Study Methodology

The study methodology is summarised in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 Summary of study methodology



2.3.1 District visits

The guidance for delivery of Options and Choices Events allows for adaptability and flexibility within each district to deliver the events in the most suitable way to fit into existing processes. Initial district visits were conducted to establish the way in which each district was organising the delivery of the events. Interviews were undertaken with the district lead and anyone else who had been involved in the set up of events. This included Administration Managers, those with a responsibility for recruiting and liaising with employers, Diary Administration Support Officers (DASOs) and Adviser Service Managers (ASMs). A steering group meeting within one district was observed and included contributions from Account Managers, leaders for In Work Credit, Childcare Partnership Managers, Operations, National Sales Team and Marketing.

2.3.2 Observation of Options and Choices Events

A total of nine observations of Options and Choices Events were undertaken in both Trailblazer districts during the first two weeks of delivery. In Birmingham, four events were observed at three different locations; in London, five events were observed in three different locations. The observation included noting how the lone parents were greeted, what information was delivered through the presentation, if lone parents were engaging with the presentation, what questions and issues arose throughout the event and whether lone parents undertook a one-to-one meeting with an adviser at the end of the presentation.

At the end of the event, short interviews were conducted with many of the lone parents who attended to seek their views of the event, whether they had understood the information that had been delivered, whether they found the event useful and to identify any actions they may take as a result of their attendance. Informal interviews were also undertaken with the presenter of the event to discuss how they felt their presentation had gone, whether they felt the lone parents were engaging with it and if they would do anything differently in their next presentation. Short interviews were also undertaken with the employer representative, and any other providers or partners present. The purpose of these interviews was to establish their thoughts on the event, how they got involved, and what they had hoped to get out of the event.

After most events, the staff involved held their own debrief meeting to discuss how the event had gone and if anything would be changed next time they delivered an event or used that particular venue. Where possible, the researchers sat in on these meetings with staff.

2.3.3 Evaluation forms

At all events held between 23 January and 29 February 2008, a short evaluation form was handed out to lone parents. The evaluation forms were distributed in the information packs handed out to lone parents at the beginning of the event and collected in at the end. The evaluation forms asked the lone parents a series of questions about the information they had been given at the event, and asked if they were willing to be contacted again after the event. The data from the evaluation forms was entered into a database for subsequent analysis.

Of the 432 evaluation forms handed out, 232 completed evaluation forms were received, 56 from attendees at events in Birmingham and 176 from events in London.

2.3.4 Focus groups with presenters

Two focus groups were undertaken with those staff who had delivered presentations, or who were going to be delivering presentations at future events. One focus group was held in each Trailblazer district. The aim of the focus group was to establish if staff felt that the training and guidance they had received had prepared them adequately to deliver the events, and any aspects that needed to be developed further or clarified ahead of national roll-out.

2.3.5 Telephone interviews with lone parents attending events

Telephone interviews were conducted with 40 lone parents within two weeks of attending an event, 20 in each Trailblazer district. The purpose of these interviews was to establish what action, if any, had been undertaken since attending the event, whether they had attended a New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) interview at their local Jobcentre Plus office, what support Jobcentre Plus had offered them and if they had applied for any jobs.

2.3.6 Telephone interviews with lone parents not attending events

Telephone interviews were undertaken with the following lone parents who had not attended an Options and Choices Event:

- Lone parents not wanting to attend an event – ten telephone interviews were undertaken with lone parents who had declined the invitation to attend an Options and Choices Event, five in each Trailblazer district. The purpose of the interview was to establish why the customer had chosen not to attend the event, whether they understood what the event was to be about, and what might make them choose to attend a similar event in the future.
- Lone parents who failed to attend an event – ten telephone interviews were undertaken with lone parents who had accepted the invitation to attend an Options and Choices Event, but had failed to attend on the day. Five interviews were conducted in each Trailblazer district. The purpose of the interview was to establish the reasons for their non-attendance at the event, and to discover if they intended to attend a similar event at a later date.

2.3.7 Follow-up visit to districts

Fieldwork was completed by a follow-up visit to each Trailblazer district office three months after they started to deliver the events. The purpose of the visits was to reflect back on how the events had gone, the amount of resource involved in organising and delivering the events, what changes had been made since the initial events, and what might be improved or done differently when considering a wider roll-out of the events. During these visits, interviews were undertaken with the key staff involved in the organisation and delivery of the events.

3 Organisation of events

3.1 Introduction

Trailblazer districts were given some flexibility to tailor the Options and Choices Events to adapt them to local circumstances and the district's existing structure. This chapter outlines the way in which the two districts organised the Options and Choices Events during the Trailblazer period.

3.2 Delivery models

The two Trailblazer districts took differing approaches to organising and delivering the Events, one centralised and the other less centralised.

In Birmingham, the overall organisation of the events was held within a centralised district team. Their role included identifying suitable venues, undertaking risk assessments, engaging employers, inviting and following up with lone parents and collecting management information. The local offices had no involvement in the events, apart from allowing one Lone Parent Adviser (LPA) to attend the events held in their locality.

In London, the local offices were divided into seven boroughs, with one local office within each borough taking the lead to deliver events in their area. The district team had supported each local office by identifying possible venues, inviting employers and collecting management information. However, it was the local office staff who had undertaken the risk assessments, identified, invited and followed up the lone parents and delivered the events.

3.3 Initial assumptions and expectations

Both districts made assumptions about anticipated attendance rates in order to plan their events.

Birmingham were planning to hold 100 events between January and July 2008. This was the number of events needed to accommodate all targeted lone parents⁷ in the district based on the assumption that a quarter of those lone parents who were invited to attend an event would actually attend. The initial cohort of 4,200 targeted customers was identified through a process of Geographical Information System (GIS) analysis. For their initial events, the district team intended to invite 40 lone parents with the expectation that between 10 and 15 would actually attend. The district team intended to monitor these numbers and adjust accordingly once they had run a few events and had more of an idea. Staff felt that, in the beginning, they were heading into unknown territory. After the initial events, where one or two events were organised each week, the expectation was that between six and eight events would run each week across the district, two on each day in the same location.

In London, the district team had planned to hold 60 events between January and March 2008, with approximately four to six events running each week, with 12-15 lone parents attending each event. The location of the events was determined as a result of GIS mapping of lone parents' addresses in the district, to help understand where different numbers of events needed to be held to accommodate the volume of targeted lone parents.

3.4 Choice of venues

Guidance indicated that, where possible, Options and Choices Events were to be held away from Jobcentre Plus premises. Moreover, staff in both Trailblazer districts felt it was important to create a friendly atmosphere and to encourage lone parents to consider future local employment opportunities. Staff felt that events away from Jobcentre Plus premises would have a more informal and friendly atmosphere, and that holding the event at an employer venue within the lone parent travel to work area would encourage lone parents to consider their potential local options for future employment.

Birmingham felt strongly about the benefits of holding the events on employer premises and therefore held all their events at such sites. As a result events were organised at a time and date negotiated with each employer, once they had agreed to host an event and the venue had been deemed suitable. The London district felt that they had a large number of lone parents that they needed to invite to Options and Choices Events in a short period of time, and were keen to ensure that enough events were organised to accommodate the numbers. The district lead, therefore, identified dates and venues for the first 60 events using a combination of Children's Centres, community centres, employer premises, and, when no alternative was available, Jobcentre Plus offices. The primary objective

⁷ Options and Choices Events were targeted at lone parents whose youngest child was aged eleven years, and who were due to have a Work Focused Interview (WFI).

for this district was, where possible, to hold the event at an external location, although not necessarily at an employer premises.

The differences in approaches meant that London held many more events during the initial delivery period, while Birmingham concentrated on establishing and building employer relationships.

While staff understood the benefits of organising events at employer premises, those who were involved in organising the events acknowledge that although many large companies may have the facilities to hold Options and Choices Events, small and medium size companies often do not. Once the delivery of events is rolled out nationally, there may be competition for larger employers, (particularly in London boroughs) and Jobcentre Plus offices may need to engage smaller local employers. It will become more likely that alternative venues such as Children's Centres and Community Centres may have to be sought when working with smaller and medium-sized employers.

3.5 Choosing the presenters

The Trailblazer districts were not allocated any additional resource to deliver the Options and Choices Events, and therefore, had to identify the most appropriate staff for their delivery.

In Birmingham, an already established team of Neighbourhood Outreach Advisers were chosen to be the lead presenters at events. This was a team of thirteen advisers who conducted outreach work around the district, and who took it in turns to present. In their usual role they deliver outreach services to a variety of customers in communities across Birmingham, and as they were not lone parent specialists it was decided that an LPA would be present to support the presenter and deliver the information on New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) to customers. One Neighbourhood Adviser, therefore, presented each event supported by one LPA. In order to ensure there would always be an LPA available to attend the event, approximately one LPA volunteer was sourced from each Jobcentre Plus office in the district to take the presentation skills training alongside the Neighbourhood Outreach Advisers.

In London, up to three LPAs were delivering each of the events. In discussion with their staff, managers were asked to recommend staff who volunteered to deliver the events and had previously undertaken presentation skills training or had delivered presentations. Moreover, it was deemed important for managers to choose staff who had the right skills to engage positively with lone parents.

3.6 Inviting lone parents to the events

Although using a similar process, the two Trailblazer districts used different teams to invite lone parents to the Options and Choices Events. In London, Lone Parent Advisers within local offices were responsible for telephoning lone parent customers to invite them to events, while in Birmingham a central team of Diary

Administration Support Officers (DASOs) undertook this role. Both Trailblazer districts believed that many lone parents do not like to travel far, and so selected customers who lived in the wards surrounding the location in which the event was going to be held.

Birmingham

Birmingham recently undertook a telephone pilot to help reduce the number of fail to attends (FTAs) to WFIs in the district. The district team decided to retain the DASO team who had been working on the pilot, to work on the Options and Choices Events. In addition to making the telephone calls and issuing letters inviting lone parents to the events, the DASO team also had responsibility for undertaking quality checks on the database records of lone parents who were being targeted to attend the events. This involved checking the database record for each customer to ensure their details were correct, checking what benefits they were claiming and the age of their youngest child.

Having established which lone parents were in the target group, the district had two criteria on which to select lone parents to attend individual events: geography and the timing of their next WFI. The intention was that having a one-to-one meeting after the presentation could count as their WFI, and so the district were inviting lone parents who were due to have their WFI in the coming weeks.

A DASO made the initial contact with the customer by telephoning them to invite them to the event. If the customer accepted the invitation to attend, they were sent a letter confirming details of the event including the time and venue, a map of the location and information on local bus routes. If the customer did not want to attend an event, they were booked a regular WFI. Two days before the event, the DASO called the lone parent to remind them of the event and confirm their attendance. If any customers indicated that they would no longer be attending the event, the DASO team would note their interest in attending a future event and invite further lone parents to ensure good attendance rates for the event.

Using a centralised DASO team proved to work well. As more events were run, the DASOs were more confident in their ability to sell the event to customers and undertaking associated tasks. However, since running the initial events, the DASO team made a few changes to the tasks they undertook.

Initially, only those lone parents who were contacted by telephone were invited to the event. However, due to a few events having a low number of invited customers, the DASO team made the decision to write to some of the lone parents in the area without a telephone number, informing them they had been booked to attend the event. Simply writing to lone parents without making initial telephone contact had only recently started to happen, so the team had no indication of its success in engaging lone parents, but it was hoped that this would boost the number of customers who attended the events.

At the first few events, at least one member of the DASO team would attend the event to staff the reception desk. They would greet customers, sign them in and

give them an information pack. These tasks were now being undertaken by the additional Neighbourhood Outreach Advisers who were at the event to conduct one-to-one's with customers. Not only was this considered a more efficient use of resource, but it also allowed the advisers an opportunity to engage with customers before they conducted individual one-to-ones.

Thus far, the central district team have maintained responsibility for organising and delivering events. In future, the Birmingham district team would like to involve the local offices more in the organisation and delivery of the events. The DASO team will continue to organise the events and invite the target group of lone parents, however, they will be encouraging Lone Parent Advisers in the local offices to identify additional lone parents for which the event might be suitable and encourage them to attend.

London

Using a similar process to Birmingham, London planned to contact approximately 200 lone parents to ask them if they were interested in attending an event. Target lone parents, who were interested in attending an event, were sent a letter confirming the details of the event and provided with maps to help them find the venue. It was anticipated that approximately 30 letters would be sent out for each event, half of which would attend the event. Depending on the level of staff within the local offices, it was a combination of DASOs and LPAs who telephoned lone parents to invite them to the events. In addition to telephoning customers, LPAs, who were conducting WFIs with lone parents whose youngest child was aged 11 years, were also informed about the event during their interview and encouraged to attend. Those lone parents who had agreed to attend an event were telephoned the day before, or on the morning of the event, to remind them of their expected attendance.

Many staff were initially concerned about a potential low turnout of lone parents to the events. In a couple of local Jobcentre Plus offices there were insufficient numbers of lone parents in the target group to invite on their weekly schedule. When this was the case, staff were encouraged to look at previous weeks' schedules to identify more customers, and to talk to the lone parents that were coming into the office to boost attendance. Some local offices suggested cancelling events where low numbers of lone parents were confirmed. However, district staff were keen that events were not cancelled unless absolutely necessary, suggesting that 'if you start cancelling you set a precedent.' During the first events, a few lone parents who were already on NDLP were invited in order to boost numbers. Staff explained that this was primarily done to ensure a good turnout for the employer, to ensure that employers did not feel the event was a waste of time.

'Initially lots of NDLP customers were invited to ensure the numbers and the events were successful, we wanted positive customers in front of the employers. Now it is two to three customers at each event.'

(District staff)

Staff also felt having customers attending events who were already on NDLP, was useful in supporting the message that Jobcentre Plus staff were delivering. NDLP customers were able to speak up about the support they had received, which was considered a powerful tool in converting new customers to NDLP.

Common issues

The DASO team in Birmingham identified that over half of the lone parents that they spoke to on the telephone were not appropriate to be invited to an event. Reasons for not inviting lone parents included identifying language issues which would prevent a customer participating in the event, the lone parent having caring responsibilities and not being able to return to work, customers also receiving a disability benefit or customers who had recently had a baby. The London district team were also concerned about the large numbers of lone parents they identified who had language barriers. Pockets of the district are dominated with particular community groups and consideration was being given as to the need to deliver Options and Choices Events to be delivered by a member of staff with appropriate language skills.

'What do we do about lone parents with language barriers? If numbers are high, can we justify an event in Turkish?'

(District staff)

3.7 Engaging employers

Both Trailblazer districts had managed to engage a number of employers from different sectors to help deliver the Options and Choices Events. Account Managers within the National Sales Team worked closely with the district teams to set up initial contacts with employers they were already working with, have a long standing relationship with or those who had signed a Local Employment Partnership (LEP) agreement.⁸ Staff had then followed up the leads to secure engagement in the Options and Choices Events.

Birmingham

In Birmingham, one member of staff within the district team was responsible for making face-to-face contact with the employer to build a relationship and explain the purpose of the events. Following up on leads provided by Account

⁸ Local Employer Partnerships aim to get 250,000 of the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP's) priority group customers into work by December 2010. This will be achieved by Jobcentre Plus working with long-term customers to get them ready for work, and employers with vacancies agreeing to use measures that can include guaranteed job interviews, work placements, mentoring, work trials and reviewing recruitment processes to make them more inclusive.

Managers, the National Sales Team, Labour Market Recruitment Advisers⁹ (LMRAs) and colleagues at Jobseekers Direct, the team had not had any issues in engaging employers and had received offers from employers to hold a series of events. For example, one recent success had been an offer from a large local employer to hold 32 events in four different venues across the city. Other large employers had offered to hold events once a month. The team were keen to ensure that they had a series of events running across the district, and were also targeting 'new' employers in those areas where they have not yet held events. The district team were considering their longer term relationships with the employers, where it was hoped that in the future the employer would have vacancies suitable for lone parents. For example, in discussions with one employer, staff identified that they would have approximately 300 vacancies over the next few months, many of which will be shift patterns that could be suitable for lone parents.

The staff member with responsibility for engaging employers for the Options and Choices Event would meet with the employer to discuss what was involved and get them to 'sign up' to delivering events. Another member of staff would later visit the venue to undertake the risk assessment, discuss their presentation with the employer and establish the best layout for the room. At this second visit the employer would be asked if they are able to provide refreshments and/or offer lone parents a tour of the premises. It was felt that offering at least one of these demonstrated the employers' commitment to the customer group. In addition, it was considered that this level of face-to-face contact with the employer helped to manage their expectations, and ensured that their contribution to the event was suitable and appropriate for the customers.

London

While planning the initial events in London, the district team anticipated that employers would be present at approximately 60 per cent of events, with a small proportion of events being held on employer premises. Due to the speed at which the events had to be organised and booked, the team looked for and booked suitable venues available for use, such as Children's Centres and community centres. An employer was then invited to the event as a guest presenter, although, where possible, events had been held on employer premises.

The National Sales Team had again played a key role engaging employers and getting them to attend events. The district lead gave a copy of the event timetable to the Account Managers, who took responsibility for finding a suitable employer to attend the events. More recently the London Employer Coalition had also provided some leads to employers who may want to be involved. After attending an event, the lead presenter at the event was encouraged to speak with the

⁹ LMRAs provide up-to-date knowledge on both the advertised vacancies and wider recruitment opportunities in their locality to Jobcentre Plus colleagues and provide recruitment advice to employers, service their vacancies and advise on the availability of potential applicants.

employer and encourage them to sign up on the day to support further events. As the events are to be rolled out nationally and become part of everyday Jobcentre Plus activity, local offices are being asked to identify local employers they consider suitable to become involved in the events and referred their details to the Account Managers.

Although the district team organised the date and venue for the event and the National Sales Team had responsibility for engaging and inviting an employer, the responsibility for ensuring the successful delivery of the events belonged to the lead presenter within the local Jobcentre Plus office. Three weeks before an event was due to be held, the lead presenter was expected to make contact with the employer, confirm and view the availability of the venue and ensure that enough lone parents were invited to the event.

On those occasions when it had not been possible to engage an employer to attend an event, staff suggested that it might be good to take a LMRA from the Jobcentre Plus local office to talk about the local labour market and current employment opportunities. It was felt that this was particularly interesting to lone parents, and useful in getting them to consider local employment opportunities.

Common issues

Both district teams described that once an employer had attended their first event and developed more of an understanding of what they were about, staff had received comments suggesting employers viewed the events positively and were keen to ensure their future involvement.

'Employers are pleasantly surprised how professional Jobcentre Plus staff and customers have been.'

(District staff)

In some cases this involved agreeing to attend future events; in others, employers previously unable to offer suitable premises, had been able to offer venues. In one case, the employer was so impressed with the events that they contacted their national head office to suggest that all their retail outlets should be involved in the events.

As mentioned earlier, district staff had identified that not all employers have suitable venues to hold events, or are unwilling to have Jobcentre Plus customers walking through their premises if the room was not customer facing. This was particularly true of small and medium-sized companies, but also some larger companies who do not have premises that are usually accessed by the public. It was anticipated that alternative venues would have to be used, particularly when the delivery of events is rolled out nationally and increasing numbers of employers are sought.

Both districts also identified the potential for multiple local offices to contact large employers once the delivery of Options and Choices Events is rolled out nationally. Staff were concerned that large employers in the area may receive several requests

for engagement from local offices in the surrounding area, and that this may damage the relationship with those employers. This was particularly a concern for London as they would be competing for employers in neighbouring areas. The National Sales Team currently work across London, which includes managing the various large employers with whom they work closely, who were national employers with outlets in most local areas. The Account Manager is currently able to coordinate and monitor the requests to the employer to ensure they were not approached from multiple offices. However, the Account Managers were shortly to be moved into the district offices, and there was concern this would lose the control currently coordinated with contacting large employers who may cover multiple areas.

On most occasions the team tried to organise two events to be held at the same location on one day. As discussed elsewhere, lone parent attendance was often higher in the morning. In addition, employers had given feedback to staff that they would prefer to deliver one session a day as it would require less commitment for them to be away from the office. Both Trailblazer districts were taking this into consideration when organising future events.

3.8 Monitoring

The district teams had been informed by head office that there was no need for them to collect additional clerical information to monitor the events. However, both districts felt that such information would be useful and so were collecting statistics for their own purposes. Based on locally collected data, Table 3.1 indicates the number of events delivered in each Trailblazer district between 23rd January and 29th February.

Table 3.1 Number of events held by Trailblazer district

	London	Birmingham
Number of events held	33	10
Number of lone parents invited	496	352
Number of attendees	326	106

Table 3.1 indicates that the overall attendance rate at the events was 51%, this has been higher than those staff involved had anticipated.

Monitoring information to examine attendance and the effectiveness of the Options and Choices Events was also collected electronically via the Labour Market System. Data from this source was not available at the time of writing, due to the need to allow customers sufficient time to undertake additional activities as a result of the events and a time lag in the availability of the information.

3.9 Follow-up with non-attendees

In both London and Birmingham, if lone parents booked onto an event but failed to attend, they were contacted by a member of staff within 48 hours to find out if there was a reason why they did not attend, and if they would like to book onto another event. If the lone parent did not want to attend an alternative event, then a mandatory WFI was booked, if appropriate.

3.10 Conclusion

The two Trailblazer districts undertook the organisation and delivery of the events differently, fitting in with existing roles and delivery models. Birmingham used a centralised model, with the organisation of events happening within a centralised team based within the district. An established team of advisers were chosen to be the lead presenters at the events, supported by LPAs who had volunteered their involvement. Establishing and engaging employers was a slow process, but resulted in all the events in Birmingham being held at employer premises.

London used a centralised resource coordinating and overseeing the organisation of events, although responsibility for delivering them and getting lone parents to attend was with the lead Jobcentre Plus office within each borough. The dates and venues were chosen in advance, the National Sales Team, London Employer Coalition and others had engaged and invited employers along, while LPAs and DASOs within each local office identified and invited targeted customers. Once employers were engaged with the process, it was hoped that more of them would offer their premises for the delivery of future events.

Both districts felt that it has taken a lot of time and resource to get the Options and Choices Events organised and up and running. In one case, the district felt that there had been 'a huge burden' on those involved.

However, once the initial process of organising and delivering the events had been established, both districts' teams felt that they should start to step back and allow the local offices more ownership of their local events.

4 Staff training and preparation

4.1 Introduction

One purpose of running Trailblazer Options and Choices Events was to field test the staff guidance, training and preparation, to enable these to be changed, where necessary, in time for national roll-out. This chapter outlines findings from the evaluation of the training and preparation, including staff guidance that was provided to staff who were delivering the Options and Choices Events prior to their first event.

4.2 Timing

From the point when the policy was first announced, there was a very short amount of time to prepare and deliver the Trailblazer Options and Choices Events. Consequently, the tight deadlines impacted on the amount of support available, and on the level of demands placed on district staff involved in developing and implementing Options and Choices Events. Unsurprisingly, both district teams and presenters made continual reference to the lack of time to prepare for delivering the Options and Choices Events. In many cases, training and guidance was only issued to presenters a week before the first event, which was felt not long enough to be able to digest the information and prepare.

'The training could be better. We weren't given enough time to absorb the information.'

(Presenter)

'It's mindblowing to think of delivering quality information with so little preparation time.'

(Presenter)

4.3 Presentation skills training

All staff who were delivering the presentation at the Options and Choices Events had attended a two day training course entitled 'Presenting a Quality Options and Choices Event'. The course is mandatory for all presenters and aimed to equip staff with the presentation skills they would need to deliver the events, and covered topics such as:

- introductions, welcomes and domestics;
- preparation and research;
- structure of a presentation; and
- managing yourself and your audience.

Staff response to the presentation skills training

Staff gave a mixed response as to whether the presentations skills training adequately prepared them for delivering the events. It was generally felt to be a good introductory course and made staff think about how to deliver presentations, which was deemed particularly useful for those who had never delivered a presentation before. It provided staff with some useful hints and tips to help them while they were presenting, and a few staff said that they had drawn on these when delivering presentations at events.

'When presenting, I thought back to the training and used the tips they gave us.'

(Presenter)

Some felt that they had not learnt anything that they could use during the presentation at the events, including those who had given presentations before. All the staff who attended the course felt that it contained a lot of theory that they did not need to know, to the detriment of having time on the course to practise what they were being told.

Due to the lack of opportunity to practise their presentation skills, and the lack of additional knowledge about the events, some staff members described a small part of their course being dedicated to dealing with difficult customers who were disrupting the presentation. Staff described being given one piece of advice to deal with all questions and issues raised by lone parents in the presentation, which was simply to respond, 'You can talk about that in your one-to-one afterwards'. Other staff did not cover this in their course, but indicated that they would have found it useful as some customers could be disruptive to the presentation.

The staff who delivered the presentation skills training were not aware of the content and details of the Options and Choices Events. For staff in one district this was not felt to be necessary, however, for staff in the other district this lack of knowledge caused frustration as questions were left unanswered.

'I didn't need the theory.'

(Presenter)

Overall, staff indicated that the course did not increase their confidence ahead of delivering the events. Some staff felt that they had learnt more from observing their colleagues at other events than from the training course.

'The training was put together far too quickly and this showed.'

(Presenter)

'I didn't use anything from the presentation skills course.'

(Presenter)

4.3.1 Improvements to the presentation skills training

Aim of the training

One of the overriding issues with the presentation skills training was the confusion surrounding the aims and objectives of the course. Was the aim simply to give staff presentation skills training or was it to provide them with the information and content of the Options and Choices Events? Staff expected it to be the latter, but discovered it was a bit of both, but more focused on presentation skills. As a result, staff felt that the course had not provided them with all the skills and information they felt they needed to confidently deliver an Options and Choices Event, and also left them with questions regarding their content and delivery.

The opportunity to practise

Staff felt that there was a lack of opportunity to practise their presenting skills, and described that the last 30 minutes on the second day was the only opportunity to give a presentation and get any feedback. All staff felt that the course should be longer to enable them to have the chance to present and get feedback on their presentation skills before delivering their first event. Alternatively, staff could be given the opportunity to practice their presentation upon their return to the office. However, the practicality of organising this may be difficult if large numbers of staff attend the training.

Use of technology

The training course assumed that everyone knew how to use a laptop and a projector. However, many of the staff indicated that they had never used a laptop, projector or Powerpoint before and would need someone to show them what to do.

'It was equipment we never used before.'

(Presenter)

'They just assumed everyone knew how to use the Powerpoint and laptop.'

(Presenter)

In most cases, one member of staff presenting at the event would know how to, or be prepared to try to, set up the equipment. However, an overwhelming majority stated that their lack of knowledge of the technology added to an already low confidence level, which was felt to provide additional pressure to staff on the day of the event.

In order to help staff overcome any difficulties they faced in using the laptop and projector, one member of the London district team visited the local offices and spent ten minutes with each presenter showing them how to connect the equipment. Although this was labour intensive, the district team felt it was a valuable use of resource as staff were now more comfortable using the equipment. The district team explained that now advisers were practising using the equipment at team meetings and showing others how to do it. One member of the district team described that 'It's not difficult but it was the fear of the unknown.'

Timing

After attending the presentation skills training, staff felt that they had a lot of preparation to undertake to put together their own presentation. In London, where staff were also committed to diaries within their local Jobcentre Plus offices, there was little time made available and staff struggled to get time away from their diaries to meet as a team and practise their presentation.

'We needed time to consolidate, time to practise'

(Presenter)

'It was very, very, stressful.'

(Presenter)

London staff, therefore, felt that it would have been better to have another day away from the office for staff to go through the content of the Option and Choices Event presentation and allow time to practice as a team. It was suggested that this could usefully be included in the presentation skills training. This contrasted with Birmingham staff, where all presenters had a week away from their regular duties to prepare presentation scripts and to run dummy events from which staff received individualised feedback.

Confidence building

Some of the staff who were due to deliver presentations at the events had never delivered a presentation to a group of people before, and were very nervous at the prospect. Some staff, therefore, indicated that they would have liked to have had some confidence building built into the presentation skills training. Confidence was considered a big obstacle for some presenters, particularly amongst those

staff members who had not volunteered to present. This was particularly true in Birmingham where none of the Neighbourhood Outreach Adviser Team, had volunteered to deliver Options and Choices Events.

4.4 Additional sales training

In addition to the national presentation skills training, the Birmingham district team felt that the staff needed some additional support to help them to 'sell' New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and other Jobcentre Plus support to the lone parents. The district, therefore, obtained additional training from the National Sales Team entitled 'Selling Skills for Advisers'.

Although the delivery of the course was considered engaging and successful, there was a mixed response from staff on its usefulness. Many of the advisers presenting at the events said that they had not found the sales training particularly useful, and felt that it did not contribute to the knowledge or skills that they needed in order to deliver the Options and Choices Events.

'It was irrelevant as we weren't selling, we were just talking about it. It's up to the Lone Parent Advisers to do the selling.'

(Presenter)

However, members of the Diary Administration Support Officer (DASO) team also attended the sales training and found it incredibly useful in helping them with talking to lone parents on the telephone to encourage them to attend an event.

'It taught me when to stop talking, if someone has said 'yes, they will come', then I don't need to keep trying to sell it.'

(DASO)

In the long-term it was also felt that this training would help Lone Parent Advisers (LPAs) in local offices who are talking to lone parents during Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) to encourage them to attend Options and Choices Events.

4.5 Additional team meetings

Both Trailblazer districts held a team meeting of all those staff who had attended the presentation skills training. As a group they discussed how the training went, went through the guidance for the content of the presentation and discussed any concerns about the events. Staff indicated that they had found this team meeting very useful, as it had enabled them to discuss and resolve the concerns they had and see that they were not the only ones who were nervous. However, the additional team meetings were not an opportunity for staff to practise delivering their presentations.

4.6 Guidance framework

The guidance issued to presenters contained the framework for the content of the presentation. Some sessions within the presentation were core, others were optional, and it was up to the individual presenters to design their final presentation.

Generally the guidance was considered to be clear, and presenters felt that they understood all that was in it. However, it was felt that some of the examples provided in the guidance were condescending of lone parents. For example, many staff felt that it was not appropriate to tell lone parents that by going to work they could meet a future partner. This suggested that lone parents would be better off having a partner.

'We didn't think that was appropriate.'

(Presenter)

'The examples are a bit tacky.'

(Presenter)

Key messages

Staff in both districts felt that there were a number of key messages to be delivered at the events. In Birmingham, the district team felt that the event was primarily about changing the lone parents' attitude towards work and for them to consider work as a possibility. The events were also felt to be about informing lone parents about the support that Jobcentre Plus could offer to get them into work. The team acknowledged that there was a need for lone parents to understand the proposed changes that are due to take place to Income Support (IS), however, the team were split as to whether this was the primary message of the events.

In London, the district team felt that the key message of the event was to inform lone parents of the proposed changes to IS and the implications regarding increased conditionality and lone parent decision making. The event was an opportunity to ensure lone parents knew of the support that was available from Jobcentre Plus. It was believed that the main aim of the events was to get lone parents to join NDLP, and then into work.

There was a general concern regarding the lack of clarity of the message about the proposed changes to IS received from head office. Due to the fact that they were unclear themselves of when this would happen, and were not aware of the groups of lone parents that the changes would not affect, staff felt nervous and 'vulnerable' about delivering 'a fluffy message.' Staff were also concerned that lone parents would ask specific questions on the changes to IS that they would not be able to answer.

'We don't look very professional if we can't give a clear answer.'

(Presenter)

'They're asking questions I can't answer.'

(Presenter)

In the time leading up to delivery of the first events, a couple of staff noted that the guidance on the wording used for the proposed changes to IS had changed after they had prepared their presentation. Although it was not a major change, it was felt that this was disruptive to their confidence and learning of the material.

'We prepared it and then it changed.'

(Presenter)

Although parts of the presentation were considered optional, some staff felt that there were so many key messages to convey to lone parents that it was almost necessary to include everything.

If the presenters had any questions about the events or what was in the guidance, they would contact the district team who were usually able to answer their questions or gain clarification from head office.

4.6.1 Improvements to the guidance

As discussed previously, the existing content of the guidance was considered to be clear and understandable. However, it was felt that the current guidance concentrated solely on what should be included in the presentation, but that it should also include all the additional information that is required to deliver an Options and Choices Event. This would include information on tasks that need to be done before and after the presentation. Examples of such information included:

Before the presentation

- Room layout – this would include advice and information on the different ways in which the room could be laid out, prompting the presenters to consider a reception area where additional staff could be seated so as not to interfere with the presentation, where the one-to-ones will take place, and a secure area for staff to leave their personal belongings.
- Meeting with the employer – a presenter should make contact with the employer prior to the day of the event, meet and greet them when they arrive on the day, ensure they have some refreshments and know the arrangements for lunch (if they are conducting two sessions in one day).
- Testing the equipment – it is important to ensure that the laptop and projector are working, and know who to contact for support if there is a problem. Presenters should have a contingency plan if the equipment does not work.

After the presentation

- One-to-ones – consideration should be given to where the one-to-ones will take place, whether there are separate tables available or whether advisers will move around the room. Guidance should be given to all staff on how long the one-to-one sessions should last, what should be covered in order for the one-to-one to be counted as a WFI and how appointments will be made for follow-up (whether clerical appointments are taken to the event or phone calls are made to a DASO from the event). Staff noted that it is important to ensure the customer felt that they had the time that they need during the one-to-one, and were not rushed.

'It has to be reasonable so the client feels they've had the time they've been promised'

(Presenter)

- Administrative tasks – there are a number of administrative tasks that need to be conducted once an event has taken place. This includes updating Action Plans and completing WFIs for those lone parents who attended the event, and making contact with those lone parents who failed to attend. It is important that these tasks are undertaken correctly as they contribute to the Management Information that is being collated to monitor the impact of the Options and Choices Events. Staff felt that the guidance should contain a checklist of all the administrative tasks that need to be completed. Staff would like to be able to 'sign off' the event by giving a completed check list to their line manager.

'It's such an important part of the process as that's how we are measured.'

(District lead)

4.7 Conclusion

Overall, staff felt the training and preparation they had received for delivering the events had been useful, and were keen to actually deliver their first event so that they could put into practice what they had been preparing for.

'We just want to get on with it.'

(Presenter)

'You've gotta get out there to practise and do it.'

(Presenter)

However, there were several areas that they felt would need improving when considering the national roll-out of training and preparation for staff delivering Options and Choices Events:

- The aims and objectives of the training given to staff were not entirely clear, and therefore, left some staff feeling that not all their needs were met, either wanting more presentation skills training or further knowledge of the content and delivery of Options and Choices Events.
- London staff felt that there was a lack of opportunity to practise the presentation skills that they had been taught, both on the training course and as a team before delivering their first event. Staff felt that comprehensive training on presentation skills relevant to the content of the Options and Choices Events was necessary.
- It was assumed that staff were able to use the technology required to deliver the presentations at the events, but, in fact, very few advisers had used a laptop, projector or Powerpoint before. Concerns over the technology added a lack of confidence to an already nervous presenter.
- The guidance issued to staff on the content of the presentation was deemed to be clear, and staff valued the opportunity to tailor sections of the presentation for their individual delivery. However, staff felt that the guidance did not address the tasks that needed to be undertaken both before and after the event. Some staff indicated they would like a checklist of activities that they were able to sign off once an event had been completed.
- Many of the presenters indicated that they felt a lot more confident once they had delivered their first event. Some presenters asked for feedback from other staff at the event and found this to be incredibly useful. However, it was also felt important 'to keep the momentum going' so that the lessons and the confidence can be rolled over into the next event. If there was a long gap between events, any gained confidence and momentum was lost.

5 Delivering the events

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the way in which the Options and Choices Events were delivered in each Trailblazer district, including the presence of employers and training providers at the events.

5.2 Meeting and greeting lone parents and information packs

In most cases, both district teams had a member of staff meeting customers as they arrived at the event. Generally, staff felt that it was important to ensure that customers felt welcomed when they attended the event, as many of them may be nervous of entering a new environment with people they do not know. In most cases, in order to help lone parents feel at ease, members of the team created a reception area to greet the lone parents when they arrived, hand them an information pack and inform them where the refreshments and toilets were located. Prioritising the meeting and greeting of lone parents was deemed particularly important for staff in one district, who were often found at the front door with several staff directing customers to the room hosting the event.

The information packs handed to lone parents varied from event to event, but generally contained a variety of Jobcentre Plus leaflets about the way in which they could support people into work, information on In Work Credit, a list of the benefits to being on New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and information on childcare. Staff in the London Trailblazer district raised concerns about the supply of the information pack. A lack of Jobcentre Plus branded folders meant that staff were using a variety of plastic sleeves, cardboard folders and envelopes. There were also depleting stocks of the leaflets to go into the information packs. Supply issues had resulted in a variety of information being given to lone parents across the district.

5.3 Attendance

As expected, the number of lone parents attending the events varied. The research has been unable to draw conclusions on whether the type of venue for the event had an impact on attendance. However, staff suggested that the level of attendance may have been linked to the amount of other work that has gone on in the area with lone parents. For example, in one particular area in Birmingham, a large retailer had recently conducted a recruitment exercise in the area, specifically targeted at disadvantaged groups. It was felt that those lone parents who had been unsuccessful in getting a job, were more likely to have turned up at the event held at another large employer.

Despite all events being delivered within school hours, both Trailblazer districts experienced better attendance at events that were organised in the morning. It was felt that lone parents liked to drop off their children at school then go straight to the event, rather than attend an event later in the day. In addition, lone parents who attended afternoon sessions were commonly seen checking their watches as they were concerned about picking up their children from school. It was expressed that the preference for morning events reflects what occurs in Jobcentre Plus offices. In developing future events, both district teams were considering organising one event a day for a larger group of lone parents.

At the initial events staff were concerned about low attendance rates and the impression this would leave with employers and other delegates. In order to ensure that there were enough lone parents at the events the London teams invited some lone parents who were already on NDLP. It was anticipated that as these customers are already engaged with Jobcentre Plus, they were more likely to attend events. When delivering the events more widely, the guidance needs to be clear on the objectives of the events, and whether existing NDLP customers should be invited as part of the target audience.

5.4 Staff at the event

The number of staff attending each event varied in the two Trailblazer districts. In Birmingham, the presenter was supported by one Lone Parent Adviser (LPA) who would speak specifically about NDLP. In addition to the staff presenting, there were approximately three Neighbourhood Outreach Advisers and two LPAs present to conduct one-to-ones with lone parents after the presentation. Initially there was also a Diary Administration Support Officer (DASO) present at each event, although this later stopped. Additional staff were conscious to not all be in the same room together and would spread themselves around greeting lone parents and offering refreshments. The Birmingham team felt that having six or seven members of staff at each session was the optimum needed to run a successful event.

In London, three LPAs attended each event. The number of staff who delivered the presentation varied by location, but it often involved all staff. Managers and other staff also attended the first few sessions to offer support to the presenters, however the district lead was keen that there were not too many staff present for fear that this would be intimidating for the customers.

5.5 The presentation

Both districts had used the guidance framework to put together the content of their presentations. Each presenter, or team of presenters, had responsibility for putting together the presentation they were delivering. This flexibility for individuals to tailor the presentation was deemed important by the presenters, as they are able to have ownership of their presentation which increased their confidence.

'You've got to get the key messages across but deliver it in your own way.'

(Presenter)

'This is an outline. The presenter is free to adapt it as they see fit.'

(Presenter)

However, when designing their personal presentation and selecting the sessions to include, some advisers admitted 'we did all the ones we felt confident about saying.'

The presentations lasted approximately one hour, including guest speakers. In all the presentations that were observed, the presentation was delivered using Powerpoint and started by informing lone parents of the proposed changes to Income Support (IS). However, very little time was spent explaining what this would mean. All the presentations that were observed covered the reasons why it would be better to work. Presenters explained to lone parents that being in work improves your health and wellbeing, as well as making you financially better off.

The team in the Birmingham Trailblazer district had made a conscious decision that they would not make any reference to the other benefits that lone parents may be eligible to move onto instead of IS, such as Employment Support Allowance or Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). It was decided to keep the focus of the event on work. In London, the observed presentations did make a brief reference to the other benefits that may be available, but gave no further detail of what this would involve, for example, Fortnightly Jobseeker Reviews.

Staff anticipated that many of the questions from lone parents would be focused around the proposed changes to IS. However, staff found that lone parents were questioning the example Better Off Calculations (BOC) that were being used to demonstrate how they could be financially better off in work. Due to the brevity of the information on the screen, customers were not always convinced by the BOC and questioned its credibility. One team of presenters had created a handout

which they gave to lone parents to take away with them which explained the BOC in more detail. This was felt to work well, and other presenters were considering doing the same thing. One presenter indicated that some lone parents were asking questions about mortgages 'they need to sort out the issue of mortgages...they are going mad about mortgages.'

In a couple of presentations that were observed, the team had developed a slide of the transferable skills that lone parents had, simply through being parents. An example of this is demonstrated below. At team meetings, other presenters commented on how they thought this was particularly useful and asked for a copy of the slide to include in their own presentations.

'That slide is just so powerful.'

(District lead)

'I wanted to plant the seed of transferable skills. For example, I talked about getting children out of bed in the morning and showed them that this is a negotiating skill.'

(Presenter)

Table 5.1 Example of parents' transferable skills

Transferable skill	Example
Meeting deadlines	Getting the children to school on time
Managing budgets	Managing the tight household income
Crisis management	When your child is ill but you have to be at work
Team leading	Leading by example
Patience	You have children!
Organisational skills	Through managing a family
Negotiation and conciliation	Getting your children to do as they are told

In almost all observed events, the lack of confidence of the presenters was evident and impacted on the delivery of the session. Staff read directly from their notes with very little engagement or interaction with lone parents. This was particularly noted when employers or training providers spoke without notes and demonstrated passion and enthusiasm in what they were talking about. However, it should be noted that observations were often carried out of the first sessions that staff were delivering, and it is anticipated that knowledge and confidence will grow with time, encouraging staff to rely less on their script. Interestingly, most staff indicated that they had decided not to interact with the lone parents or ask any questions, but to encourage these to be kept to the end in the one-to-ones.

Terminology

In most of the observed events, staff used technical terminology that would have been difficult for the lone parents to understand or deemed inappropriate. For example 'we want to put you on the caseload', and 'child poverty'. The latter is a government term that refers to a specific definition, but could easily be misunderstood by lone parents.

'You don't want to imply to people that their children aren't fed and clothed'

(Training provider)

5.6 Employer presentations

We observed a variety of employer presentations from retail, construction and hospitality sectors. The length of the employer presentation ranged from 10 minutes to half an hour. In both Trailblazer districts, employers were asked to deliver a presentation about their company, particularly what it was like to work for them, emphasising family friendly policies and hours of working that may be enticing to a lone parent.

Some employers were more successful than others at engaging the lone parents and considering their needs in the content of their presentation. Almost all employers started with a brief background to the company and explained what the company did. Those employers who were more engaged with the lone parent agenda focused their presentation on the family friendly policies that the company had to offer, ensuring that lone parents understood that their personal lives could be accommodated in the world of work. Once the event had finished, some employers also took interested lone parents on a tour of the premises so that they could see 'behind the scenes'. However, some employers who were less prepared, spent a long time discussing the history and development of the company, and discussed training opportunities that were less appropriate for lone parents who may not be able to attend full-time training.

In some cases, the employers had no current vacancies or potential future recruitment. Although direct recruitment was not the purpose of the events, or a criteria for employer involvement, in most cases lone parents would ask 'Can I apply while I am here today?' Jobcentre Plus staff were keen to talk about local recruitment opportunities in order to keep the interest and momentum going.

Employers involved in the events described a varying level of engagement with staff from Jobcentre Plus prior to the event. In some cases, staff had been to meet with them face-to-face to talk about the aims of the event, and what they would like from the employer at the event. In other cases, the employer had simply received a long email which they felt had not given them a clear briefing on what to include in the content of their presentation. However, having delivered one session, many of the employers indicated that at future events they would tailor

their presentation slightly differently now that they had more understanding on what the event was about. The variation in quality of the employer presentations highlighted the need to ensure that employers were fully briefed on the type of audience and what was expected of them from their presentation.

In many cases it was felt that the employer agreed to get involved in the event due to the existing good relationship with Jobcentre Plus.

'There is a large amount of time to devote to this but you do it because Jobcentre Plus are a key partner.'

(Employer)

Having delivered an event, employers appeared more engaged with the needs of lone parents and what they might be able to do to help them find employment. Having been involved in one event, employers were often happy to be involved in further future events, and in some cases increased their offer of the number of events or offered to provide premises.

5.7 Employment Zone

Both districts include Employment Zones (EZ), however, Birmingham chose not to involve their EZ provider in delivering Option and Choices Events. The EZ do not offer NDLP, rather they get customers to sign up with a training provider who is able to offer them the same level of support that they would receive on NDLP. The outcome for those events was, therefore, to get lone parents to make an appointment with the EZ provider while they were at the event. As there were three training providers that operate in the EZ area, each provider was taking it in turns to attend events in that area.

In the event observed within the EZ, the training provider gave a passionate presentation to lone parents, engaging with them by asking questions about the type of jobs or support they offer. The provider informed lone parents of the services available and was available to speak with lone parents on a one-to-one basis after the presentation. In many cases, the LPA would escort the lone parent to the training provider once they had undertaken a one-to-one with them after the presentation.

5.8 The one-to-ones

The length and content of the one-to-one varied at each location. In some cases, it was a two minute conversation simply to allocate the lone parent an appointment at a local office. In another case, the LPA spent 30 minutes with the lone parent and helped her to complete a form for an English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) class.

At observed events in Birmingham, one-to-ones lasted up to ten minutes as staff helped customers to complete an Action Plan and allocated an appointment with

an LPA at their local Jobcentre Plus office. Staff used mobile phones to call the central DASO team to book interviews for lone parents interested in converting to NDLP. However, it was later discovered that on the management information all of these interviews were being counted under the Jobcentre Plus office where the team was located, rather than the office where the appointment was made. In order to address this, the team moved to having the phone number of one person to call in each local Jobcentre Plus office to make appointments. This proved more problematic in terms of getting through on the phone to make appointments for customers. As a result, Birmingham have recently moved to taking clerical appointments to the events to allocate to lone parents. These are appointments that have been blocked out in the few days following an event for those lone parents attending the event.

In London, advisers used the one-to-one sessions simply to book appointments for an initial NDLP interview at their local office. Staff took a list of clerical appointments that had been blocked out for lone parents at the event. Although staff tried to ensure that appointments were within a week of the event, in some cases, initial appointments were not available until three or four weeks after an event, which was considered to be too long a delay. Where the event was in an EZ, staff spent time during the one-to-one discussing the lone parents' personal situation before referring them to the training provider to make an appointment. District staff felt that 'initially the one-to-one was too long, now it is short and focused for appointment allocation'.

5.9 Staff reflections

In the initial stages of planning and preparing for the delivery of the Options and Choices Events, district teams felt that they had a lot to achieve. Having delivered other group sessions previously, some staff were sceptical about the anticipated impact of the Options and Choices Events. However, in most cases, staff were pleasantly surprised about the smooth running of the events, the higher than expected turnout of lone parents and the impact the events were having at engaging lone parents.

'I never thought that they would turn out the way they have.'

(District staff)

Having delivered their first few events, staff were now more confident in their ability to deliver the sessions. In many cases, staff were relying less on their notes and delivering the presentation from knowledge. An increase in knowledge and confidence allowed presenters to ad-lib to the presentation, drawing on practical examples that lone parents were able to relate to and allowed their personality to shine through.

'The staff are enthusiastic, positive and passionate about the events.'

(District staff)

In general, staff felt positively about the events and felt that the key messages were being effectively delivered to lone parents through the group sessions. Staff appreciated having time out of the office, away from the routine of their diary appointments and having more time to spend with the lone parents.

Staff demonstrated concern that not all lone parents were ready to work, and that the presentation needed to ensure it delivered a message of support rather than pressure customers to get a job immediately. Staff explained that some lone parents had never worked and may have ill-health or disabled children. For these lone parents, it was felt that parts of the presentation were deemed patronising.

In rolling out the delivery of Options and Choices Events, staff had been told that computers may not be available in all areas for the delivery of the presentation. Trailblazer staff felt that delivering the presentation using PowerPoint helped to make the events look professional and were, therefore, key in the impact and success of the events. District staff feel that 'it has been powerful on the screen' and that this impact would be lost if computers were not used.

5.10 Conclusion

The delivery of the events in both Trailblazer districts had been similar. Lone parents were greeted and given an information pack containing leaflets on the different support that Jobcentre Plus were able to offer them in finding and moving into work.

Attendance at the events was varied, with higher numbers being demonstrated at morning sessions, which reflects activity in Jobcentre Plus offices. During afternoon sessions, lone parents were continuously checking the time as they were concerned about getting away to pick up their children from school.

Staff felt more confident about the presentation by the fact that they have been able to put it together themselves. It was felt to be important to be able to tailor the presentation, and allow for individuality rather than simply being given a script. However, staff needed to be careful not to use terminology that could be misunderstood by customers. Generally, staff had very little engagement with lone parents during the presentation, in fact mostly informing lone parents to keep any questions for their one-to-one. Staff had anticipated questions from lone parents concerning the proposed changes to IS, however, staff have been surprised to receive more questions about the BOC that is presented.

More than twice the number of Jobcentre Plus staff were present at events held in the Birmingham Trailblazer district. This was felt to be necessary in order to deliver the one-to-one interviews with lone parents after the presentation. In London, the one-to-ones were used purely to arrange an initial NDLP interview for the lone parent at their local office.

Employer presentations have varied across both districts. In order to ensure that the employer delivered a presentation that is most appropriate to the lone parents, it was found to be important that Jobcentre Plus staff talk with the employer before the event to discuss what the event is about and what is expected of them. This should help to ensure that the employer contribution is engaging, discusses policies and practices that are appropriate to lone parents and adds value to the Jobcentre Plus presentation.

6 Lone parent feedback

6.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the reaction of lone parents to the Options and Choices Events. This includes commentary from our observations at events, interviews with lone parents at the event, and responses to an evaluation form. This chapter also includes analysis from interviews with lone parents who declined an invitation to attend the events, or who failed to attend on the day.

6.2 Evaluation forms

Staff were asked to handout evaluation forms at all events held within the evaluation period, therefore, the exact number of evaluation forms handed out to customers across both districts is unknown. A total of 232 completed evaluation forms were received, 56 from attendees at events in Birmingham and 176 from events in London.¹⁰

6.2.1 Respondent nature and characteristics

The vast majority of evaluation form respondents (196 or 89%) were female. Where details of their age were provided, the majority (57.8%) were aged between 31 and 45 years of age, as shown Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Age distribution of lone parents completing evaluation forms

	16 to 30	31 to 45	46 to 55	56 and over	No response
All responses (n= 232)	3.0%	57.8%	31.5%	1.7%	6.0%
Birmingham (n=56)	3.6%	64.3%	28.6%	0	3.5%
London (n=176)	2.8%	55.7%	32.4%	2.3%	6.8%

¹⁰ For more information on the evaluation forms, please see Section 2.3.3.

As the age of the lone parents' youngest child was a key variable for being invited to a Trailblazer event, each attendee was asked the age of their youngest child. Table 6.2 below provides the responses for all those completing evaluation forms.

Table 6.2 Distribution of lone parents completing evaluation forms by age of youngest child

	0-10 years	11 years	12 years and over	No response
All responses (n= 232)	3.9%	16.8%	72.4%	6.9%
Birmingham (n=56)	3.6%	7.1%	85.7%	3.6%
London (n=176)	4.0%	19.9%	68.2%	7.9%

As Table 6.2 shows, the majority (72.4%) of respondents had a youngest child aged 12 years or over, as would be expected given the targeting and key messages of the events. However, around 4% of respondents reported their youngest child being aged 10 years or younger.

Pre-event communication

In the majority of cases, lone parents completing evaluation forms had discussed attendance at the events with their Jobcentre Plus adviser, had received a letter providing further details and, in their view, understood the purpose of the event and their reason for attending.

Of those responding, 182 (78.4%) had discussed attendance with Jobcentre Plus in advance and 208 (89.7%) received a letter with details of the event. The majority (199, 85.8%) considered that they understood the purpose of the event prior to attending.

6.3 Event location and venue

The organisation of the events, including the location of the venue, the venue itself, the time at which the event took place and its duration, were viewed positively by the majority of respondents.

Location

Most lone parents felt that the location of the events was convenient, and many described that the venue was closer to their home than the Jobcentre Plus office that they usually visit. 209 (90.1%) of the evaluation form respondents rated the location either suitable or very suitable with just nine (3.8%) describing it as unsuitable or very unsuitable. In many cases, lone parents indicated they already knew the location well and they were able to walk or easily catch a bus to the venue.

'It's just a bus ride away.'

(Lone parent)

'It is great. It's local to me, only a 10 minute walk so it was really handy. It's better than having it in the Jobcentre; it makes it less formal.'

(Lone parent)

However, a couple of lone parents were not confident in finding the location of the event and had to rely on friends or family to help them get there. This was particularly noted for one observed event at an employer's premises, where all the lone parents expressed difficulty in finding the venue. This was because the employer was a small local employer, and the address was misleading for locating the actual premises.

Venue

Once lone parents had located the venue, they felt that it worked well and provided a comfortable environment for the purpose of the event. 207 (89.2%) of evaluation form respondents indicated they felt the venue was suitable or very suitable and only three (1.3%) rated it as unsuitable or very unsuitable. One lone parent explained,

'I really liked the venue. I thought it was very suitable. It was less clinical and formal than visiting the Jobcentre.'

(Lone parent)

It was felt that holding the event at an employer venue may also impact positively on attendance rates, as many lone parents expressed a curiosity about seeing what the employer had to say and offer at the event, which had encouraged them to attend. This was particularly the case when lone parents were provided with the opportunity to see 'behind the scenes' when employers provided a tour of their premises, and as one lone parent admitted 'I want to be nosey.'

Timing and duration of the events

Both districts had been conscious of organising the events during school hours, ensuring that lone parents could attend after dropping off their children at school, or finishing in time for them to collect their children at the end of the school day. For this reason, the events tended to be held at 9.30am and 12.30pm. 215 (92.6%) of the questionnaire respondents felt that the timing of the event was suitable or very suitable, with only four (1.7%) indicating that the timing was unsuitable for them.

Although the guidance indicated that the event should last no more than two hours, both district teams felt 'the shorter the better'. Lone parents generally felt positively about the duration of the event, with the majority of the evaluation form respondents indicated that they felt the duration of the event was suitable (121, 52.2%) or very suitable (85, 33.6%).

While a number of respondents offered no opinion on how well the event was organised to meet their needs against the above variables, very few provided negative views, fewer than ten individuals against each variable, and four or fewer in each case with the exception of location.

6.4 Reasons for attending the event

Lone parents gave a variety of reasons for attending the event including: being interested in finding out what the event was about; wanting to find out how the changes will affect them; to get more information about getting into work; and to apply for jobs with employers they had expected to be present.

Many lone parents indicated that they were aware of some changes to Income Support (IS) before they attended the event. In most cases this might have been through the conversation with staff inviting them to an event, others had recently attended a Work Focused Interview (WFI) where their adviser had discussed the changes with them.

A few lone parents indicated that they had expected there to be many local employers at the event who had current vacancies. They had anticipated being able to apply for a number of jobs on the day, and this had been their main motivation for attending the event. These lone parents expressed disappointment when they realised only one employer was at the event, and they either came from a sector the lone parent was not interested in or they had no vacancies for which they could apply.

Most of the lone parents that attended the events indicated that they had previously considered returning to work and indicated that they were already looking for employment. In many cases, the lone parents had recently applied for a job, or had discussed their work options with their Lone Parent Adviser (LPA). In a few cases, the lone parent felt they were ready to think about work, but had not yet discussed this with anyone.

6.5 The presentation

In general, lone parents demonstrated little engagement with the presentation delivered by Jobcentre Plus staff. Of the events that were observed, staff rarely interacted with lone parents. Occasionally a customer demonstrated that they were listening and understanding the information through nodding their head or taking notes, however, the majority simply sat and listened. A small number took notes during the event, while one lone parent did ask 'are we going to get a handout with all this information on' after a presentation had started.

Occasionally a lone parent would interrupt the presentation by asking a question or making a statement. In the latter case this was typically an objection to what was being said, for example, disagreeing with the Better Off Calculation (BOC) that was being demonstrated, or informing the employer that they had tried to apply for a job with their company but had experienced problems with the on-

line application procedure. On those occasions where a lone parent attempted to explain how their personal situation did not fit with what was being said, the staff simply replied 'we can talk to you on a one-to-one about your situation', and rarely addressed the issue during the presentation. Although some lone parents were surprised how much better off they might be if they moved into work, they expressed concerns about the transition period while moving off benefits and into work.

'It's a big leap of faith, moving off benefits and going into work. At the moment I know when all the money is coming.'

(Lone parent)

'I'm a bit worried about my budget. If I start working, will I have enough to cover everything? I'm going to discuss this with my adviser.'

(Lone parent)

At a few observed events, lone parents raised concerns about leaving their children alone or not being able to find suitable childcare for older children. Customers discussed that children aged 12 years or older could be tricky as they do not want to be looked after and if there are no after school clubs, parents were reluctant to use a childminder. Lone parents also highlighted that girls were different from boys, and whereas many parents would feel comfortable leaving their daughter at home while they were at work, most were not happy to leave their son, even if the son was older than the daughter. One parent expressed that she thought it was illegal to leave your children at home unattended until they were 14 years old. Another described that,

'They started off the event by saying that they'd looked into it and there wasn't any legislation to say what the legal age limit was for leaving your children at home on their own, that you should just go out to work and leave them there.'

(Lone parent)

In most cases, lone parents discussed the concern and dilemma of the age at which they were comfortable to leave their child alone while they are at work. Staff should be prepared for stronger concerns and in-depth discussions about childcare when delivering the same message to lone parents with younger children in the future.

One lone parent echoed concerns that had been highlighted by staff about the inappropriateness of some of the examples being given through the presentation. In particular, the customer felt it was patronising to suggest that lone parents should be going to work to meet a partner.

'Well, I found it a bit condescending. They had this Powerpoint that was going on about how work will improve your social life and all this. It was very condescending, I wasn't impressed really.'

(Lone parent)

6.6 Presentations by others

Lone parents did appear more engaged when listening to presentations from employers, particularly those employers who asked the lone parents questions such as 'Has anyone heard of us before?', 'Has anyone ever applied for a job with us before?', or 'Has anyone ever had to apply for a job on-line before?'. This gave lone parents the opportunity to interact with the employer. When given the opportunity, lone parents appeared keen to ask the employer practical questions, such as what to do when children are ill or childcare lets you down, and whether they had jobs with hours suitable to their needs.

'I think the support they [employer name] offer is very good and it's great that they have shift systems because that will address some of the problems.'

(Lone parent)

'It was nice to hear how they all work as part of a team like a big family. It sounds like a nice place to work'

(Lone parent)

Many lone parents indicated that they enjoyed the employer presentation and that it was good to hear 'from the horse's mouth' that they would be supportive of lone parents' needs. Having heard from the employer about the variety of ways in which they accommodated parents through family friendly policies, most lone parents indicated that they did not think that employers would be so flexible, and they had been pleasantly surprised.

At some events, the employer brought along a member of staff that was a lone parent themselves to talk to the customers. In many cases, the employee would stand up and talk informally to the lone parents, and demonstrated passion and enthusiasm for working. This talk from the employee had a positive impact on those lone parents attending the event, often reinforcing the message the employer and Jobcentre Plus were trying to convey.

'The presentation from a lone parent who works for [employer name] was really good. It really encouraged me. It was really positive and it lifted my spirits.'

(Lone parent)

However, a few lone parents felt that the employer did not add any value to the event. This was noticed particularly when the employer demonstrated some of the elements identified previously on what makes a less effective employer presentation, such as talking too long about the history of the company rather than focusing on their family friendly aspects that would meet the needs of lone parents.

'The person from [employer's name] spoke for around 20 minutes, a lot about the history of the company, it's partnership...profit margins, stock market. All of this was not interesting or relevant, I just wanted to know if I could get a job there, and there were no vacancies available.'

(Lone parent)

6.7 Understanding of messages

Most lone parents indicated that they felt the objective of the event was to encourage them to move into work and to inform them of how Jobcentre Plus could help them to do this. Lone parents expressed that this message was reinforced through having an employer present at the event.

'The event has been very, very useful. It was explained properly and gave you everything you needed to help you go back to work.'

(Lone parent)

'They gave me information I didn't know about before. I didn't realise you could go to the Jobcentre for any help and they will give you advice.'

(Lone parent)

Some lone parents described that when Jobcentre Plus staff had informed them about the event they had explained that it was to inform them of the proposed changes to IS. Lone parents at the event indicated that they had understood the information given to them at the event. However, the evaluation form presented a slightly different picture. In order to explore the extent to which the key messages of the events had been communicated effectively, lone parents attending the events were asked to state whether they agreed, disagreed or were unsure about a series of statements. The findings suggest that understandings varied considerably across the evaluation form respondents, as shown in Table 6.3.

Table 6.3 Responses to statements to test understanding of key messages (n=232)

Statement	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	No Response
I may no longer receive Income Support shortly after my child turns 12 years old	55.6%	19.4%	14.2%	10.8%
I need to look for work immediately	48.7%	21.1%	21.1%	9.1%
Jobcentre Plus can help me get work	80.6%	9.5%	2.6%	7.3%
I will have my benefits taken away	25.9%	26.7%	31.9%	15.5%
I may need to look for work shortly after my child turns 12 years old	57.3%	18.1%	9.9%	14.7%
I can considering entering training or education when my child turns 12 years old	62.5%	19.8%	6.5%	11.2%

As the events were intended to inform lone parents about forthcoming changes in the Income Support eligibility, and the aspects of conditionality that would accompany any move to Jobseekers Allowance, the findings from the evaluation forms suggest that this objective was only partially achieved. Only 129 (55.6%) of lone parents agreed that they may no longer receive Income Support shortly after their youngest child turns 12 years old, less than a third of respondents (74, 31.9%) disagreed that they were going to have all their benefits taken away and almost half (113, 48.7%) indicated that they had to look for work immediately.

The high levels of 'don't know' responses, and 'no responses' for certain questions, suggests a lack of clarity, possible poor understanding of the questions or possible low levels of literacy skills. More starkly, the distribution of lone parents agreeing and disagreeing with the same statement may suggest that they have either received the incorrect message, or have interpreted the message differently. It may be that the inability to provide precise information on the changes to Income Support and their implications, as described previously, has had a particular impact in this area.

The attendees completing evaluation forms were given the opportunity to identify if there was anything that they were unclear about. Very few responses were provided to this question, with the majority referring to isolated issues or praising how well the event had been delivered. No single issues emerged where lone parents were unclear, and instead referred to concerns over individual ability or preparedness to return to work, including:

- concerns over other caring responsibilities such as including looking after a sick parent;
- individual health problems which were considered by one individual to limit their ability to look for work or training;
- whether or not one individual would be better off in work suggesting a lack of understanding of the BOC or where to get further information; and

- in two cases, language and literacy issues were highlighted as barriers to complete understanding, emphasising the importance of identifying such issues at the outset.

Some lone parents interviewed discussed issues around training. Several explained that they had been out of the labour market for so long that they felt they would have to undertake training or gain a qualification before they were able to apply for jobs. In many cases this was to update skills or to acquire computer skills, other lone parents wanted to gain a qualification in a new sector of employment that they would like to enter.

'I would like to work, and I would like to work with children but I have no qualifications, so I would like to do some training. I'm going to talk about this with an adviser tomorrow at the Jobcentre.'

(Lone parent)

'I have been looking for work some time now but realised I needed to retrain for the sort of work I wanted to do. I am taking a part-time course in travel agency work and hope to find employment once I have completed it.'

(Lone parent)

'I think I may need to look at retraining. I got my NVQ in 1992 but computers change so quickly that I'm probably not qualified anymore.'

(Lone parent)

Lone parents were interested in finding out where to collect further information on training for specific jobs/careers (for example, childcare/caring sector), and the implications of the changes in Income Support for new and continued study. In all cases, lone parents indicated that they were going to talk with the adviser about their options at their next meeting.

In line with the findings from the evaluation forms, many lone parents interviewed following the events stated that while they had understood that there were going to be changes to Income Support, they remained unclear of what the changes would mean for them.

'I needed to be aware of the changes in conditions to Income Support but I realised when I got home that I had a lot more questions that hadn't been answered.'

(Lone parent)

'They said something about the money was going to stop, but I am confused about it, I don't know what's going to happen.'

(Lone parent)

Another lone parent indicated that she was currently looking for work 'because I have to, from October nothing is going to be counted, not your health, nothing, it's just job, job, job.'

6.8 One-to-Ones

Almost all lone parents had a one-to-one interview with an adviser after the presentation. In most cases, this was simply to confirm that they were interested in what the presentation had told them and to arrange an interview for them with an adviser at their local office. Having seen the presentation, many lone parents expressed that they were hoping that the adviser would be able to do a BOC with them on the day, as they were interested to know how their personal situation may change if they went out to work.

'It's nice to know that there is someone here to talk to about me personally and how the changes will affect me and what help is available to me.'

(Lone parent)

6.9 Usefulness of the event

The majority of lone parents that were interviewed indicated that they had found the event useful, helpful and informative. Many lone parents expressed that they had learnt something new from the event that they did not previously know about. In some cases, this was the level of support that the adviser was able to offer them if they signed up to NDLP, for others, it was the degree of financial incentives that were available if you work more than 16 hours a week.

'I was really impressed with the benefits available through the programme. I never knew so much support was available to lone parents.'

(Lone parent)

'The support they offer is very good like help to buy clothes for an interview.'

(Lone parent)

'The information was good. I didn't know about Work Trials. I think I may like to try one'

(Lone parent)

In Work Credit was the one incentive that lone parents remembered more than any of the others. Lone parents consider receiving an additional £40 a week (or £60 in London) a true incentive to return to work.

'It's a great incentive, and it was the first time I'd heard about that.'

(Lone parent)

Although these incentives were considered good, some lone parents felt that they do not need them as they want to work, and would like Jobcentre Plus to do more to help them with their jobsearch.

'They don't have to hold a carrot for me, I already want a job.'

(Lone parent)

Lone parents indicated that having a group presentation was a more effective method for communicating information than through leaflets, as they admitted they sometimes forget to read leaflets they are given.

'I really liked being in a room with other lone parents. Seeing that there were lots of other people in my situation made me feel like less of a freak. It was good to be able to bounce ideas off other people.'

(Lone parent)

Table 6.4 sets out the responses received to a series of statements on the evaluation form. The table suggests that the vast majority of respondents reported positively on their individual events, and were particularly positive about the friendliness and approachability of Jobcentre Plus staff.

Table 6.4 Usefulness of events (n=232)

Statement	Agree	Disagree	No Response
The information was clear	91.8%	1.7%	6.5%
I understand how the Jobcentre can help me	91.4%	1.3%	7.3%
The staff were friendly and approachable	94.4%	0.4%	5.2%
I felt I could ask questions if I wanted to	90.9%	2.2%	6.9%
I know how to find out more information	90.9%	1.3%	7.8%

Lone parents indicated that they felt at ease once they had arrived at the venue. In most instances, lone parents explained that a member of staff had met them at the door, welcomed them and explained what they needed to do before offering them tea, coffee and biscuits when they arrived.

'If you didn't understand anything in the presentation you could ask them afterwards. They were very friendly and open.'

(Lone parent)

'I was greeted by lots of different people. Everyone was really friendly. This helped me to feel a bit more relaxed.'

(Lone parent)

Contrary to the way in which many lone parents felt when they entered a Jobcentre Plus office, many lone parents expressed that they felt the staff were friendly, helpful, welcoming and approachable. Many lone parents described that they

would be happy to sign up for New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and regularly meet with an adviser, but that the adviser that they usually see in their local office was not as helpful or understanding of their personal circumstances as those at the event appeared to be.

'The staff are very friendly, they didn't make you feel small which they can do sometimes.'

(Lone parent)

'The staff were very friendly and laid back. It made a nice change.'

(Lone parent)

6.10 Language issues

At a few of the events there were lone parents who had language needs. A couple of lone parents brought an interpreter with them, and in both cases the interpreter had young children which they also brought along. In other cases, the lone parent sat through the presentation and then spoke with staff during their one-to-one. One member of staff commented *'It's amazing that we have been seeing her every 12 weeks and no one has identified an ESOL need before now.'*

For those lone parents for which language was a barrier to employment, they indicated that after their one-to-one session they felt more confident that Jobcentre Plus was able to help them access ESOL provision. In one instance, the venue in which the event was being held provided ESOL classes and the adviser helped the lone parent to complete the application form during their one-to-one meeting after the presentation.

6.11 After the event

Overall the events appeared to boost lone parents' confidence about finding work. It had given them knowledge that a support mechanism was there to help them to find employment. Many lone parents were keen to follow up what they had learnt at the presentation with a conversation about how the various levels of support would impact on their personal situation.

Better Off Calculation

Before attending the event many lone parents had believed that they would not be better off in work due to losing all their benefits. Having listened to the presentation, lone parents indicated that they did not realise how much better off they would be just by working 16 hours a week, and were interested in getting a personal BOC calculation. In some cases disappointment was expressed that they were unable to do this at the event itself.

Some lone parents were already working a few hours a week, often as a dinner lady at a school or cleaning. They were deliberately working less than 16 hours

a week in order that the income would not affect their benefits. However, after the presentation about the additional financial support available for those people working more than 16 hours, all those working indicated that they were going to talk with their LPA about increasing their hours of work.

'I was surprised with the example of how much better you could be if you work 16 hours.'

(Lone parent)

NDLP is really attractive now. Going back to work before didn't look like a very good idea, it would have been for very little extra money but In Work Credit is extra help, it's a big incentive.'

(Lone parent)

Job ready lone parents

The majority of the lone parents interviewed at the events indicated that they had already started to think about going to work before attending the event. Some lone parents had thought about wanting to return to work, but had not discussed this with their adviser, while others had recently made at least one job application.

'I want to go back to work. I have been looking for a while. I'm registered with temping and recruitment agencies and have handed my CV into places. I'm just waiting for something to come up.'

(Lone parent)

In many cases, the lone parents were looking for employment that they would be able to undertake while their children were at school. Many did not feel that their children were ready to be left completely on their own at 12 years of age, and there were issues about putting a child of that age into childcare.

'The main problem is finding a job and then one that has the hours I want.'

(Lone parent)

6.12 Outcomes of the events

In general, the events appeared to have increased the confidence of many lone parents in their ability to get a job. Many lone parents were not aware of the level of support that Jobcentre Plus were able to offer them in finding employment, and indicated that they intended to talk in more detail with their adviser about their work options.

'They explained that once you are in work, there is still someone there at the end of the phone to help you. This is really supportive – knowing you are not going back into work completely on your own.'

(Lone parent)

'I am quite looking forward to it actually, I want to get out now and do something for me, it's my time.'

(Lone parent)

6.13 Lone parents who declined the invitation to attend an event

All of the lone parents not attending an event, that we spoke to, did remember being invited to an Options and Choices Event, but gave a variety of reasons for not wanting to attend. These included: not wanting to attend a group event, preferring a one-to-one situation; the time of the event not being convenient due to other commitments such as college; caring responsibilities and being currently in the process of moving onto Incapacity Benefit.

Attending a group event

Some lone parents indicated that they were uncomfortable attending a group event. Two customers who had chosen not to attend the event explained that the event was presented to them as a choice of a group event or their WFI. In these cases, the lone parents chose to have the WFI because they preferred one-to-one discussions rather than talking about their personal situation in a group.

Unsuitable time or location

A couple of lone parents would have been willing to attend the event, however, the time and location of the event was not suitable. One lone parent was attending college one day a week on the same day as the event, another indicated that they had a hospital appointment that day.

Only one of the lone parents, that we spoke to, indicated that she did not want to attend due to the location of the event. She had a health condition affecting her mobility, and explained that 'I would have to catch two buses to get there, and would have really struggled to make it on time.' This customer indicated that she would have attended the event if it was held at an employer closer to where she lived.

Not able to return to work

A couple of lone parents indicated that they had caring responsibilities that would make it difficult for them firstly, to attend the event, and secondly, to take on a job. In one case, the lone parent was caring for an elderly family member who would only accept care from immediate family members. Another lone parent described that her child has severe behavioural problems and only attended school for two hours a day. In addition, she regularly received telephone calls from the school asking her to collect her son as they are unable to control him.

'Who would employ me if I'm getting phone calls about him every five minutes.'

(Lone parent)

6.14 Lone parents who accepted an invitation to attend an event but failed to attend

In all cases where the lone parent had a place but failed to turn up for an event, the lone parent did remember being invited to the Options and Choices Events and most were able to recall what the event was about.

'Lone parents' entitlement to benefits, changes to benefits and training that is available for lone parents.'

(Lone parent)

However, one lone parent admitted that they were not really sure what the event was about as she was 'not really listening' on the telephone, and although she remembered receiving a letter about it, she could not remember what it said.

In almost all cases, lone parents were able to provide an 'official' reason for having not attended the event. In several cases this was due to the child being ill on the day of the event. Other reasons included having a hospital appointment at short notice, being ill themselves or having to collect a parent from the airport. One lone parent indicated that she had started working part-time and the time of the event clashed with her working hours. Only one lone parent admitted to having forgotten about the event.

In further discussion with these customers it became apparent that the 'official' reason for not attending the event may have not been the real reason for their non-attendance. Some lone parents expressed concern about attending a group event as they felt it would be generalised information and not necessarily appropriate to them. Lone parents expressed that they preferred to discuss their personal situation on a one-to-one basis, and did not think that they would have had the opportunity to do this in a group session. Some of the lone parents expressed a lack of confidence in going somewhere where they did not know what to expect or would not recognise anyone.

'It makes me feel sick sometimes even to think about going to the Jobcentre'

(Lone parent)

'I asked my adviser if they were also going to the event and I found out that they weren't. This made me nervous. I think I would have been more comfortable and relaxed about going if she was there. It is always nice to see a friendly face, someone who knows you and your circumstances. Having my adviser there would have put me at ease.'

(Lone parent)

Other lone parents expressed nervousness with going to a location that they were not familiar with.

'I do not know that area very well. It is quite far from my house and that put me off going a bit.'

(Lone parent)

A couple of lone parents indicated that they would have felt more comfortable if they were able to take their children along to the event. However, for the target group of lone parents, their children should be in school at the time of the event and would, therefore, not have been able to attend.

6.15 Conclusion

Overall, lone parents who attended the events found them to be useful in helping them to think about returning to work. Many lone parents attending the events had previously thought about returning to work, and were surprised at the amount of support available to them through Jobcentre Plus.

One of the key messages for the event was to inform lone parents of the changes to IS. Although most lone parents indicated that they had understood the information given to them on the day, analysis conducted on evaluation forms and follow-up interviews after the event identified that many lone parents appeared not to either, have understood the changes or how the changes may impact on them.

Almost all lone parents found the location of the events to be convenient for them to attend, often indicating that they knew the area well and it was easy for them to get to.

Lone parents appeared to be more engaged and willing to ask questions during the employer presentation. However, several lone parents had attended the event with the expectation that there would be several employers with vacancies, and that they would be able to apply for jobs on the day. However, it was unclear if this is what they had been told on the phone when invited to the event, or if they had misunderstood the information given to them.

For those lone parents who did not want to attend the event, many indicated that they preferred to have a one-to-one with their adviser rather than attend a group event, or the time or date of the event was inconvenient for them to attend. However, for those who failed to attend an event, official reasons were uncovered to reveal a nervousness of attending group sessions or getting to the location. In these cases it may have been that the lone parent did not understand that they had a choice about attending, rather perhaps they felt it mandatory.

7 Recommendations and policy implications

This chapter provides the recommendations and policy implications from this research focusing on the Trailblazer Options and Choices Events. The research has followed the initial set-up and delivery of Options and Choices Events in two Trailblazer districts prior to the national roll-out. Although the organisation and delivery of the events has differed slightly between the two Trailblazer districts, some of the issues that have been identified are similar in both areas, and offer valuable knowledge to the future delivery of Options and Choices Events.

Our recommendations are structured to address these areas of interest, as follows:

- organisation of events;
- staff training and preparation; and
- delivering the events.

7.1 Organisation of events

The two Trailblazer districts have undertaken the organisation and delivery of the events differently, fitting in with existing roles and delivery models. Despite different delivery models, a similar process has been used for identifying and inviting lone parents and some of the same issues have been faced when organising the Options and Choices Events. The following recommendations should be taken into consideration when organising future events nationally.

Recommendations for the organisation of the events

1. The key objective for the events needs to be clarified. Is the objective to inform all lone parents of the changes to Income Support (IS), or is it to convert customers to New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP)? If it is the former, then customers already on NDLP should not be invited.

2. When sending customers written confirmation of their attendance at an Options and Choices Event, customers should be sent maps and public transport details to help them to locate the event.
3. In contacts with potential attendees, staff should be clear about the aims and objectives of the event, and take care not to raise false expectations regarding the number and role of employers attending.

7.2 Staff training and preparation

The two day presentation skills training course was felt to be a good introductory course to help staff deliver a presentation. However, for many staff it did not meet all their needs to enable them to deliver an Options and Choices Event. The following recommendations should, therefore, be considered when preparing staff for the delivery of Options and Choices Events.

Recommendations for staff training and preparation

4. The aims and objectives of the presentation skills training need to be refined to ensure it meets the needs of staff in preparing them to deliver Options and Choices Events.
5. Staff need to be allowed time to develop and practise their presentation skills prior to delivering their first event. This could also include 'shadowing' more experienced presenters to develop their confidence and pick up any 'tricks and tips'.
6. Consideration needs to be given to the technology training needs of staff delivering events. Any training delivered to staff needs to include the use of a laptop, projector and Powerpoint.
7. Review the guidance framework that is issued to staff who are delivering events with a view to including a complete checklist of activities involved in delivering an Options and Choices Event. This would include any tasks needing to be conducted prior to, or after, delivery of the presentation.

7.3 Delivering the events

The quality of the Options and Choices Events varied across the two Trailblazer districts. Moreover, the quality of employer presentations has varied. From observations, it is possible to summarise the factors that were demonstrated by those employers who appeared more successful at engaging lone parents.

A 'Good' employer:

- engaged with the lone parents through asking questions and inviting the sharing of experiences;

- the content of the presentation focused on the needs of the lone parents, for example, flexible working patterns, availability of training, career prospects, staff benefits and social activities;
- brought along a lone parent who worked for the company to share their experience of how they combine working with parental responsibilities;
- brought a list of current vacancies and was able to organise application forms on the day;
- guaranteed an interview for all lone parents attending the event who apply for vacancies; and
- gave a tour of the premises or provided lunch.

A 'not so good' employer

- the presentation was too long and concentrated on the history and development of the company;
- the employer was not locally based, and lone parents would have to travel a considerable distance to work;
- the training that was on offer was delivered over full-time hours (Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm); and
- did not engage or interact with the lone parents, nor provide any opportunity for the lone parents to ask questions.

In order to ensure that all events are of the highest possible quality, we recommend that the following be taken into consideration when delivering future Options and Choices Events.

Recommendations for delivering Options and Choices Events

8. Ensure that consideration is given to meeting and greeting the lone parents as they arrive at the event, particularly if the venue is small or the location is not well known in the community. This will be particularly important when using small employer premises and will help lone parents to feel more comfortable and relaxed at the event.
9. Presenters should actively engage and interact with the lone parents, and encourage lone parents to participate in the event by asking and inviting questions.
10. Time should be given to meet with employers face-to-face to discuss the nature of the event and the expectations of them. Guidance should be offered on the proposed content of their contribution.
11. Employers should be strongly encouraged to bring an employee who is a lone parent to talk with the customers. Where this is not possible, Jobcentre Plus staff should identify a lone parent already on NDLP to talk with customers at the event.

12. Ensure that follow-up appointments for lone parents at their local office are within a week of the Options and Choices Event.
13. While effective in communicating the support available to lone parents, the events appear to have been less successful in communicating the changes in IS legislation. We recommend that this be subject to further study as part of the early roll-out stage.

7.4 Overall conclusion

Overall, the delivery of Options and Choices Events has been found to be resource intensive to set up, but should be less so once processes are put in place and the events are up and running. The employer presence at the event was considered to complement and add value to the message the Jobcentre Plus are delivering. Employer relationships will require careful management, to ensure they do not receive multiple requests once the events are being delivered nationally.

Lone parents have responded positively to the events, often indicating that the location was closer than the Jobcentre Plus office that they usually attend and that they knew the venue already. Lone parents were surprised at the level of support that Jobcentre Plus were able to offer them in finding work, and were often more motivated and enthusiastic about looking for work after the event. The message about the level of support available was felt to be more powerful if delivered by a working lone parent, through the employer involvement. Generally lone parents were more confident in their ability to find work once they had attended an event.

Appendix A

Lone parent case studies

Mrs A is a mother of three children aged 13, 16 and 18 years; the eldest does not live with Mrs A. Mrs A came to the event to find out more about the changes in Income Support; finding out that other lone parents were coming, encouraged her to attend.

Attending the event has started to get Mrs A thinking about going to work. She stated that 'I would have to go to work now, so I've just been thinking about looking for a job and the type of things I could do. I'm going to speak to someone now [an adviser] to help me with this.'

Mrs A reported that her two children have behavioural problems and are always getting into trouble at school, which is very stressful for her as she is called into school regularly to discuss her children's behaviour. She is worried that if she did work, her employers wouldn't understand and she wouldn't be able to get time off work with deal with these issues. However, Mrs A said that she was encouraged to hear from an employer today saying that they understand their issues and they can be flexible. This had made her feel a little more positive about going to work.

Mrs B has one child and came to live in the UK from France. Mrs B has many skills and qualifications including a University Degree from France and is fluent in French. However, Mrs B's lack of confidence in her English speaking skills has prevented her from taking up employment. Mrs B stated that 'I came here today to meet an adviser to help get links into work. I have lots of qualifications and skills but I need to be more fluent in English. I am waiting to see an adviser now to help me get some training to improve my English.'

Mrs C is a mother of two children aged 13 and 16 years. Mrs C also cares for her elderly mother. Currently, Mrs C works in a pre-school for 10 hours a week and has recently been promoted to a Deputy Assistant position.

During the presentation Mrs C realised that she could be financially better off if she worked 16 hours a week which was contrary to what she believed. Having heard this Mrs C stated 'I'm thinking about increasing my hours to 16 hours. There is a job in the school I'm currently working, I can work 16 hours and still care for my mother and children.' Mrs C was going to meet one of the advisers after the event to discuss her personal situation and find out how much better off she would be if she got the job.

Mrs D is a mother of two. Currently Mrs D works 7.5 hours a week as a lunchtime supervisor at a local school. Commenting on the event Mrs D reported 'they explained that if you work 16 hours a week you can be better off. I've booked an appointment to see an adviser tomorrow to help me find work as I want to increase my hours to 16 hours a week. I think I will look for a different job, in retail maybe. The event has been very useful.'

Since attending the event Mrs E has signed up to New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and has met with her adviser a few times. The customer explained that in the past she has never seen the same adviser more than once, but now that she has signed up to NDLP, 'just focusing on one person has helped me to concentrate on my jobsearch...she is helping me assess what skills I have and what work I might be able to do.'

Mrs F had previously been looking for work but had not been successful in getting an interview. 'I've been out of work for so long, I feel rusty and my CV is cr*p but this package that they gave you had a leaflet about a place you can go to get your CV redone and that has been a big help.' Since attending the event, Mrs F has been to a training provider who has helped her to update her CV. 'She was brilliant.' She has given a copy of her CV to some local agencies, and one has phoned her to say there is some temporary work available that may lead to something permanent in the future. 'I can't wait. When you don't work you feel like a nobody.'

Mrs G had started to think about returning to work and felt that the event 'was very informative'. She believed that there would be several employers at the event, so took copies of her CV along to hand out. Although the employer present at the event was not from an industry she had considered before, it made her realise that they still have administrative teams and other workers, 'not just builders.' She gave her CV to the employer at the event and has not heard anything. However, since the event she has spoken to an adviser about undertaking some IT training and has done an assessment so is on a waiting list with a provider. She recently had an interview at a school, although she didn't get the job, she received good feedback and this has built up her confidence to continue with her jobsearch.

After the presentation Mrs H made an appointment to speak with an adviser at her local Jobcentre Plus office about NDLP and has also talked about the type of work she might like to do. Having talked about shop work, the Lone Parent Adviser (LPA) identified a suitable vacancy selling hair products, so she has sent off an application form. When considering returning to work, 'I am quite looking forward to it actually, I want to get out now and do something for me, it's my time.' Mrs H found the event very useful and since attending she has been more proactive with her jobsearch. 'I'm looking for work a bit more now and in more places, before I was just going to the Jobcentre and that's it.'

Appendix B

District visit topic guides

Evaluation of the Lone Parent Trailblazer – Group Seminars

Draft Topic Guide for District Visits

It is anticipated that the interviewer will have received a copy of the district delivery plan prior to the interview. If not, the interviewer should ask:

Is the delivery plan available, and can we have a copy? If not, when do you anticipate it being ready?

Details of the group seminars

Can you tell me how many group seminars you intend to delivery each week and where they will be held?

Why were the particular venues chosen? (If held outside of Jobcentre Plus offices, probe whether the venues have been used before)

How long will each group seminar last? What times will the group seminars be held?

How many lone parents are you inviting to each group seminar? How many do you anticipate will turn up?

Will refreshments be made available to lone parents who attend the seminars?

How do you aim to make lone parents feel welcome/at ease when they arrive at the sessions?

Details of target audience

How will lone parents being invited to the group seminars be identified?

How will the group be introduced to the lone parent? Will they be told that attendance is voluntary?

Will lone parents be told about the group seminar prior to receiving a letter? Will attendance at a WFI be part of the selection criteria?

When discussing the group seminar with their adviser, will lone parents have the opportunity to 'opt out'?

Will all group seminars be open to everyone, or will you be targeting some at specific groups? If so, which groups will you run specific seminars for e.g. black and ethnic minorities, lone parents who have never worked?

Will all seminars be open to lone parents whose youngest child is below 11 years old?

Delivery of group seminars

What will the content of the group seminars be? How much of the content is prescribed and how much has been added through local discussions?

What are the key messages for lone parents to take away?

Who will be delivering the group seminars? How were the people selected?

How many trainers/staff will be attending each group seminar? What experience of this customer group do they have?

Will there be any external providers or employers attending the group seminars? If so, who, and how have they been chosen/identified?

After the group seminar

Will there be any follow up with lone parents who have attended the group seminar?

Will Lone Parent Advisers be available to speak to lone parents directly after the group seminar? If so, how many LPAs? If not, will appointments be made for lone parents to speak with LPAs before they leave the group seminar?

Will there be any follow up of lone parents who were invited but did not attend the group seminar? If so, who will do the follow up? (e.g. LPAs, admin, those delivering the course)

What action will be taken with those who are invited but do not attend the second group seminar?

Will lone parents be referred only to a one to one session or will there be alternative provision signposted from the sessions?

Monitoring

What details will you be collecting on those lone parents invited to the group seminars? (probe for contact details, age of youngest child, number of children, length of time out of the labour market, diversity characteristics).

Will the same data be collected for those lone parents who are invited but do not attend the group seminars?

Will the characteristics of the individual seminars be recorded? (probe: venue, number of attendees, content, target audience etc). Who will record this information, and who will collate it?

Expectations

What are the expected outcomes of the seminars? What are the group seminars aiming to achieve?

How do you think lone parents will respond to the seminars?

Do you think the seminars will achieve the expected outcomes?

What barriers do you anticipate facing in achieving a positive outcome for lone parents?

Do you feel you will be able to address all potential barriers highlighted by lone parents?

What risks do you face in delivering the group seminars successfully?

Do you think that Jobcentre Plus has the right package of support for lone parents?

Those delivering the group seminars

What experience do you have with this customer group?

Have you received any special training specific to this customer group?

What guidance have you received for delivery of the group seminars?

Do you feel the guidance you have received is adequate for you to deliver the seminars? If not, what further information would you require? How could it be improved?

How many of you will be present in each group seminar?

To what extent will each seminar vary in content?

Have you had any discussions with the other Trailblazer district about the content of their group seminars?

Will the content vary depending on the target audience? If so, how?

What barriers do you anticipate lone parents may present in entering employment? What questions do you anticipate lone parents will raise at the group seminars?

How many lone parents are you expecting to attend each session?

If the number of lone parents attending the seminar is low, will you cancel the session? If so, how many is too low?

What if more than 20 lone parents turn up at the seminar? Will you have an additional venue to use?

Appendix C

Evaluation form



Options and Choices Events Feedback Form

GHK are an independent company who are evaluating the Options and Choices Events that you have attended today. Please tell us about what you thought of the event today to help Jobcentre Plus to improve future events.

- Q1 Please answer the questions below about the information you had about the event before attending today. Please put a tick in each row.**
- | | Yes | No | Don't Know |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Did your Jobcentre Plus adviser discuss the event with you before you attended today? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Did you receive a letter with the details of the event? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Before you attended the event, did you understand the purpose of coming to the session? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
- Q2 Please tell us how well the event was organised to meet your needs. Please put a tick in each row depending on how well the different aspects suited your needs.**
- | | Very Suitable | Suitable | No opinion | Unsuitable | Very unsuitable |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Location | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Time | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Venue..... | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Length of the event | <input type="checkbox"/> |
- Q3 Thinking about the information that you have been given today, please indicate which of the following statements you agree with. Please tick in each row.**
- | | Agree | Don't Know | Disagree |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| I may no longer receive Income Support shortly after my child turns 12 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I need to look for work immediately..... | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Jobcentre Plus can help me get work | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I will have my benefits taken away | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I may need to look for work shortly after my child turns 12 years old..... | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I can considering entering training or education when my child turns 12 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
- Q4 Is there anything that you have been told today that you are unclear about?**
-
-
-
-
-
-

Please turn over

Q5 Please answer the questions below to let us know how useful you have found the event today.
Please put a tick in each row.

	Agree	Disagree
The information was clear	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand how the Jobcentre can help me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The staff were friendly and approachable	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I felt I could ask questions if I wanted to.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I know how to find out more information.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q6 Were you offered the chance to meet with a Lone Parent Adviser following the event?

Yes, I am going to see an adviser immediately.....

Yes, I have a time to see an adviser in the next couple of weeks.....

No, I am not going to speak with an adviser.....

Q7 Is there anything you would improve about today's Options and Choices Event?

Details about you

In order to monitor who is attending the Options and Choices Events, please let us know the following information about you.

Q8 Are you:

Male ? Female ?

Q9 Which age group do you fall in?

16 - 30 years 46 -55 years

31 - 45 years 56 + years

Q10 How old is your youngest child?

0 - 10 years 11 years 12 + years

Further research

We would like to be able to speak to you more about the event you have attended today. This would involve a short telephone call. If you are happy for us to call you in the next couple of weeks, please provide your contact details below.

Name.....

Phone number - home.....

Phone number - mobile.....

Phone number - other.....

Thank you for completing the form today.
Please hand this form back to one of the staff members.

Appendix D

Event feedback form responses

Event feedback form responses: consolidated responses

Number of responses: 232

Event Location (District):
 Birmingham and Solihull 56
 North and North East London 176

Q1 Please answer the questions below about the information you had about the event before attending today.			
	Yes	No	Don't Know
Did your Jobcentre Plus adviser discuss the event with you before you attended today?	182	39	1
Did you receive a letter with the details of the event?	208	19	1
Before you attended the event, did you understand the purpose of coming to the session?	199	21	3

Q2 Please tell us how well the event was organised to meet your needs.					
	Very Suitable	Suitable	No opinion	Unsuitable	Very unsuitable
Location	100	109	9	8	1
Time	111	104	6	3	1
Venue	101	106	10	1	2
Length of the event	85	121	8	1	1

Q3 Thinking about the information that you have been given today, please indicate which of the following statements you agree with. Please tick in each row.			
	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree
I may no longer receive Income Support shortly after my child turns 12 years old	129	45	33
I need to look for work immediately	113	49	49
Jobcentre Plus can help me get work	187	22	6
I will have my benefits taken away	60	62	74
I may need to look for work shortly after my child turns 12 years old	133	42	23
I can considering entering training or education when my child turns 12 years old	145	46	15

Q4 Is there anything that you have been told today that you are unclear about?	
	83

Q5 Please answer the questions below to let us know how useful you have found the event today?		
	Agree	Disagree
The information was clear	213	4
I understand how the Jobcentre can help me	212	3
The staff were friendly and approachable	219	1
I felt I could ask questions if I wanted to	211	5
I know how to find out more information	211	3

Options and Choices Events: testing implementation and delivery in Trailblazer districts

Q6 Were you offered the chance to meet with a Lone Parent Adviser following the event?	
Yes, I am going to see an adviser immediately	90
Yes, I have a time to see an adviser in the next couple of weeks	72
No, I am not going to speak with an adviser	2

Q7 Is there anything you would improve about today's Options and Choices Event?
69 Responses

Details about You

Q8 Are you:	
Male	23
Female	196

Q9 Which age group do you fall in?	
16 - 30 years	7
31 - 45 years	134
46 -55 years	73
56 + years	4

Q10 How old is your youngest child?	
0 - 10 years	9
11 years	39
12 + years	68

Event feedback form responses: Birmingham and Solihull District

Number of responses: 56

Q1 Please answer the questions below about the information you had about the event before attending today.			
	Yes	No	Don't Know
Did your Jobcentre Plus adviser discuss the event with you before you attended today?	40	12	0
Did you receive a letter with the details of the event?	51	3	1
Before you attended the event, did you understand the purpose of coming to the session?	50	3	0

Q2 Please tell us how well the event was organised to meet your needs.					
	Very Suitable	Suitable	No opinion	Unsuitable	Very unsuitable
Location	27	25	2	1	0
Time	27	27	1	0	0
Venue	27	26	0	0	1
Length of the event	16	32	2	0	0

Q3 Thinking about the information that you have been given today, please indicate which of the following statements you agree with.			
	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree
I may no longer receive Income Support shortly after my child turns 12 years old	31	10	10
I need to look for work immediately	28	9	13
Jobcentre Plus can help me get work	46	2	1
I will have my benefits taken away	13	16	16
I may need to look for work shortly after my child turns 12 years old	33	12	4
I can considering entering training or education when my child turns 12 years old	34	8	5

Q4 Is there anything that you have been told today that you are unclear about?	
	11 Responses

Q5 Please answer the questions below to let us know how useful you have found the event today.		
	Agree	Disagree
The information was clear	53	0
I understand how the Jobcentre can help me	53	1
The staff were friendly and approachable	55	0
I felt I could ask questions if I wanted to	53	0
I know how to find out more information	52	0

Q6 Were you offered the chance to meet with a Lone Parent Adviser following the event?	
Yes, I am going to see an adviser immediately	26
Yes, I have a time to see an adviser in the next couple of weeks	15
No, I am not going to speak with an adviser	2

Q7 Is there anything you would improve about today's Options and Choices Event?	
	12

Details about You

Q8 Are you:	
Male	7 Female 48

Q9 Which age group do you fall in?			
16 - 30 years	2	46 -55 years	16
31 - 45 years	36	56 + years	0

Q10 How old is your youngest child?			
0 - 10 years	2	11 years	4 12 + years 48

Event feedback form responses: North and North East London District

Number of responses: 176

Q1 Please answer the questions below about the information you had about the event before attending today.			
	Yes	No	Don't Know
Did your Jobcentre Plus adviser discuss the event with you before you attended today?	142	27	1
Did you receive a letter with the details of the event?	157	16	0
Before you attended the event, did you understand the purpose of coming to the session?	149	18	3

Q2 Please tell us how well the event was organised to meet your needs.					
	Very Suitable	Suitable	No opinion	Unsuitable	Very unsuitable
Location	73	84	7	7	1
Time	84	77	5	3	1
Venue	74	80	10	1	1
Length of the event	69	89	6	1	1

Q3 Thinking about the information that you have been given today, please indicate which of the following statements you agree with.			
	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree
I may no longer receive Income Support shortly after my child turns 12 years old	98	35	23
I need to look for work immediately	85	40	36
Jobcentre Plus can help me get work	141	20	5
I will have my benefits taken away	47	46	58
I may need to look for work shortly after my child turns 12 years old	100	30	19
I am considering entering training or education when my child turns 12 years old	11	38	10

Q4 Is there anything that you have been told today that you are unclear about?	
	72 Responses

Q5 Please answer the questions below to let us know how useful you have found the event today.		
	Agree	Disagree
The information was clear	160	4
I understand how the Jobcentre can help me	159	2
The staff were friendly and approachable	164	1
I felt I could ask questions if I wanted to	158	5
I know how to find out more information	159	3

Q6 Were you offered the chance to meet with a Lone Parent Adviser following the event?	
Yes, I am going to see an adviser immediately	64
Yes, I have a time to see an adviser in the next couple of weeks	57
No, I am not going to speak with an adviser	10

Q7 Is there anything you would improve about today's Options and Choices Event?	
57 Responses	

Details about You

Q8 Are you:			
Male	16	Female	148

Q9 Which age group do you fall in?			
16 - 30 years	5	46 -55 years	57
31 - 45 years	98	56 + years	4

Q10 How old is your youngest child?			
0 - 10 years	7	11 years	35
			120

Appendix E

Observation template

Observation template

Logistics	
Location of event	
Date and time of event	
Duration of event	
Venue	
Number of Jobcentre Plus staff attending	
Number of partners/providers attending – from where?	
Number of lone parents attending the session	
Number of lone parents who failed to attend session	
Are there any additional staff available to speak with lone parents after the event? If so, how many?	
How many lone parents spoke with a member of staff after the event?	

Meet and greet	
Were the lone parents made to feel welcome? How was this achieved?	
Note staff meeting customers at the door, introductions to other lone parents, signs to tell lone parents where to go, refreshments etc.	

Session 1 – Welcome and introductions	
How much time was spent on this session?	
How was the session delivered? Presenter talking/ice breaker activity, Q&A?	
Were the lone parents engaged ? Did the lone parents appear to understand what they were being told?	
Was the purpose of the event clearly set out?	
Did the session meet the objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To formally welcome lone parents to the event and introduce self and other presenters To set the scene and briefly explain the purpose / content / importance of the event. To engage attendees, making them feel comfortable and able to participate. 	
Other comments? Note any interruptions or questions	

Session 2 – The Changes	
How much time was spent on this session?	
How was the session delivered? Presenter talking/ice breaker activity, Q&A?	
Were the lone parents engaged? Did the lone parents appear to understand what they were being told?	
Did the session meet the objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To give attendees an understanding of the changes to Income Support entitlement and how it may affect them 	
Other comments? Note any interruptions or questions	

Session 3 – Why work?	
How much time was spent on this session?	
How was the session delivered?	
Presenter talking/ice breaker activity, Q&A?	
Were the lone parents engaged? Did the lone parents appear to understand what they were being told?	
Did the session meet the objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For lone parents to understand the benefits of working – for themselves and their family and to encourage them to see work as a viable and beneficial alternative to benefit dependency 	
Other comments? Note any interruptions or questions	

Session 4 – The World of Work – employer presentation	
Name of the employer	
Number of staff from the employer	
How much time was spent on this session?	
What topics did the employer cover?	
How was the session delivered? Presenter talking/ice breaker activity, Q&A?	
Did a lone parent who worked for the employer form part of the presentation? If so, what did they talk about? Note use of mentors, flexible working patterns	
Were the lone parents engaged? Did the lone parents appear to understand what they were being told?	
Did the session meet the objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To let lone parents know that local employers understand the commitments that lone parents have and can offer work that is flexible to their needs. • To introduce / facilitate presentations from a local employer representative • To show lone parents that many of the perceived barriers to work can be overcome. 	
Other comments? Note any interruptions or questions	

Session 5 – How Jobcentre Plus and NDLP can help	
How much time was spent on this session?	
How was the session delivered?	
Presenter talking/ice breaker activity, Q&A?	
Were the lone parents engaged? Did the lone parents appear to understand what they were being told?	
<p>Did the session meet the objective: To support previous sessions encouraging lone parents to recognise work as a desirable alternative to benefit dependency and to encourage them to access the support available through Jobcentre Plus and NDLP by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailing the new incentives/services to support the move into work (e.g. In Work Credit/Work Trials/Guaranteed Job Interviews). • Giving a brief overview of other financial incentives/help available • Demonstrating the financial advantages of work by using a Better Off Calculation • Discussing/Promoting access to local learning/training opportunities 	
Other comments? Note any interruptions or questions	

Session 6 – Other presentations	
Name of additional presentations	
How much time was spent on this session?	
How was the session delivered? Presenter talking/ice breaker activity, Q&A?	
Were the lone parents engaged? Did the lone parents appear to understand what they were being told?	
<p>Did the session meet the objective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To make lone parents aware of other support/help/expert advice available 	
Other comments? Note any interruptions or questions	

Session 7 - Confidence Building, Gaining Commitment and Motivation	
How much time was spent on this session?	
How was the session delivered? Presenter talking/ice breaker activity, Q&A?	
Were the lone parents engaged? Did the lone parents appear to understand what they were being told?	
Did the session meet the objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilise Peer support, engage with the attendees already on NDLP (and employed lone parent if available) and facilitate their engaging with one another • Identify perceived barriers to work • Identify any perceived skills gap • Show that many lone parents already demonstrate a range of skills directly transferable to the labour market and that, where they do not, opportunities exist to help them 	
Other comments? Note any interruptions or questions	

Section 8 – review/summarise and Next Steps	
How much time was spent on this session?	
How was the session delivered? Presenter talking/ice breaker activity, Q&A?	
Were the lone parents engaged? Did the lone parents appear to understand what they were being told?	
Did the session meet the objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recap on, and reinforce the key messages of the event • Promote key outcomes (i.e. NDLP) • MUST DO – must again make an offer of a one to one meeting with an adviser NOW – straight after the seminar ... or, if not possible, must offer to book a meeting with an adviser at a time convenient for them. The 1-2-1 will focus completion of an individual action plan and, for those not already on NDLP, agreement to attend an NDLP initial interview. A 1-2-1 with completion of an action plan (even if the customer just agrees to further contact or to attend a NDLP initial interview) and the contact can be treated as a WFI. 	
Other comments? Note any interruptions or questions	

Other issues raised	
Note any further questions raised by lone parents	
Additional observer comments	

Appendix F

Presenter topic guide

Focus group with presenters of Options and Choices Events

Introduction

Introductions and describe how you got involved in the Options and Choices Events and how many events you have delivered so far.

Probe: whether volunteered to get involved

Has anyone any experience of presenting events like these before?

Training received

Describe the training you received to deliver the Options and Choices Events

When was the training?

How long did the training last?

Where was the training held?

Who delivered the training?

Did you find the training useful?

What did you particularly like about the training? What were the key skills you learnt as a result of the training?

What did you particularly dislike about the training?

Was the training tailored to the events, or was it giving you presentation skills training?

Did you feel that the trainers knew enough about the Options and Choices Events to answer your questions?

Do you feel that the training gave you the presentation skills you needed to be able to deliver the event?

How would you improve the training for national roll-out?

Guidance

What did you think of the guidance you received for delivering the Options and Choices Events?

Did you find the guidance easy to understand? If not, what were your questions?

Who was available to answer your questions surrounding the guidance?

The guidance included a section on 'things to think about when setting up events', did this help you in thinking about how the events would run?

The guidance presented a variety of sessions that you were able to choose to deliver. How did you decide which session to include in your event?

The guidance allows you flexibility to think about and deliver the events in the most appropriate way for your area, do you like this, or would you have liked it to be more structured?

Would you have preferred to be given a script to deliver?

Would you have preferred it if the guidance gave you some scripted answers to anticipated questions or problems?

Do you feel that the guidance was clear for you to deliver the Options and Choices Events?

How would you improve the guidance for national roll-out?

Resources

How much time did it take to interpret the guidance?

After the initial guidance interpretation and presentation writing, has the resource involved in the events reduced?

Overall

How well do you feel that the guidance and training prepared you for delivering the Options and Choices Events?

Were there any gaps in your training?

Is there anything you would improve to have prepared you better for delivering Options and Choices Events?

Appendix G

Customer and staff topic guides

Trailblazer Options and Choices Events

Discussions with lone parents and those staff running the Options and Choices Events will be held informally after the event, if the situation allows. We shall not interfere with the process of referral of lone parents to see an LPA if they are available at the event – rather make an informal approach to lone parents who are waiting or able to speak with us after the event. The questions below are therefore meant as a guide for the interviewer rather than a formal topic guide.

Interview with lone parents

Before attending the session

Can you tell me how you found out about the event today?

Why did you decide to attend today?

Did you understand why you were being invited to attend the event today?

The venue

What did you think of the venue today? Was it easy for you to get here?

Do you think the venue was good for this event today?

The information

Have you found today's event useful?

What do you think about the information you have been given today?

Did you understand the information you were given today? Do you have any questions?

Did you feel that the people delivering the event were approachable if you wanted to ask questions?

What do you think of what the employer said today?

As a result of the event

What do you intend to do now? Have any of your future plans changed as a result of this event?

Are you going to speak with some from Jobcentre Plus? Or someone else? What are your next steps?

How do you feel about returning to work?

What do you think of New Deal for Lone Parents that they told you about today?

Is there any information or support you would like to help you return to work?

As explained today, you may not longer be entitled to claim Income Support shortly after your youngest child turns 12 years old. Do you intend to look for work or will you find out what alternatives there are for you? Try to establish if the lone parent intends to start looking for work, or move onto another benefit

Follow up

Are you happy for us to give you a call in a couple of weeks to see how you are getting on?

If so, can you please provide me with your contact details:

Name.....

Home phone number.....

Mobile phone number.....

Interview with staff delivering the Options and Choices Events

How do you feel that the event went today?

What do you feel about the number of people who turned up for the event? Probe if low numbers why this might be or if high numbers if there were too many to handle in one session.

Were there any difficulties that arose today? Probe for lone parents turning up with children, language difficulties, any issues with the venue etc. How were these problems dealt with?

Do you feel that the lone parents understood the messages you were trying to get across today? If

Did you manage to get everyone a one-to-one session with an LPA? Note if participants saw an LPA immediately or an appointment was made for a later date. Did many lone parents not feel the need to see an LPA?

What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the Options and Choices Events?

What impact do you think the Options and Choices Events will have on lone parent activity?

Will you do anything differently in your next event?

Appendix H

Telephone follow-up with attendees topic guide

Trailblazer Options and Choices Events

Telephone follow up topic guide for Options and Choices Event attendees

To be read at the beginning of the interview:

I am calling from a company called GHK who have been commissioned by the Jobcentre Plus to undertake an evaluation of Options and Choices Events. You recently attended an Options and Choices Event, and kindly offered your contact details for us to give you a call and talk to you about the event. Is now a good time to talk with you?

Your conversation with me is confidential and will not impact on your benefits in any way. Any information that we report back to Jobcentre Plus will be anonymous and they will not be able to trace what you said.

Do you remember where and when you attended an Options and Choices Event?
Note differences between Birmingham and London

What did you think of the event that you attended?

Venue

Did you manage to find and get to the venue okay? What was the venue like?
Note if held at an employer location, Children's Centre, Jobcentre Plus office or other location

How did you get to the event? record mode of transport

- If by public transport, was the venue easy to get to, how long did it take and how much did it cost?
- If other means – how far did you travel/how long did it take to get here?

Did you think that the venue was suitable for the event that you attended?

Were you met by anyone when you arrived? Did you feel comfortable arriving at the venue?

Were any refreshments provided at the event? Note if tea/coffee or a lunch/snack

Information and logistics

Who told you about the event? Did you get any written information in advance?

Before you attended the event, did you know what the event was going to be about?

Why did you choose to attend the event? Was there anything in particular that you hoped to find out from attending the event?

What do you think the purpose of the event was? This is testing their understanding of the key messages so probe about changes to Income Support eligibility if necessary

Did you understand the information that was given to you at the event? What key messages did you take from the event?

Was there anything that wasn't covered at the event that you would have liked to have seen included?

Did an employer speak at your event? If so, what did they talk about? Did you find this useful?

Did anyone else talk at your event? What did they talk about? Was it useful? Note: this may be someone who works for the employer or a training provider

Did you feel that the staff delivering the event were approachable if you had any questions? Did you have any questions? If so, were staff able to answer them?

Since the event

Did you speak to a Lone Parent Adviser immediately after the event? If not, would you have liked to?

Have you spoken to a Lone Parent Adviser since attending the event? Was an appointment made for you while you were at the event?

Have you spoken with anyone else about your future since you attended the event? If so, who? Note: this may be training providers, careers advisers, employers, childcare providers

What has happened as a result of speaking with these people? Note if signing up for a training course, put together their CV, started looking for jobs, no impact

Once your entitlement to Income Support changes, do you intend to look for work or will you find out what alternatives there are for you? Try to establish if the lone parent intends to start looking for work, move onto NDLP or onto another benefit

How do you feel about returning to work?

If planning to go into work: Were you planning on returning to work before you attended the event and/or found out about changes Income Support eligibility. If no, why have your future plans changed? Do you know what type of work you would like to do? Are you happy for your children to look after themselves, or will you be using childcare? Note: they may only be happy to take employment that fits in with school hours Do you think that you will be able to find childcare – and which type are you looking for?

What do you think of New Deal for Lone Parents that they told you about at the event? Is this something that appeals to you?

Is there any information or support you would like to help you return to work that you have not been offered?

Future

What actions do you plan to take in the future? Note: follow up on earlier conversations:

If they intend to return to work:

- Are you currently applying for jobs?
- Do you know where to look for jobs?
- Are you confident in your ability to be able to get a job?

If they intend to go to return to training/education:

- Do you know what course you want to do?
- Have you got the necessary information about the course?
- Have you signed up and when does the course start?
- Are you receiving any financial support to be able to undertake the course?

If they are going onto another benefit e.g. Incapacity Benefit:

- Do you know which benefit you intend to claim?
- Do you think you will get a job at some point in the future?
- If so, when? Note if action is related to when their child reaches a particular age, skill needs, confidence etc.

Looking back

Do you think that attending the Options and Choices Event was useful?

What was the most/least useful thing about attending the event?

How do you think that the event could be improved?

Has anything changed as a result of attending the Options and Choices Event? If so, what?

Appendix I

Telephone topic guide for non-attendees

Trailblazer Options and Choices Events

Telephone topic guide for non-attendees

We shall attempt to contact each individual at least three times on different times of the day on different days of the week. If contact cannot be made with an individual after three attempts they will be excluded from the sample.

Those who refused to be booked onto an event

To be read at the beginning of each interview:

I am calling from a company called GHK who have been commissioned by Jobcentre Plus to undertake an evaluation of Options and Choices Events. You were recently offered the opportunity to attend an Options and Choices Event by Jobcentre Plus, but felt that you did not want to attend. Do you mind if I talk to you a little bit about your decision? Your conversation with me is confidential and will not impact on your benefits in any way. Any information that we report back to the Jobcentre Plus will be anonymous and they will not be able to trace what you said.

Awareness of the Options and Choices Event

Do you remember being offered the opportunity to attend an Options and Choices Event? Note that customers may not remember and may need reminding of who will have discussed the event with them – in Birmingham this will be a member of the admin team over the phone, in London it would have been their adviser.

Did you understand what the event was about? If yes, please describe what the event was about.

Did you understand why you were being invited to the event?

Attendance at the event is optional, and you felt that it was not something you wanted to attend, can you tell me why you made that decision?

Any obstacles preventing attendance

Were there any obstacles that stopped you from attending? Note issues of transport, childcare or language

Did you discuss any of these obstacles with the adviser/admin team when they offered you the opportunity to attend an event? If so, did the adviser/admin team offer any support to make it easier for you to attend?

Was the location and time of the event something that stopped you from attending? If so, when and where would you have liked the event to be held?

Improvements to encourage attendance

Is there any information or support that you could have been offered before the event that would have made you want to attend the event?

What could be done to encourage you to attend an event?

Awareness of change in Income Support

Are you aware that you may no longer be entitled to claim Income Support shortly after your youngest child turns 12 years old?

If aware – how did you find out about it? What do you intend to do when this happens? Probe return to work, move onto NDLP or another benefit Do you know how Jobcentre Plus are able to help you?

If not aware – was this information not given to them when they were offered the opportunity to attend an Options and Choices Event? Note, if the lone parent requires more information about this, we will recommend that they get in touch with their Lone Parent Adviser. What impact will the end of Income Support eligibility have on the lone parent? What do they think they will do if their Income Support ends?

Those who failed to turn up to an event they were booked on

To be read at the beginning of each interview:

I am calling from a company called GHK who have been commissioned by Jobcentre Plus to undertake an evaluation of Options and Choices Events. You were recently offered the opportunity to attend an Options and Choices Event by Jobcentre Plus, but did not attend. Do you mind if I talk to you a little bit about this? Your conversation with me is confidential and will not impact on your benefits in any way. Any information that we report back to Jobcentre Plus will be anonymous and they will not be able to trace what you said.

Awareness of the Options and Choices Event

Do you remember being booked onto an Options and Choices Event? Note: in London this will have been done by an adviser, in Birmingham this will have been done by a member of the admin team over the phone.

Did you receive a letter confirming the event and your attendance on it?

Did you understand what the event was to be about? If yes, please describe what the event was about.

Did you understand why you were being invited to the event?

Can you tell me why you did not attend the Options and Choices Event that you were booked on to?

Has a member of Jobcentre Plus been in touch with you to find out why you did not attend? Explain to the customer that they will do so independently of the evaluation – we shall not be sharing any information about their non-attendance with Jobcentre Plus.

Any obstacles preventing attendance

Were there any obstacles that you felt stopped you from attending? Note issues of transport, childcare or language

Did you know in advance if this was going to prevent you from attending? If so, did you discuss this with your adviser at Jobcentre Plus?

Did your adviser offer any support to make it easier for you to attend? Note if they were offered payment for childcare or transport arrangements

Was the location and time of the event something that stopped you from attending? If so, when and where would you have liked the event to be held?

Improvements to encourage attendance

Do you intend to attend an Options and Choices Event in the future? Have you booked onto a future event?

Is there any information or support that you could have been offered before the event that would have made you want to attend the event?

What could be done to encourage you to attend an event?

Awareness of change in Income Support

Are you aware that you may no longer be entitled to claim Income Support shortly after your youngest child turns 12 years old?

If aware – how did you find out about it? What do you intend to do when this happens? Probe return to work, move onto NDLP or another benefit

If not aware – was this information not given to them when they were offered the opportunity to attend an Options and Choices Event? Note, if the lone parent requires more information about this, we will recommend that they get in touch with their Lone Parent Adviser. What impact will the lost of Income Support have on the lone parent?

Appendix J

Follow-up district visit topic guide

Trailblazer Options and Choices Events

Follow-up district visit

During the visit we shall be talking with those who have been closely involved with organising and delivering the events. As the delivery model is different in the two Trailblazer districts, it is not possible to target the topic guides for specific roles, however, the following topics will be covered and questions will be asked of those most appropriate.

Introduction

1. What is the main aim of the Options and Choices Events? What are the key messages you want lone parents to take away from the events?
2. Generally, how do you feel that the events have gone? Is this what you expected?
3. Can you tell me how many events your district has run so far and where they have been held?
4. How have those events been spread geographically across the district? Have the areas been targeted specifically? If so, what were the criteria for choosing those areas? Note: high numbers of lone parents, high levels of deprivation, high number of jobs, other initiatives going on in that area.

Initial set up

5. What difficulties or barriers did you face in setting up the events?

6. Have you noticed any differences in the different venues you have used to deliver events? E.g. Children's Centres, Community Centres, employer premises, Jobcentre Plus offices. Note: more/less attendance rate, more/less engagement from lone parents
7. Since initially recruiting your presenters, have any dropped out or chosen not to deliver any events since you started? If so, what were their reasons for this? Have you had more staff wanting to become involved?
8. When initially inviting lone parents to the events, what reasons do they give if they do not want to attend?
9. What proportion of the lone parents invited to the event are already on NDLP caseload? Do you think that it makes any difference having lone parents already on the NDLP caseload at the event?

Organisation of events

10. What lessons have you learnt about organising the events having now delivered some?
11. Have you made any changes to the way in which events are organised since you started? If so, please describe those changes. Note: changes to who makes initial contact with lone parents, how far in advance lone parents are contacted, what follow up/reminder activity is undertaken and who does it.
12. What prompted you to make those changes? Have the changes made any impact on the success of the events?
13. Do you plan to make any changes to the way in which events are organised in the future? If so, why? Note: move of responsibility from district to local office, long-term delivery plan
14. What impact do you think those changes will have on the deliver and success of the events?

Employer/training provider engagement

15. Have you found it easy or difficult getting employers engaged in delivering the events?
16. How did you identify the initial employers? Probe: worked with them before, identified through Account Managers
17. Did you target specific types of employers? If so, which ones and why?
18. Have you had any smaller employers engaged in delivering events? Any views on how smaller employers could be encouraged to deliver events?
19. What questions or requests have employers made of you before they agree to participate in an event?

20. How did employers react when you suggested holding the event on their premises? What barriers have you faced? Note: lack of available venue, not wanting to have customers on their premises.
21. Have any employers particularly stood out as delivering good presentations at the events? If so, why?
22. Have any employers particularly stood out as delivering bad presentations at the events? If so, why? Was this discussed with the employer during or after the event?
23. What feedback have you received from employers about the events?
24. Have employers signed up to deliver more events? Do you anticipate any difficulties in getting employers engaged in delivering the events in the longer term?
25. Are there any lessons learnt about employer engagement that you would share with other districts when this is rolled out nationally?

Resource and administration

26. Can you describe how much resource has been involved in setting up and running the events? Total numbers of staff including admin/support staff, staff time, costs?
27. Is this level of resource sustainable in the long-term delivery of events? Have resources been diverted from other business areas, if so which areas?
28. How many staff do you have attend each event? Has this increased or decreased with time? Do you see the number of staff at the event changing in the future? If so, why?
29. Do you anticipate that the resource involved in organising and running the events will increase or decrease with time? Why?
30. There is a bit of administration involved with contacting, writing and phoning lone parents, who undertakes all these administrative tasks? Note: central team of DASO, or local admin teams
31. Do you feel that using (LPAs/DASOs) for the initial contact impacts on whether a lone parent attends the event or not? If so, why?

Running of events

32. Describe how an event is planned? For example, how long prior to an event are lone parents contacted, when are lone parents told to arrive, length of presentation, number of staff etc.
33. Is there always someone to meet and greet the lone parents? If so, is this one of the presenters or another member of staff?
34. Have the events that have been run so far gone smoothly? If not, what problems have you faced? Could these problems have been avoided?

35. How do you feel about the number of lone parents who are turning up for each event, is it the numbers that you expected? If not, why do you think this is the case?
36. Do you feel that there is anything that can be done to increase the number of lone parents attending events?
37. What do you consider to be a positive outcome from the event? Note: conversion to NDLP or sharing information about the changes to Income Support?
38. Has the delivery of the events changed in any way since the first ones were run?
39. What lessons have you learnt from the first few events that could be shared with others?

One-to-ones and after the events

40. How have you organised the one-to-one interviews at the events? Note: if separate space made available, if staff integrate with lone parents.
41. What is covered during a one-to-one? Note: how long they last, what paperwork is undertaken, how initial NDLP interviews are organised (clerical appointments or over the phone).
42. Are customers aware their next WFI could be waived if they attend a one-to-one? How do they feel about this?
43. How soon after the event are interviews available at the local office?
44. What monitoring of events are you undertaking? How are you accessing the figures? Who has responsibility for collation of statistics? How frequently are you updating LMS with event details? Any difficulties using the Opportunity Types' on LMS ?

Finally

45. What do you feel are the key factors ensuring the successful delivery of an event?
46. Is there any good practise that you feel could be shared with other districts running group events?
47. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about that we have not yet discussed today in relation to the Options and Choices Events?

Many thanks for your time today and your support with the evaluation