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The Lone Parents Pilots: A qualitative evaluation of Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (12+), Work Search Premium and In Work Credit.

Kathryn Ray, Sandra Vegeris, Sheere Brooks, Verity Campbell-Barr, Lesley Hoggart, Karen Mackinnon and Isabel Shutes

Policy Studies Institute, University of Westminster

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Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 423

The Lone Parents Pilots: A qualitative evaluation of Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (12+), Work Search Premium and In Work Credit

**Kathryn Ray, Sandra Vegeris, Sheere Brooks, Verity Campbell-Barr,
Lesley Hoggart, Karen Mackinnon and Isabel Shutes**

A report of research carried out by the Policy Studies Institute on behalf of the
Department for Work and Pensions

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Abbreviations

ADF	Advisers' Discretionary Fund
BOC	Better Off Calculation
DIM	District Implementation Manager
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
EITC	Earned Income Tax Credit
ESC	Extended Schools Childcare pilot
EZ	Employment Zone
HB	Housing Benefit
IB	Incapacity Benefit
IS	Income Support
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
IWC	In Work Credit
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
ND+fLP	New Deal Plus for Lone Parents
PSI	Policy Studies Institute
QWFI (12+)	Quarterly Work Focused Interview (in ESC pilot areas for lone parents with a youngest child 12 years or older)
RTWC	Return to Work Credit
SSP	Self-Sufficiency Project
WFI	Work Focused Interview
WFTC	Working Families Tax Credit
WSP	Work Search Premium
WTC	Working Tax Credit

Summary

Background

During 2004, three pilots: Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (QWFIs (12+)), Work Search Premium (WSP) and In Work Credit (IWC), were introduced in selected Jobcentre Plus districts. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) to conduct a qualitative evaluation of these three pilots. The qualitative research constitutes one strand in a broader evaluation programme, which also includes an impact analysis¹ and an analysis of pilot administrative data. This report presents the findings from the qualitative evaluation.

Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (12+)

QWFIs (12+) are an expansion of existing Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) for lone parents, introduced nationally in April 2001 via phased roll out. The pilot QWFIs (12+) are mandatory for lone parents (in pilot areas) with a youngest child aged 12 or older and entail an interview with a Jobcentre Plus adviser at quarterly intervals. They operate in local authorities in which an Extended Schools Childcare (ESC) pilot is also operating.

Work Search Premium

Work Search Premium is available to lone parents who have been on benefits (Income Support (IS) or Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)) for 12 months or more. It includes a payment of £20 per week for a maximum of 26 weeks in exchange for undertaking structured job search activities. Receipt of WSP is at the discretion of a lone parent adviser with whom participants discuss their job search activity on a fortnightly basis.

¹ For more information please refer to Brewer, M (2007), *The lone parent pilots after 12 to 24 months: an impact assessment of In Work Credit, Work Search Premium, Extended Schools Childcare, Quarterly Work Focused Interviews and New Deal Plus for Lone Parents* DWP Research Report 415.

In Work Credit

The In Work Credit pilot consists of a payment to lone parents who enter work of at least 16 hours per week, of £40 per week, for up to 12 months. To be eligible, lone parents must have been in receipt of benefits (IS or JSA) for 12 months or more. Payments stop if the individual leaves work for more than five weeks.

The qualitative evaluation

The objectives of the qualitative evaluation are:

- to explore the circumstances and backgrounds of participants, reflecting the range of lone parents who participate in the pilots;
- to assess the impact of the pilots on the attitudes, motivations and actions of participating lone parents; and
- to investigate the delivery of the pilots, considering the effectiveness of their delivery, how the pilots achieve any impacts, and how they might be made more effective.

Research methods

The fieldwork for the qualitative evaluation covered six Jobcentre Plus districts, selected to represent different pilot combinations. The research was carried out in three stages:

Stage One entailed a review of the relevant literature in order to put the findings of the evaluation in context.

Stage Two explored pilot delivery. The research methods consisted of telephone interviews with District Implementation Managers (DIMs), familiarisation visits to the districts, and focus groups with advisory staff.

Stage Three explored lone parents' experiences of the pilots. Methods entailed in-depth face-to-face interviews with 70 lone parent participants. A sub-group of 40 participants were then contacted for a follow-up telephone interview, 3-4 months later, to gain a longitudinal perspective on their experiences.

Research findings

Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (12+)

Advisory staff had mixed views about the QWFI (12+) pilot. They thought that more regular meetings could be useful for building rapport with customers, and they welcomed the opportunity to work with lone parents whose children were aged 12 and over, well before their eligibility for IS ended. However, it was felt that the mandatory schedule of quarterly meetings was too inflexible and they would have

liked to have had more say in deferring meetings for customers who they felt were unable or unwilling to work in the foreseeable future. (Section 3.1)

Lone parents' experiences of QWFIs (12+) were diverse, with the meetings described differing in content and length. Customers' attitudes differed for those who had subsequently entered work, who were mostly positive, and those who had not, who were more negative. Those who were positive valued both the practical and emotional support from advisers. They often welcomed meetings where advisers took a 'holistic' view of them as a person and took the time to get to know them. Those who were negative tended to be less receptive towards the idea of working and/or to have more severe barriers to work. Nonetheless, the majority expressed a desire to work and many of these respondents felt that their needs were not addressed. (Section 3.2.2)

Customer perceptions of the impact of QWFIs (12+) varied. Those with positive experiences and outcomes often said that the QWFI (12+) came at 'the right time' for them, usually due to children becoming older and more independent. Accordingly, QWFIs (12+) were felt to have had little impact on receptiveness to work, but had helped in signposting to work preparation. They also gave a 'push' to some that had started to think about work but had not yet started work preparation. Those who had not entered work did not generally feel that the meetings had changed their opinions about work or helped them move closer to the labour market, although a small number felt that the QWFIs (12+) had increased their confidence. In one case the nature of the meetings changed over time and became more helpful, suggesting that the schedule of regular meetings does have the potential to become more productive over time. (Section 3.2.3)

The interviews with both advisers and lone parents concur that the QWFI (12+) experience was most successful for those lone parents who were already, or were becoming, receptive to work. While advisers felt that there was a group of more challenging lone parents whom they could not help, some lone parents in this category expressed a desire to work, albeit with the right support. It did not appear that the QWFIs (12+) were currently meeting the needs of these customers. (Section 3.3.)

Work Search Premium

Staff gave the WSP pilot a lukewarm response. It was felt that regular meetings could help to build rapport and provide a potential incentive to look for work more actively. However, many felt uncomfortable introducing a mandatory element into their work with lone parents. This attitude, combined with the heavy administrative load associated with the pilot, resulted in advisers offering the pilot selectively, only to customers who they perceived to be serious about looking for work. (Section 4.1)

All the lone parent WSP participants said that they had made the decision to look for work prior to finding out about WSP, and some were already actively job searching. (Section 4.2.1) The £20 payments were welcomed by participants and used either

for day-to-day expenses or job search costs. Most attended fortnightly meetings with an adviser and kept a written record of their job search activities. The majority were happy with this regime and felt that it lent structure to their job search activities. (Section 4.2.2)

Those who left WSP before their eligibility ended did so due to changed personal circumstances, although in some cases there was dissatisfaction with meetings and they became disengaged from Jobcentre Plus. Those who exhausted their payments without finding work tended to have spent a longer time out of work or to have more complicated work requirements. They mostly continued looking for work, although some had lost momentum after becoming demoralised, and some had taken the decision to retrain. (Section 4.2.2)

None of the participants felt that WSP had impacted on their commitment to look for work, since most were already looking for work previously. However, some felt that the schedule of regular meetings impacted on the intensity of their job search, by keeping up the momentum. Both the regular adviser meetings and the £20 payments were felt to enhance their job prospects. (Section 4.2.3)

While advisers were negative or ambivalent about the WSP pilot, the majority of lone parent participants were more positive. However, given that participants were already searching for work before enrolling on the pilot, it is difficult to assess whether WSP might act as an incentive for those undecided about work preparation. Findings from staff and customers suggest adviser selectivity in marketing the pilot, which might be unduly restricting the pilot to those who are already actively job searching. (Section 4.3)

In Work Credit

IWC was overwhelmingly welcomed by staff who felt that it was a powerful work incentive, particularly for lone parents who were undecided about work. Staff were generally optimistic that customers would remain in work after the payments ended. (Section 5.1)

The majority of lone parent recipients were not aware of IWC before securing work, or found out when they were already searching for work. (Section 5.2.1) The majority reported no problems with the administration of the payments. There was little in-work contact with advisers whilst lone parents were in receipt of IWC. (Section 5.2.2)

Lone parents were unanimously positive about the payments and spent them primarily on day-to-day living expenses. The amount and frequency of payments was welcomed, particularly the weekly schedule. The payments were more important to those who were in debt, had high childcare, housing or transport costs, or those with low and/or unreliable incomes. Some had plans in place for improving their earnings after payments ended, although only a small number had 'advanced' in the time they had been in work. (Section 5.2.2)

Where respondents left work (either prior to or after the 12 month period of IWC), this was primarily due to difficulties reconciling employment with childcare responsibilities or problems relating to the work itself (e.g. redundancy). Those who stayed in work after IWC ended often said that they had to 'juggle' their finances more carefully. Only a few were more severely affected, mainly because they had very low pay or their wages were unreliable, but none had dropped out of work for this reason. (Section 5.2.2)

Lone parents felt that IWC alone had little impact on their work-related decisions. None felt that it acted as an incentive for them to enter work, although some spoke of IWC as an important part of a broader package of financial help that made work seem more feasible. None felt that IWC alone kept them in work, although the vast majority felt that it had made a difference to their financial wellbeing whilst in work. To this extent it reinforced their positive assessment of a working lifestyle. (Section 5.2.3)

Both staff and lone parents concurred that IWC was a useful addition to the financial package which eased lone parents' transition from benefits into work. However, while staff saw it as a powerful incentive, lone parents, by and large, did not. The majority of participants only found out about IWC when they were already committed to finding work, therefore it is difficult to judge its potential incentive effect. (Section 5.3)

Lone parent work journeys

Lone parents' work journeys are divided into three phases: work receptivity, work preparation and in-work journeys, which provides a framework for understanding their interactions with the pilots and their outcomes. Lone parents brought to the pilots a variety of backgrounds, personal and family circumstances, and orientations to paid work and to caring, which affected the way they experienced and responded to the pilots. (Section 6.2)

Work receptivity is a process whereby lone parents start to consider paid work as an option and become receptive to the idea. It can be a lengthy and protracted process and some may need a considerable amount of help and support. Lone parents who were unreceptive to work had concerns about childcare or about the financial feasibility of work, while those who were ambivalent found that life events, combined with lack of confidence, conspired to prevent them from taking 'the first step'. (Section 6.3)

Respondents took different routes through work preparation, utilising Jobcentre Plus support through New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP), external training providers or independent means of job search. Those who had been out of work for longer particularly valued confidence building courses. Some respondents benefited from training providers who offered paid work placements. (Section 6.4)

The work transition period could be difficult and respondents spoke of financial adjustments as well as changes to family routines. Most managed financially, while those in more difficulty had debts or high childcare costs and low wages. Most were overwhelmingly positive about being in work, citing social and emotional benefits, as well as financial. (Section 6.5.1)

In-work journeys followed one of three trajectories: steady, advanced or broken. Those who advanced tended to be in better paid work or to have a supportive employer with internal opportunities for career advancement. Broken work journeys were caused by job factors, such as redundancy, or difficulties reconciling work with childcare. (Section 6.5.2)

Pilot impacts on journey stages

Work receptivity

None of the three pilots were thought to have a great impact on work receptivity. The QWFI (12+) pilot has the most potential to impact here because it captures lone parents at a time when they are undecided or averse to working. However, most of those who had a positive outcome from the QWFIs (12+) maintained that it had come at 'the right time' for them, when they were already thinking about work. Nonetheless it did give some respondents an additional 'push' into work preparation. There was also (more limited) evidence that regular meetings over time might alter receptivity to work. At present, however, QWFIs (12+) were not effectively engaging with those who were unreceptive to and/or had more challenging barriers to work. (Section 7.1.1) Neither WSP or IWC were felt by lone parent respondents to impact on their motivation to work, however, the respondents in the study were mostly already committed to work when they found out about the pilots. Advisers, on the other hand, did feel that IWC could impact on the receptiveness of those who were currently undecided about work. (Section 7.1.2)

Work preparation

Both the QWFI (12+) and WSP pilots were an effective aid to work preparation. The QWFIs (12+) signposted those who were work receptive on to appropriate services for support, either NDLP or external providers. This is likely to have expedited participants' movement into work. Given that all WSP participants were already job searching or about to start, they did not feel that WSP fundamentally changed their job-search behaviour, but many felt it helped to sustain the momentum and support their job-search routine (alongside NDLP services). (Section 7.2)

In-Work

The only pilot to have a potential effect on the in-work phase is In Work Credit. Participants rarely felt that IWC was the primary factor keeping them in work, but the vast majority did feel that the extra cash helped to make work more manageable for them. It reinforced their wellbeing and as a consequence of this may have

reinforced their work motivation and work identity. Aside from the initial few months in work, however, when financial support was crucial to managing the transition from benefits to a wage, it was primarily factors other than finances which impacted on work retention, namely employment issues (temporary contracts, redundancies) and reconciling childcare with work hours. In-work advisory support from Jobcentre Plus, as well as more partnership working between Jobcentre Plus and employers to enhance the 'family friendliness' of work, may have helped this. (Section 7.3)

Recommendations

- It is recommended that adviser capacity for effectively engaging with and supporting those customers 'further' from the labour market, with more complex support needs, is a priority since these lone parents do not appear to benefit from current provision. This could include enhancing the training given to advisers and ensuring that it is ongoing and combined with support mechanisms, such as case conferencing and sharing best practice, to help ensure techniques learned are put into practice.
- In addition to staff training and support mechanisms, it may be necessary to rethink the incentive structures for advisers, in order to ensure that there is effective engagement with lone parents who have more challenging circumstances, and to address current problems of adviser selectivity for the easier-to-help cases.
- Additional administrative support would help alleviate the extra paperwork associated with both the WSP and IWC pilots and combined with other factors (such as training and support) this could encourage advisers to offer WSP less selectively.
- Further development of partnership working between Jobcentre Plus and outside agencies would be useful to expand the support options available for lone parents – to address both work and non-work related needs.
- Better Off Calculations (BOCs) could be offered more consistently, including prior to obtaining a job (e.g. during WFLs and QWFLs (12+)) to alter perceptions about the financial advantages of working and to assist better targeting of job search.
- Greater in-work support from Jobcentre Plus advisers might be helpful in some cases, alongside better signposting to other providers for specialist help, e.g., debt management. One suggestion for in-work contact would be for advisers to contact lone parents to discuss financial and other options, if desired, around the time of the last IWC payment.
- It may be useful to review the duration of any future in-work incentive programmes to better target the earlier in-work phase and to review the incentive amount and the eligibility criteria to better target those in most need. A phased removal of in-work financial help might ease the effects of reduced income caused by payments ending.

- Employers need to take on more responsibility for making work manageable for lone parents. Jobcentre Plus could help in this process by working with employers, and also by making sure that lone parents in work are aware of their employment rights.

1 Introduction

During 2004, three pilots: Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (QWFIs (12+)), Work Search Premium (WSP) and In Work Credit (IWC), were introduced in selected Jobcentre Plus districts with the aim of enhancing the labour market participation of lone parents and partners of benefit recipients. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) to conduct a qualitative evaluation of these three pilots for lone parent participants.² The qualitative research constitutes one strand in a broader evaluation programme, which also includes an impact analysis and an analysis of pilot administrative data. This report presents the findings from the qualitative evaluation.

1.1 The pilots

The three pilots have been delivered in conjunction with other initiatives designed to help lone parents move into and sustain paid employment. Within Jobcentre Plus, the principal initiative has been the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP), which was introduced in 1998, offering personal adviser support to lone parents who are interested in entering paid work. Revisions to NDLP are currently being piloted as New Deal Plus for Lone Parents (ND+fLP).³ Outside of Jobcentre Plus other initiatives have included wage supplementation through in-work Tax Credits, to help make work more financially viable, and initiatives to improve the availability of childcare, e.g. Sure Start and the National Childcare Strategy.

² Whilst partners of benefit recipients are eligible for two of these pilots (QWFI (12+) and IWC) the evaluation was restricted to lone parent participants.

³ The qualitative evaluation of ND+fLP is completed and the report is forthcoming.

1.1.1 Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (12+)

QWFIs (12+) are an expansion of the existing Work Focused Interview (WFI) framework. It is important to view the pilot QWFIs (12+) within the context of this framework, since the majority of participants in the pilots will already have had experience of a WFI. WFIs for lone parents claiming Income Support (IS) were introduced nationally in April 2001 via a phased roll-out, depending on the age of the youngest child. They entail a compulsory interview with a personal adviser and are intended to promote the benefits of paid employment, as well as encouraging participation in NDLP as a route into work. In October 2005, mandatory WFIs at quarterly intervals were introduced nationally for lone parents on IS with children aged 14 and over.⁴

The pilot QWFIs (12+) are mandatory for lone parents (in pilot areas) with a youngest child aged 12 or older and entail an interview with a Jobcentre Plus adviser at quarterly intervals. They were introduced in October 2004 in local authorities in which an Extended Schools Childcare (ESC) pilot was also operating⁵, and are due to end in April 2007.

1.1.2 Work Search Premium

The Work Search Premium pilot is available to lone parents in participating districts who have been on benefits (IS or Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) or a combination of the two) for 12 months or more and who agree to join NDLP. Participants receive a payment of £20 per week, for a maximum of 26 weeks, in exchange for undertaking structured job search activities. This includes agreeing an Action Plan and meeting fortnightly with an adviser to discuss progress. Receipt of WSP is reliant on participants supplying evidence of their job search, the judgement of which is left to the discretion of the adviser.

WSP was introduced in selected Jobcentre Plus districts in October 2004. The pilot continues in districts that are trialling ND+fLP, but ended in other districts in September 2006.

1.1.3 In Work Credit

IWC participants receive a £40 weekly payment on entering work of at least 16 hours a week, for up to 12 months. To be eligible, participants must have been in receipt of benefits for at least 12 months. Payments stop if the individual leaves work, reduces their work hours to below 16 a week, or fails to supply proof of work hours. IWC is offered in 22 Jobcentre Plus districts (eight of which are also offering WSP). It was first introduced in three pilot districts in April 2004 and then extended to additional districts in October 2004 and October 2005. In April 2005, the pilot

⁴ Findings from this study can inform the national QWFI initiative.

⁵ The Extended Schools Childcare pilots are intended to improve the availability of affordable childcare for working parents. They are being evaluated separately, see: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/RRP/u014264/index.shtml>

was extended to parents in all workless households in London Jobcentre Plus districts.

1.2 Qualitative evaluation design

Qualitative evaluation, like other forms of evaluation in social research, aims to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a programme or policy. Using primarily textual forms of data, qualitative evaluation aims to deepen understanding as to why programmes or policies have the effects that they do. In order to achieve this, qualitative evaluations often encompass the following elements (see Swanson and Chapman, 1994):

- **An understanding of policy as a process**

Qualitative evaluations aim to explore and describe the multiple social processes that make up a policy or programme and customers' interactions with it, including paying attention to possible variations across time and place (e.g., across different sites where the policy/programme is offered).

- **Capturing diversity**

It aims to capture the understandings, interpretations and perspectives of the different stakeholders to the policy or programme, for example the staff who deliver the programme and the customers at whom it is targeted. It is particularly attuned to capturing tensions and contradictions amongst these perspectives, which may affect how the programme/policy is delivered or received.

Qualitative research does not attempt to be generalisable to, nor representative of, a broader population, rather it aims to capture diversity and variation within the population in order to explore a variety of possible processes and outcomes. Qualitative methodologies often incorporate purposive sampling techniques to achieve this.

- **Understanding social behaviour**

There is a focus on understanding social behaviour and its varied influences, to shed light on whether and how the programme/policy influences behaviour, including multiple or unanticipated outcomes.

In sum, qualitative evaluation is a form of systematic social inquiry, capturing the uniqueness of the context through multiple perspectives. It attempts to identify the intricacies of social reality and thus the complexity of social interventions. To these ends, qualitative evaluation is a powerful tool for informing the details of policy.

1.2.1 Objectives

The principal objectives of the study were:

- to explore the circumstances and backgrounds of the lone parent participants;
- to assess the impact of the pilots on the attitudes, motivations and actions of these participants; and

- to investigate the delivery of the pilots, considering the effectiveness of delivery and how the pilots achieve any impacts.

1.2.2 Study design

The study was designed to capture the perspectives of both Jobcentre Plus staff and lone parent participants. The research design also incorporates a longitudinal element, tracking participant trajectories over time. The fieldwork for the qualitative evaluation covered six Jobcentre Plus districts, purposively selected to represent different pilot combinations and different geographical regions. (The pilot combinations in the case study districts are shown in Table A.1 in Appendix A.) This design enabled an examination of possible differences between the contexts in which the pilots are delivered.

The research was carried out in three stages:

- **Stage One** entailed a review of the relevant literature in order to put the findings of the evaluation in context. The review covered the policy context; the factors affecting lone parents' work entry and retention; and evidence on 'what works' in terms of encouraging lone parents' movement into sustainable employment. The latter specifically focused on evidence relevant to the pilot initiatives, ie adviser support (before and after entering work) and financial supplements and incentives.
- **Stage Two** of the research was conducted between June and November 2005 and explored pilot delivery, concentrating on the ways in which the pilots were implemented within the sampled districts. It investigated Jobcentre Plus staff perspectives on the implementation and operation of the pilots, pilot uptake, and how well the pilots met the needs of their customers. The research methods consisted of telephone interviews with District Implementation Managers (DIMs), familiarisation visits to the districts, and focus groups with advisory staff.
- **Stage Three** was conducted between February and September 2006⁶ and explored lone parents' experiences of the pilots and their perceptions of how the pilots have impacted upon their lives. Methods entailed in-depth face-to-face interviews with 70 lone parent participants, asking them to describe their experiences and to reflect on their decision-making processes, choices and trade-offs, as well as asking them to speculate about different policy scenarios. A sub-group of 40 participants were then contacted for a follow-up telephone interview, which took place approximately three to four months after the initial interview. This was in order to gain a longitudinal perspective on participant

⁶ Given that the research with staff and with lone parent customers was undertaken at different points in time, some caution should be exercised in directly comparing their experiences and views. Since the staff research was undertaken earlier, pilot delivery may have changed in the intervening period due to pilots bedding down and district efforts at improving delivery

experiences and perceptions of the pilots and any impacts at a later point in time, including after their participation in the pilots had ended.

1.2.3 Sampling

Lone parent participants were purposively sampled to capture diversity in experiences of the different pilot combinations. A range of possible combinations were identified for sampling based on administrative data about pilot take-up. Table A.2 in Appendix A provides a breakdown of the number of respondents interviewed in each of the sample groups.

The sampling frame also allowed the study to capture variation in the length of time since lone parents first entered the pilots, which facilitated exploration of a range of lone parent journeys into work and through work. Table A.3 in Appendix A documents this variation, showing the duration of time between entering the pilot and the last research interview.

Participants were sampled across the five pilot groups and by district, and then purposively selected to ensure that a range of personal and family characteristics were represented, such as age, gender, ethnicity, number of children and age of youngest child. Table A.4 in Appendix A reports the personal characteristics of the respondents in the sample.

Further details about the content of the interviews and the analysis are provided in Appendix B. A sample research instrument is also included in Appendix C.⁷

1.3 Structure of the report

Chapter Two: Literature review: Lone parents, work entry and work retention

This chapter reviews the existing literature on the factors that shape work entry and work retention for lone parents, including relevant previous evaluation evidence. It identifies any gaps in the existing evidence base that this study can help to address.

Chapter Three: Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (12+)

Chapter three reports staff and participants' experiences and views of the QWFI (12+) pilot, including perceptions of its impact. Staff and lone parents' views are compared, as are those of participants who subsequently entered work and those who did not.

⁷ Only the topic guide for the face-to-face lone parent interviews is included in the appendix, for illustrative purposes. Readers may contact the authors for information about other topic guides used in the evaluation.

Chapter Four: Work Search Premium

This chapter reports staff and participants' experiences and views of the WSP pilot, including perceptions of its impact. Staff and lone parents' views are compared, as are the experiences of those who subsequently entered work and those who did not.

Chapter Five: In Work Credit

Chapter five reports staff and participants' experiences and views of the IWC pilot, including perceptions of its impact. Staff and lone parents' views are compared, as are the experiences of those who entered IWC via different routes (e.g. from QWFI (12+) or WSP or straight to IWC) and those with different trajectories through the pilot (i.e. those who left before the end of their eligibility and those who exhausted their eligibility).

Chapter Six: Lone parent work journeys

This chapter examines the journeys taken by lone parents from becoming receptive to work, to preparing for work, to their in-work journeys. The factors that shape these journeys are also explored.

Chapter Seven: Discussion and recommendations

Finally chapter seven assesses how the pilots impacted on lone parents at different stages of their work journeys, and considers which types of customers the pilots worked best for. Recommendations for future policy in this area are also proposed.

2 Lone parents, work entry and work retention: a literature review

Summary

- The three pilots being evaluated in this study offer different combinations of one-to-one adviser support and financial incentives to search for, enter, and remain in work. This chapter considers what is already known about the factors that affect lone parents' work entry and work retention and the existing evidence on what helps.
- To help move lone parents into paid work, a series of initiatives have been introduced by the Government, including tax and benefit reforms to help 'make work pay', employment legislation to support working parents, increases in the availability of childcare for working parents, and the introduction of active case management into the welfare system.
- There are a number of factors associated with lone parents' participation in paid work including demographic factors, human capital and wellbeing factors. The availability and affordability of childcare is particularly important for lone parents. Research also suggests the importance of varied and dynamic orientations to work and care in shaping work participation.
- A significant body of research has examined what can help lone parents make a successful transition into work. Evidence on adviser support through New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) concludes that while these programmes have been helpful in moving significant numbers of lone parents into work, they have been less effective in engaging those who need more intensive support to help them move closer to the labour market.

- Evidence on the role of financial incentives is largely inconclusive. While there is evidence of an incentive effect on work entry, some studies also show that work retention is short-lived and others that financial supplements can have a depressing effect on wages.
- The existing evidence on work retention is limited. Preliminary findings suggest a combination of financial support and other kinds of support (for combining work and childcare and for work advancement) may be helpful.
- This qualitative study of the three pilots, which combine different elements of support, and are targeted at different points in the work entry and retention process, can contribute to what is known on these issues.

2.1 Introduction

The three pilots being evaluated in this study form part of the Government's strategy aimed at increasing employment amongst lone parents. They offer different combinations of one-to-one adviser support and financial incentives to search for, enter, and remain in work. This chapter considers what is already known about the factors that affect lone parents' work entry and work retention and the existing evidence on what helps. It begins with a discussion of the difficulties and constraints non-working lone parents face when considering paid employment and what may help improve their employment participation, including adviser support and financial incentives (relevant to all three of the pilots in this evaluation). It then considers the evidence on work retention, which is particularly relevant to the In Work Credit (IWC) pilot which is designed to help lone parents retain work.

2.2 Policy background

The promotion of labour force participation for lone parents is an important aspect of the broader 'welfare to work' focus in contemporary welfare policy and forms a central plank in the Government's agenda to tackle child poverty. The Government has set a target of 70 per cent of all lone parents being in work by 2010, and this is intended to contribute to the longer term goal of eliminating child poverty in Britain by 2020.⁸ The proportion of lone parents in work currently stands at approximately 57 per cent (LFS, 2006), an increase of 11 percentage points compared to the 1997 rate. This means that the Government has made significant progress to achieving its 2010 target for lone parent employment. However, the gap between lone parent employment rates and those of partnered mothers remains large (LFS, 2006).

⁸ A recent review of policy has suggested that Jobcentre Plus needs to focus more squarely on the needs of all parents (not just lone parents), in light of the fact that nearly half of all children in poverty now live in families where one adult is in work (Harker, 2006).

To help move lone parents into paid work, a series of initiatives have been introduced by the Government, which fall into four types:

- Tax and benefit reforms to help 'make work pay', such as the introduction of in-work tax credits. Working Families' Tax Credit (WFTC) was introduced in 1999 and supplanted by Working Tax Credit (WTC) and Child Tax Credit in 2003. It is estimated that more than three-quarters of lone parents who enter work receive WTC (Marsh and Vegeris, 2004).
- Employment legislation to help make work pay and to support working parents, such as the National Minimum Wage, extensions to maternity and paternity leave and the encouragement of flexible working;⁹
- Increasing the availability of childcare for working parents through the National Childcare Strategy, first set out in the 1998 Green paper *Meeting the Childcare Challenge*, which pledged to increase quality, affordability and accessibility;
- The introduction of programmes and services introducing active case management into the welfare system. The New Deal for Lone Parents, introduced in 1998 on a voluntary basis, offers work preparation support through a personal adviser. In 2001, a mandatory programme of Work Focused Interviews, intended to draw more lone parents towards employment related services, was also introduced.¹⁰ The two schemes operate in tandem through Jobcentre Plus. The three pilots being evaluated in this study represent extensions of this approach.

2.3 Constraints on engaging in paid work

There are a number of factors associated with lone parents' participation in paid work – and conversely with non-participation – which include demographic factors (number and ages of children), human capital (previous work history and qualifications) and wellbeing factors (health, deprivation) (Evans *et al.*, 2004; Millar and Ridge, 2001). In addition, though rarely mentioned in quantitative studies, attitudes to

⁹ The right to request a change in working hours to work more flexibly, for example, came into effect in April 2003 as part of the 2002 Employment Act. The right to parental leave was introduced earlier (1999) as part of the Maternity and Parental Leave Regulations. Research, however, indicates low levels of awareness and take-up of these rights ((Dex and Smith, 2001a and 2001b; Wattis *et al.*, 2006). The Government is now encouraging employer responsibility for providing flexible work practices and encouraging partnership working amongst Jobcentre Plus, employers and local authorities to supply a greater diversity of support to move more lone parents into work (National Employment Panel, 2006).

¹⁰ Mandatory WFIs were introduced firstly to lone parents on IS with a youngest child aged 13-15, then over successive years to all lone parents in receipt of out-of-work benefits.

work and care are also important factors which interact with socio-economic and demographic circumstances (Bell *et al.*, 2005; Graham *et al.*, 2005; Hoggart *et al.*, 2006).¹¹

The most common deterrent to employment cited by lone parents is their caring responsibilities and the inadequacy of childcare, in terms of availability, cost or suitability. Surveys have shown that between a quarter and a third of lone parents on Income Support (IS) say that they are deterred from entering work by the potential cost of childcare and typically another one in ten say they doubt that childcare of sufficient quality and convenience could be found locally (Kasparova *et al.*, 2003). Demand for childcare is difficult to assess, however, and does not remain static. A national survey of parents in 2001 found that 24 percent of the parents surveyed had some unmet demand for childcare in the last year and that lone parents were more likely to have unmet demand than couples (Woodland *et al.*, 2002).

The National Childcare Strategy has increased provision in recent years, with about half a million new out-of-school places provided since 1997. The Daycare Trust reported in 2003 that childcare provision had gone from one childcare place for every seven children under eight years, in 2001, to one for every five in 2003.¹² It has also been a longstanding finding in Britain, however, that many mothers prefer informal to formal childcare, that is relatives and friends rather than nurseries or out-of-school clubs (Woodland *et al.*, 2002). Lone parents, in particular, tend to prefer informal childcare whenever it is practical (Bell *et al.*, 2005). This is also true for some ethnic minority families (Daycare Trust, 2003).

Reuben Ford's (1996) benchmark study showed that calculations about the cost and availability of childcare were rarely parents' only concerns. They were one among other considerations, that included their fears about the quality of their working lives and the balance of its rewards both for themselves and for their children. A number of studies have focused on parents attitudes to work and how these combine with their attitudes and orientations towards their caring responsibilities to children. These studies have shown that social and cultural understandings of how to combine work and care, and of what it means to be a 'good mother', produce different orientations to work and care, which may vary by class, ethnicity and locality (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Bell *et al.*, 2005; Hoggart *et al.*, 2006). These studies also suggest variation in orientations to work and care among the lone parent population, for example while many lone parents prioritise spending time with their children which limits their paid work participation, others in similar circumstances may hold the view that paid work participation is an important element of parenting.

¹¹ Recent research from the National Centre for Social Research has recommended that quantitative surveys on lone parents' decision making about work include attitudinal measures on employment and caring in order to establish an intention to work (see Collins *et al.*, 2006).

¹² <http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk/article.php?sid=160> (accessed 06.12.2006).

Analyses of orientations to work and care also suggest that these are dynamic and can vary across the lifecourse, as well as in response to behavioural change (such as entering and exiting work) (Crompton and Harris, 1998; Bell *et al.*, 2005; Ford and Millar, 1998; Himmelweit and Sigala, 2004; Hoggart *et al.*, 2006). The age of children is especially significant in determining lone parents' labour market participation. This suggests that non-work participation may be a temporary state for many lone parents, and that many settle into paid work as their children enter secondary school (Iacovou and Berthoud, 2000). The QWFI (12+) pilot targets lone parents with children in this age group.

2.4 Helping employment participation

A significant body of research has examined what can help lone parents make a successful transition into work. A synthesis of evaluation research of the NDLP programme concluded that it has largely been successful in achieving its aims, with employment entry roughly doubled for those who take part in the programme, while participation also significantly increased benefit awareness and understanding of tax credits (Evans *et al.*, 2002; Evans *et al.*, 2003). A number of studies have also identified particular elements of the New Deal, including Better Off Calculations (BOCs), training provision and job search activities, as playing a significant role in promoting positive work outcomes. Jobcentre Plus personal advisers, using a case management approach, also contribute positively to lone parent work outcomes (Hales *et al.*, 2000, Lewis *et al.*, 2000).

Building on the success of the New Deal, mandatory Work Focused Interviews for lone parents (previously Personal Adviser Meetings) were phased in from 2001. This policy intervention represented a more proactive stance on the part of Jobcentre Plus towards lone parents and work, by requiring lone parents to attend a Jobcentre Plus meeting at regular intervals to discuss work options. The WFI regime has been credited with increasing participation in NDLP (Thomas and Jones, 2006).

However, the research on both WFIs and NDLP suggests that they are most helpful for those lone parents with the greatest work readiness but are less effective in engaging those who need more intensive support to help them move closer to the labour market (Evans *et al.*, 2003; Thomas and Jones, 2003). From the customer perspective, research suggests that lone parents who are not interested in work view WFIs as unhelpful and/or feel that meetings are at an inappropriate time in their lives (Davies *et al.*, 2004). Thus as more and more 'job ready' lone parents enter work, it seems likely that Jobcentre Plus services will increasingly be left to deal with individuals who are 'harder to help' and further from the labour market. The strategy to move these lone parents into work is likely to require more intensive case management. The introduction of the QWFI (12+) pilot is oriented towards this group of customers.

2.4.1 Wage supplementation and work incentives

Two of the pilots being considered here use financial incentives with the aim of increasing lone parent work entry (WSP and IWC). Insights can be gleaned from research on the role of financial incentives in promoting work entry among other out-of-work groups.

Extra cash as a work incentive is being trialled as part of the reform of Incapacity Benefit (IB), through the Return to Work Credit (RTWC). Similarly to IWC, this is set at £40 per week. Qualitative evidence suggests that RTWC has acted as an incentive to work entry for some participants, mostly by helping to allay financial worries, however, there was less evidence of an impact on participants' receptivity to work (Corden and Nice, 2006).¹³ Qualitative evidence from the Employment Credit (Kodz and Eccles, 2001), introduced as part of the New Deal 50+, similarly showed that the financial support acted as an incentive effect to help some groups of people into work, primarily those who felt that they could not otherwise afford to work due to low wages. Participants saw such jobs as a transition to 'something better', although the study did not follow up participants to see whether they did in fact move on. The Credit had less incentive effect for those with severe barriers to work and those who were committed to work and would have taken a job anyway.

A number of studies suggest that financial incentives may have an initial impact, but that the longer-term consequences are complex. Research from North America is largely inconclusive regarding the effectiveness of wage supplementation as a work incentive. Evaluations of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) in the US (a wage supplement similar to WTC in the UK) have linked the supplement to improved employment rates among lone parents, but it was predominantly low wage jobs that were taken up (see summary in Gregg and Harkness, 2003). Gregg and Harkness (2003) attempt to quantify the impact of the package of reforms for lone parents in the UK introduced since 1997, including the New Deal and WFTC, and conclude that the proportion of lone parents working at least 16 hours a week has risen by seven percentage points from 1998-2002 as a result of the policy changes. They found no evidence that the 'windfall effect' of WFTC led to a reduction in working hours amongst those already in work or that employment gains came at the expense of lower earnings. However, concern has been expressed that while tax credits provide an incentive for people to move into work, it may limit motivations to seek higher pay, given the withdrawal of tax credits and means-tested benefits as incomes rise (Brewer, 2001; Adam *et al.*, 2006b).

¹³ Early findings from the impact analysis suggest positive and statistically significant impacts of the pilot on employment outcomes. Later analysis will attempt to unpick the impact of different elements including the RTWC (See Adam *et al.*, 2006a).

Similarly, results from the Self Sufficiency Project (SSP) in Canada suggest that although financial incentives encourage more lone parents into employment, they may also deflate earnings by encouraging the take-up of low paid jobs (Card *et al.*, 1996; Foley and Schwartz, 2003). Card and Hyslop (2005) also show that the impact of SSP on movements into work was short-lived, peaking 15 months after random assignment to the programme, and fading relatively quickly afterwards, with little long-term effect on employment participation.

These findings, in combination with the qualitative research on work and care orientations discussed above (Section 2.3), emphasise the complexity of work-related decision-making and suggest that it is unlikely that financial considerations alone determine work-related behaviour. It is more likely that financial considerations play a role in lone parents' decisions about work *alongside* other factors. Thus increasing the financial benefits of working (or removing disincentives) might be likely to make a difference to those for whom other factors align in favour of work.¹⁴

2.5 Retaining employment

There are a range of reasons why people leave work and return to benefits, including labour market and other external factors (such as the type of jobs available, employer attitudes, and inadequate support systems); constraints posed by personal circumstances or characteristics (such as caring responsibilities); and individual preferences (such as not enjoying the job or tensions with an employer) (Bivand *et al.*, 2004; Hoggart *et al.*, 2006).

Problems with work retention are often linked to pre-existing factors that are known to impinge on work entry. Consequently, joblessness and work retention problems may be concentrated in the same populations. As Johnson (2002) notes, people who struggle to find work tend to be the first to lose their jobs. Lone parents are particularly vulnerable to problems with sustainable employment and tend to have relatively high rates of job exits (Hales *et al.*, 2000; Evans *et al.*, 2004). Evans *et al.* (2004) show that low paid jobs appear to have a small probability of being 'stepping stones' to better jobs for lone parents, and qualitative research has suggested that unhappiness at work is an important factor in work retention (Graham *et al.*, 2005).

For lone parents, flexible working hours and the 'family-friendliness' of employment are key to work retention, and leaving work is often associated with childcare responsibilities (Millar, 2000; Evans *et al.*, 2002; Evans *et al.*, 2003). Lone parents' complex arrangements to combine employment and care responsibilities (and sometimes training too) can break down and threaten job stability (Bell *et al.*, 2005; Hoggart *et al.*, 2006).

¹⁴ There is also a difficulty with exploring these issues in qualitative work where individuals may be reluctant to present themselves as solely motivated by financial considerations. Asking questions about household finances is particularly sensitive and respondents may be reluctant to discuss such issues (Pahl, 1999). Determining the extent to which lone parents are motivated by financial concerns is, therefore, complex.

There is relatively little evaluation research into what may improve job retention rates. A recent review of post-employment initiatives introduced in OECD countries in order to improve job retention and advancement rates concluded, cautiously, that there is some evidence that job retention (in the short-term) can be improved through earnings supplements (Kellard *et al.*, 2002). There was more limited evidence that other factors may also improve job retention, including employer-provided childcare, transport assistance and job coaching. Some of these supports are currently being tested in the Employment Retention and Advancement programme, preliminary results from which will be published in Spring 2007 (Dorsett *et al.*, 2007). The IWC pilot, investigated here provides only financial support to lone parents to support work entry, however, other initiatives are also being piloted through New Deal Plus for Lone Parents (ND+fLP), such as an In-Work Emergencies Fund and In-Work Support from Jobcentre Plus advisers.

2.6 Conclusion

The three pilots investigated in this qualitative evaluation offer different combinations of support targeted at work entry (advisory support and financial help) and work retention (financial help). The previous evidence on such forms of support suggests that:

- The advisory support which has so far been offered to lone parents through NDLP and WFIs has played an important role in helping move lone parents into work, however, those benefiting are predominantly lone parents with relatively few work constraints. Less is known at present about what may help lone parents who are further from the labour market. The QWFI (12+) pilot is targeted at such lone parents.
- The evidence on financial incentives is inconclusive but seems to suggest that there is a role for financial incentives in encouraging work entry, if other factors align in favour of work. However, concerns remain about both work retention and the effect on child poverty if entrants remain in low-paid work.
- There is little known at present about what may help lone parents retain work. Preliminary findings suggest a combination of financial support and other kinds of support (for combining work and childcare and for work advancement) may be helpful.

This qualitative study (and the associated Impact Assessment) can contribute to what is known on these issues.

3 Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (12+)

Summary

- Advisory staff had mixed views about the Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (12+) (QWFI (12+)) pilot. They thought that more regular meetings could be useful for building rapport with customers, and they welcomed the opportunity to work with lone parents whose children were aged 12 and over, well before their eligibility for Income Support (IS) ended. However, it was felt that the mandatory schedule of quarterly meetings was too inflexible, and they would have liked to have had more say in deferring QWFIs (12+) for customers who they felt were unable or unwilling to work in the foreseeable future.
- There were mixed reactions among lone parents to the letter informing them of their mandatory QWFI (12+), ranging from 'pleased' to 'terrified'. However, they were mostly put at ease after attending a meeting. Their experiences of QWFIs (12+) were diverse, with the meetings described differing in content and length.
- Broadly, customers' attitudes towards the QWFIs (12+) differed for those who had subsequently entered work, who were mostly positive, and those who had not, who were more negative.
- Those who were positive valued both the practical and emotional support from advisers. They often welcomed meetings where advisers took a 'holistic' view of them as a person and took the time to get to know them.
- Those who were negative tended to be less receptive towards the idea of working and/or to have more severe barriers, such as a disabled child. Nonetheless, the majority expressed a desire to work and many felt that their needs were not addressed. They referred to repetitive and unconstructive meetings and sometimes to advisers who were unsympathetic and did not respond to their needs.

- Customer perceptions of the impact of QWFIs (12+) on their feelings about work or on their ability to start preparing for work varied. Those with positive experiences and positive outcomes often said that the QWFI (12+) had come at 'the right time' for them, usually due to children becoming older and more independent. Accordingly, QWFIs (12+) were felt to have had little impact on receptiveness to work, but had helped in signposting to work preparation. They also gave a 'push' to some that had started to think about work but had not yet started work preparation.
- Those who had not entered work did not generally feel that the meetings had changed their opinions about work or helped them move closer to the labour market. A small number felt that the QWFIs (12+) had increased their confidence about returning to work. In one case the nature of the QWFI (12+) meetings changed over time and became more helpful, suggesting that the schedule of regular meetings does have the potential to become more productive over time.
- Both advisers and lone parents concur that the QWFI (12+) experience was most successful for those lone parents who were already, or were becoming, receptive to work. However, while advisers felt that there was a group of unreceptive or 'hard to help' lone parents whom they could not help, some lone parents, who seemed to fall into this category, expressed a desire to work, albeit with the right support. It did not appear that the QWFIs (12+) were currently meeting the needs of such customers.

3.1 Staff perspectives

Staff in the three districts that offered QWFIs (12+) all reported that they had an administration team who were there to support the delivery of the pilot. The administration team would take on the role of sending out letters to those eligible for a QWFI (12+) and booking lone parents in for a meeting, as well as contacting those who failed to attend. In some districts, however, advisers would attempt to contact the parent in advance of this happening to stress that if they did not attend or explain their non-attendance they would be sanctioned. Other advisers simply documented the 'no show' on the computer and left the sanctioning to the administration team.

All three districts reported they had held group sessions for the QWFIs (12+), mainly, it seemed, to clear an initial 'back log'. These were designed to be informal events to raise awareness about Jobcentre Plus support and the services of other organisations. Some areas invited employers and service providers to speak, whilst others ensured the presence of external agencies such as Sure Start in order to directly attend to specific enquiries. During group sessions, customers were given the opportunity to speak to an adviser on a one-to-one basis and/or to book a personal appointment. Those who had not attended a group session would be contacted by the administration team to attend a mandatory QWFI (12+).

During a QWFI (12+), advisers reported that they would discuss the incentives that were on offer, including Work Search Premium (WSP) and In Work Credit (IWC) where applicable, as well as tax credits, work interests and/or any barriers to work, such as childcare. Advisers thought that it was useful to stress to customers that QWFIs (12+) were not just about going back to work, but also about addressing work readiness more widely as they felt that this was more appealing to lone parents.

On the positive side, advisers felt that QWFIs (12+) were useful for building adviser-customer continuity and rapport. Most advisers felt that it was desirable to keep regular contact with customers for *'building up a better picture of the person'*. Advisers also felt that introducing QWFIs (12+) to those with older children was useful because it served to remind lone parents that their entitlement to IS will run out once their youngest child reaches 16. It thus gave advisers a chance to begin to work systematically with parents before they 'lose' them to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA).

On the negative side, however, several staff described issues with the pilot that related to the rigidity of the interview regime. In particular they felt that they were 'wasting time' by seeing customers who did not want to work or who were identified as being a long way from being job ready. There was some evidence that staff were practicing 'selectivity' and not spending as much time with lone parents who were further from work in terms of their attitudes and circumstances.¹⁵ Advisers felt that they were able to distinguish between respondents who were unlikely to work in the foreseeable future and those who were closer to being job-ready and might find work with just a little help. They felt that in some cases it would be useful to be able to postpone the regular meetings until a time when the customer was more work ready. A few advisers expressed the view, however, that even where lone parents had problems such as health or additional caring responsibilities, which meant that work was not an immediate possibility, bringing them in for a QWFI (12+) gave advisers the possibility of starting to help with these issues and barriers, thus potentially moving them closer to the labour market.

Staff thus had mixed views about the QWFI (12+) pilot. While they viewed it positively as an outreach vehicle, informing a particular subgroup of lone parents about the support services available through Jobcentre Plus, it was also felt that the mandatory schedule of quarterly meetings was too inflexible. They felt that more frequent Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) would not have any impact on lone parents who had taken the decision not to work and was inappropriate for those with circumstances that rendered work impractical. They would have liked to have had more say in deferring QWFIs (12+) for such customers.

¹⁵ This might be exacerbated in contexts where there are pressures on staff time, an issue which is being considered in more depth in the separate evaluation of the ND+fLP pilot.

3.2 Lone parent perspectives

Twenty-five lone parents were interviewed as QWFI (12+) participants – just over half had moved into work and were receiving IWC at the time of the interview (QWFI (12+) and IWC) while the others had not entered work (QWFI (12+) only).

3.2.1 Initial engagement

The majority of QWFI (12+) participants reported receiving a letter calling them in to Jobcentre Plus for an interview, although a few reported that they had started to see a Jobcentre Plus adviser voluntarily and could not recall receiving a letter informing them of a mandatory interview. It is possible that such respondents were already seeing an adviser when they became eligible for a QWFI (12+), or that they had difficulty recalling the initial letter. In general, those who had only attended QWFIs (12+) (and did not subsequently join New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP)) were more likely to remember receiving a letter about a mandatory QWFI (12+), probably due to their limited contact with Jobcentre Plus, both previously and subsequently.

There were mixed feelings among respondents about the mandatory nature of the QWFI (12+) interviews. A few welcomed the offer of help, others felt 'OK' or 'all right' about being called in for an interview, while others reported feeling 'scared', 'worried' and even 'terrified'. Those in the latter category tended to have been out of work for a long time and to have had limited previous contact with Jobcentre Plus, although they were not all negative towards the idea of working:

'I got a bit worried because I felt, Oh god, they're getting older now, I'm gonna have to do it...and after [being] out of work for so long...I thought they were gonna make you go to work.'

(LP45)¹⁶

'I thought, They're going to take my money away, how am I going to feed my children?'

(LP49)

A sense of acceptance of the regime was also evident however, most respondents expressed the view that if you are claiming benefits then you should be required to do certain things, such as attending a mandatory interview. This sentiment was expressed by one respondent who had been sanctioned for failing to turn up to a QWFI (12+), even though she had called to cancel the interview. She later had her benefit reinstated. She felt that cutting benefits was justified if people 'don't bother to turn up', and comments of her own experience: *'[it] made me go down there pretty sharpish!'*.

¹⁶ Respondents quoted in the text have been assigned labels for anonymity. The labels start at LP1 and run to LP70.

Frequency and number of interviews

Respondents varied in how much they recalled of their QWFI (12+) experience. Most of the QWFI (12+) only (not working) participants could recall regular meetings with a lone parent adviser at quarterly intervals. However, some could recall only one meeting. It is unclear whether these were participants who had subsequent QWFIs (12+) deferred, and thus were not called back for further meetings, or whether there were problems of respondent recall. Such customers were mostly not aware of whether or why meetings had been deferred. The number of meetings recalled among the QWFI (12+) only participants varied from one to five.

The QWFI (12+) participants who had subsequently entered work generally had less recall of their QWFI (12+) experience, mainly because all but one respondent in this group had started to see an adviser more regularly (through NDLP) following their QWFI(s)(12+). It was thus difficult for respondents to distinguish QWFIs (12+) from these subsequent meetings and sometimes also from previous (annual) WFIs. Some recalled mandatory quarterly interviews while others thought they had been called in every six months. Due to poor recall, therefore, it is difficult to specify the number of QWFIs (12+) attended for these participants.¹⁷

3.2.2 Experiences and attitudes

Any apprehension on the part of lone parents about the QWFIs (12+) was generally allayed after an initial meeting. They felt assured that they were not going to be 'forced' into work, that their job search was voluntary and that their benefits would continue.

The content of QWFI (12+) meetings seemed to vary considerably. Respondents' descriptions ranged from very brief appointments which terminated when the lone parent expressed obstacles to working, to lengthier meetings in which advisers discussed possible constraints, explained the help available, conducted Better Off Calculations (BOCs) and helped respondents with a job search. On the whole there was not much evidence of customers receiving BOCs or information about the IWC and WSP pilots until they started to see an adviser more regularly and were more actively looking for work. However, as suggested above, respondents often had difficulty distinguishing between the information given at QWFIs (12+) and at subsequent NDLP meetings. QWFI (12+) participants who had not entered work were rarely aware of the WSP and IWC pilots.

¹⁷ Given these difficulties in customer recall, attempt was made in the interviews to firstly establish whether QWFIs (12+) had taken place and then to ask about the content of these meetings. To assist respondents in distinguishing QWFIs (12+) from other meetings they may have had, interviewers usually asked about 'receiving a letter from Jobcentre Plus calling them in for an interview' and about the frequency of such meetings. In most cases this worked effectively, however, respondents often found it difficult to be precise about the frequency of their meetings.

In general, the QWFI (12+) participants who had entered work reported a more positive experience of their QWFIs (12+) than those who did not. This group were also more positive about their adviser. Only a few of these respondents had a negative view of their meetings. This is likely to be related to the fact that these participants subsequently joined NDLP and then found work, hence they experienced a positive outcome. Reactions to the interviews among the QWFI (12+) only group (not in work) were more negative. These lone parents were characterised by having less recent work experience than those who entered work and they often faced more severe obstacles to entering work.

Positive experiences of QWFIs (12+)

There were a range of types of support received through QWFIs (12+) that respondents found helpful. These included:

- information about in-work benefits and tax credits;
- help with CV preparation;
- interview coaching;
- help with childcare¹⁸;
- help with training;
- self-employment advice; and
- referrals to other agencies.

The group that subsequently moved into work reported receiving more services than those who did not, although given that most of this group subsequently joined NDLP (and difficulties with respondent recall) it is difficult to say whether these services were offered as part of QWFIs (12+) or in the context of NDLP.

A number of customers from this group when interviewed a second time, said that they had returned to their adviser when they needed help after they had started work. One customer who had found her adviser very helpful and understanding of her anxieties about going back to work had returned to her adviser when she wanted assistance with moving to a 'better' job.

¹⁸ While all QWFI (12+) pilot areas also have Extended Schools Childcare (ESC) available, use of ESC was not investigated here due to the separate evaluation of ESC. However, lone parents' views on the childcare support offered by Jobcentre Plus were probed. No respondents reported using ESC (or childcare tasters or chats). Where help was received from Jobcentre Plus, it was usually in the form of referrals to local Children's Information Services. A small number of respondents felt that a more structured form of support could be useful, and one customer would have liked to discuss childcare options in more detail with an adviser but said that she had not been given this option.

In addition to the practical help and support given, some respondents also valued the emotional support received through QWFIs (12+) which encouraged them in their job search and helped to bolster their self-confidence. Some of these people had been out of work for a long period of time and were nervous about the idea of working. They welcomed interviews in which they were able to discuss anything they might be worried about and that might make work difficult. One respondent talked about how she was initially nervous but that her adviser put her at ease:

'I made an appointment to come and see her...and each week that went past I got more nervous and more nervous, and I really wanted to do it but it was really terrifying...So I went and saw her...she was lovely, she was really friendly and we had a laugh, and basically she just spoke to me as a mum before she actually got into getting a job first, which relaxed me more because that's what I was used to.'

(LP48)

Some participants said that prior to the QWFIs (12+) they had thought about returning to work, but had not felt confident that they would succeed. In such cases the QWFI (12+) could act to boost confidence and help customers prepare for work. One stated:

'[it] gave you some hope in actually saying, Yeah, I can, I could go out and actually find employment, I could go out and get back into work, I could go out and do certain things, whereas beforehand you wouldn't think you could.'

(LP44)

Again these sentiments were mostly expressed by those who had subsequently joined NDLP and then entered work. Such respondents often had very good relationships with their advisers. One stated:

'she was really wonderful, she was very, very supportive.'

(LP47)

Negative experiences of QWFIs (12+)

Of those respondents who reported negative experiences of the QWFIs (12+), there were a number of reasons given. Some did not feel that the meetings were constructive; they reported that meetings were repetitive, and did not address their expectations or needs. Some of these were respondents who professed some desire to enter work although they were often a long way from being job-ready, while others were more ambivalent about working. However, they shared a concern that they were not being helped to move closer to the job market.

Often these customers wanted help with accessing training but said they were not receiving such help. One example is a lone parent with two older children who had not worked since her divorce twelve years before. She had previously attended a number of short computer courses, but realised that she needed further training to

improve her skills. She stated that her QWFIs (12+) were very brief and repetitive and did not address her training needs. Some of those who were more ambivalent about work expressed an uncertainty regarding the financial implications of entering paid work. One stated:

'most people I've spoken to, to be honest, who've picked up employment recently...they're not any better off than what they were before'

(LP64)

Again it seemed that in this case her concern had not been addressed by the adviser.

It is unclear why, in these cases, advisers had not met the needs and expectations of respondents. It may be that the uncertainty about working expressed by respondents was interpreted by advisers as a disinterest in work, or it may have been that lone parents were not proactive in expressing their needs and concerns to advisers. There also may have been gaps in the support that advisers were able to offer (e.g. with training, which seemed to be of particular concern to a number of those with more negative experiences). However, it was apparent that advisers were not effectively engaging with some customers or addressing their obstacles to work.

Some of those QWFI (12+) participants who were ambivalent about working felt that it was too early for them to be going back to work. As discussed in Chapter 2, lone parents often become more receptive to the idea of working when their children enter secondary school. While the children of QWFI (12+) participants are aged 12 and over, there were nevertheless anxieties expressed about the age at which children can be left and some respondents felt that it was still important for them to be at home before and after school. Some expressed anxieties about whether teenage children were responsible enough to behave appropriately if 'left to their own devices' after school. In other cases, respondents described constraints that they felt would be difficult to overcome, such as a lack of work experience, poor qualifications and health issues. One respondent, for example, had a disability that made it difficult for her to travel very far from home or to do physically demanding work. At her QWFI (12+) meeting she was told that she would be referred to a disability adviser, but at the time of the interview (18 months later) this had not transpired, and she had had no further contact with Jobcentre Plus.

Some of those reporting negative experiences of QWFIs (12+) also referred to poor relationships with advisers. It was noticeable that those respondents who had subsequently joined NDLP were more likely to be happy about the relationship that had been established with their adviser than those who were attending QWFIs (12+) only. Some respondents commented that advisory staff were rude to them, and one described her adviser as intimidating and not on the 'same wave length' as her. Several respondents expressed the view that finding work is up to the individual, and some felt that the meetings should not be mandatory. One lone parent expressed concern that QWFIs (12+) were a reflection of Jobcentre Plus 'pushing' lone parents back to work regardless of whether or not they could cope.

By the time of the follow-up interviews, most customers with negative experiences of QWFIs (12+) did not report significantly different experiences. One customer, however, noted that her most recent QWFI (12+) had been quite different. She had previously complained that she had not been given any advice about training and had not found the QWFIs (12+) very helpful. At her most recent QWFI (12+), however, (with a different adviser), she reported that they had talked about the type of work she wanted and the training she needed, and she had taken the decision to go to college in the future.

Whilst for the most part respondents' attitudes towards the QWFIs (12+) were coloured by the outcome of their meetings (whether they entered work or not), there were also a small number of QWFI (12+) participants who *had* moved into work but who nonetheless reported negative experiences of their QWFIs (12+). Similarly to those not in work, these respondents reported short, obligatory QWFIs (12+) in which they felt that their needs were not addressed. Sometimes these views were associated with other negative experiences of using Jobcentre Plus, such as problems with benefit payments. A small number of participants had moved from IS on to JSA at the time of the interview, because their youngest child had turned 16. All reported negative experiences on JSA which thus subsequently coloured their views of Jobcentre Plus, including their accounts of the QWFI (12+) experience. For example, one customer who had lost her work by the time of the second interview was reluctant to return to Jobcentre Plus because she had moved from IS to JSA and found the JSA advisers 'rude' and unhelpful. She said that she *would* have returned to Jobcentre Plus if she could have seen her previous lone parent adviser.

3.2.3 Perceptions of impact

Lone parents were asked whether they felt that attending one or more QWFIs (12+) had changed their attitudes towards working, including their willingness to seek work and confidence in their ability to do so. Not surprisingly, views on the value of QWFIs (12+) as a work incentive were coloured by experiences and views of the meetings.

The vast majority of QWFI (12+) participants who did not enter work did not feel that the QWFI (12+) process affected their views on working. As discussed previously, these respondents had mostly negative views of the QWFI (12+) and reported that their needs had not been met, they had not established a rapport with an adviser or that their concerns about work (particularly the financial implications) had not been allayed. Some in this group saw little financial incentive to work until their children were 16 and their benefits were stopped; one respondent, for example, said she would not be looking for work until her youngest was 19 and at university. It did not appear that the QWFI (12+) process had had any impact on such views.

There were a small number of QWFI (12+)-only participants who reported that the meetings helped them think about the possibility of working or at least instilled the

notion of introducing work into their lives again. One respondent who had been worried about her age was reassured by her adviser that some employers favoured mature workers and found them more reliable. Another lone parent, who was about to start a training course, felt that the regular meetings had made a big difference to her self confidence:

'I feel a lot happier in myself and I'm looking forward to it, you know, I'm bored by ten o' clock in the morning, that's why I drag the housework on...so yeah, I'm looking forward to meeting new people.'

(LP66)

Those lone parents who entered work after attending a QWFI (12+) were generally more positive about their experience of the QWFI (12+) and were more likely to say that Jobcentre Plus support had an impact on their motivation for work. However, it is difficult to distinguish the effects of the QWFIs (12+) from that of the other support they had received. As mentioned previously, the majority of such participants had subsequently gone on to enter NDLP.

The extent to which respondents in this group felt that the QWFI (12+) had changed their attitude to work was partly related to whether they had already made the decision to look for work prior to attending an interview. The majority of those who had entered work reported that they were already thinking about the possibility of work before receiving the QWFI (12+) letter. Not surprisingly, these lone parents did not feel that the QWFI (12+) had made any difference to their decision to look for work, although the practical help and support offered may have helped them on their way. One respondent who said that she was already looking and applying for work when she was called in for a QWFI (12+) was nonetheless assisted in enrolling on a computer course. Others said that the regular meetings helped keep them focused on finding work:

'But being a parent as well you've obviously got, you're doing your parent thing, and it is easy for you to side track from looking for a job, because you've got your parent responsibilities around you constantly.'

(LP48)

Generally it was said by these respondents that the QWFI (12+) was successful because the time was right for them to look for work due to other factors, notably children becoming old enough to look after themselves after school. One respondent described attending annual and then QWFI (12+) meetings but felt that they did not make a difference until *she* had made the decision that her children were old enough for her to go out and work. At this point, she started seeing an adviser more regularly and found the help and support offered very useful. Reflecting on the impact of adviser meetings on her decision to work, she stated:

*'I decided. It was **me**. I thought, you know, the children are old enough now, I can do something,'*

(LP40)

There were some respondents who had already started thinking about work when they were called in for a QWFI (12+), but had not yet taken any steps to seek work. These respondents often welcomed the chance for regular meetings with an adviser. One example was a respondent where the QWFI (12+) (and finding out about IWC) helped him take the step towards starting his own business. Another said that the QWFI (12+) had given her confidence and encouraged her to start applying for jobs and she had subsequently found work in administration.

There were only a very small number of respondents who had not started thinking about work, but were prompted to do so when called in for a QWFI (12+). One example was a lone parent who cared for her sick parent. She did not think that she would be able to work, but through the meetings was prompted to pursue the idea of having her caring treated as paid work. She was subsequently able to leave Income Support. Another lone parent, who attributed her success in finding work to her own efforts, nonetheless felt that the regularity of being called into Jobcentre Plus had helped change her mind about work. When asked why she decided to start looking for work, she stated:

'I think it's, I think they started asking me to come to the Jobcentre a bit regular, I thought, You know what, this is about time to make a break from them [benefits].'

(LP39)

The follow-up telephone interviews also indicate that, for some customers, the QWFI (12+) has the potential to mark the beginning of a productive relationship between adviser and customer. This is reflected in the fact that some customers went back to their lone parent adviser when things became difficult at work, or when they were ready to try to progress.

3.3 Lone parent and staff views compared

The interviews with both advisers and lone parents seem to concur that the QWFI (12+) experience was most successful for those lone parents who were already, or were becoming, receptive to work. This was often because the QWFI (12+) came at the 'right time' for them, because children were getting older and they had already started to think about returning to work. Practically all the positive experiences of QWFIs (12+) reported by respondents were heard from those who had subsequently gone on to enter work. In these cases, QWFIs (12+) were often useful for giving that little extra 'push' to lone parents who needed it and for signposting to job preparation support. Customers tended to be appreciative of advisers that had made the effort to get to know them and sympathise with their views and needs, rather than taking a narrow work-focused approach. This accords with the accounts of some advisers who spoke about promoting QWFIs (12+) as a work preparation tool, as opposed to pressuring people into work. This helped to ease customer experiences of the interview and to facilitate rapport between the customer and the adviser.

Conversely, advisers found QWFIs (12+) less useful for those whom they felt were not receptive to work or who had more severe constraints that made work difficult, such as a disability or additional caring responsibilities. In these instances, advisers felt that it would have been better if they had more leeway to defer QWFIs (12+) because they felt that they were not achieving very much with these customers. Similarly, a number of those QWFI (12+) participants who had not gone on to enter work confirmed that they too had found the QWFI (12+) experience unconstructive, describing meetings as repetitive and unhelpful. However, it should be noted that at least some of these customers did report a desire to work, either immediately or in the future, but did not feel that their advisers had been helpful in moving them closer to the labour market. Sometimes these lone parents were requesting training and did not feel that they had received help in accessing this; others were more ambivalent about work, sometimes due to financial concerns, and reported that nothing in the QWFI (12+) had changed their perception; and some had more complicated support needs, for example the respondent with a disability who had not been referred to a disability adviser, despite requesting this.

It is difficult to ascertain accurately in individual cases why lone parents' needs were not being met. It might be because these lone parents' were not proactive in articulating their needs to an adviser and this was interpreted by advisers as disinterest. Given that advisers felt that there was little they could do to help certain customers who they judged to be resistant to work or to have difficult barriers to overcome, it is possible that advisers were practicing 'selectivity' and not spending as much time with these lone parents. The two sets of accounts, from lone parents and advisers, therefore suggest that those furthest from the labour market, some with significant difficulties, received the least benefit from the QWFIs (12+).

4 Work Search Premium

Summary

- Staff viewed the Work Search Premium (WSP) pilot as a potential incentive for lone parents to look for work more actively, and they felt that the regular meetings could help to build rapport. However, many felt uncomfortable introducing a mandatory element (i.e. the requirement to attend fortnightly meetings) into their work with lone parents. This ambivalent attitude, combined with the heavy administrative load associated with the pilot, meant that advisers offered the pilot selectively, to the most 'committed' customers, who they perceived to be serious about looking for work.
- All the lone parent WSP participants said that they had made the decision to look for work prior to finding out about WSP through an adviser, and some were already regularly seeing an adviser for job search when they took up the pilot.
- The £20 payments were welcomed by participants and used either for day-to-day expenses or job search costs, such as buying newspapers. Most attended fortnightly meetings with an adviser and kept a written record of their job search activities. In one district, participants attended job search activities weekly with an external provider. The majority were happy with this regime and felt it lent structure to their job search activities.
- Those who left WSP before their eligibility ended did so due to changed personal circumstances (e.g. childcare requirements changing), although in some cases there was limited rapport between customer and adviser and the lone parent had become disengaged from Jobcentre Plus support.
- Those who exhausted their payments without finding work tended to have spent a longer time out of work or to have more complicated work requirements. They mostly continued looking for work after WSP ended, although some had lost momentum after becoming demoralised, and some had taken the decision to retrain in consultation with advisers.

- None of the lone parent participants felt that WSP had impacted on their commitment to look for work, since most were already looking for work when they enrolled on the pilot. However, some felt that the schedule of regular meetings impacted on the intensity of their job search, by keeping up the momentum, which might otherwise have dropped off. Both the regular adviser meetings and the £20 payments were felt to enhance their job prospects.
- While advisers were mostly negative or ambivalent about the WSP pilot, feeling that it was too rigid a regime for lone parents, the majority of lone parent participants valued the regular meetings for maintaining the momentum in their job search, and the £20 payments for helping with their job search costs. However, given that participants were already searching for work before enrolling on the pilot, it is difficult to assess whether WSP might act as an incentive for those who are undecided about work preparation. Findings from staff and customers strongly suggest adviser selectivity in marketing the pilot, which might be unduly restricting the pilot to those who are already actively job searching.

4.1 Staff perspectives

The WSP pilot received an ambivalent response from advisers. On the positive side, some spoke of the pilot as useful for building adviser-customer rapport due to the regularity of contact, and some viewed the monetary benefit to customers in a positive light. However, many advisory staff expressed discomfort with the WSP pilot. They felt that lone parents would not want to commit to the rigidity of fortnightly meetings, and were concerned about the fact that WSP appeared to be incorporating a mandatory element into the voluntary New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) programme. They felt that the formality of signing an agreement would act as a deterrent to customers.

These attitudes to the pilot seemed to underpin the selective way in which advisers marketed the pilot. They spoke of offering the WSP pilot to customers either at mandatory Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) (or Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (QWFIs (12+)) in pilot areas) or during drop-in visits to Jobcentre Plus. However, they also spoke of using their discretion as to whom they offered it to among eligible customers. Advisers often spoke of the heavy paperwork associated with the pilot, to both set up and terminate the pilot, as a reason for not offering it to all eligible customers. The heavy administrative load, the ambivalent attitude towards the pilot, and a feeling that WSP was not useful or relevant to all customers, all combined to constrain advisers in offering the pilot to all eligible customers.

In selectively marketing the pilot, advisers talked about categorising customers (as with QWFI (12+) customers) according to how close to the labour market and receptive to work they appeared to be, and selecting only the most 'committed' customers, who demonstrated that they were serious about looking for work, for the pilot:

'I only offer it to lone parents that, you know, genuinely want to return to work, that aren't going to just come in every fortnight to see you to just get the extra twenty pounds premium... I think that's why, within [this office] anyway, we've basically made the decision that we don't offer it at first interview; we don't even discuss it at the first interview.'

(Lone Parent Adviser)

This was reinforced by the guidance given to advisers about the pilot which stated that customers needed to be within four weeks of becoming job ready in order to enrol on the pilot. It therefore appears that advisers were deciding on the job readiness and work commitment of lone parents before offering the WSP pilot.

Where WSP was offered, some advisers felt that it was a useful work incentive. In particular, they felt that it was most effective for those customers 'on the border' who were thinking about work but had not started actively looking. They felt that for these customers it acted as an incentive to take work more seriously. That is, for more hesitant customers, it 'tipped the scale' in favour of work search, which then helped advisers move more customers onto NDLP.

4.2 Lone parent perspectives

Twenty two lone parents who had participated in WSP were interviewed, over half went on to enter work and receive In Work Credit (IWC) whilst others did not. Two had previously attended a QWFI (12+).

4.2.1 Initial engagement

All of the WSP participants said that they had been informed about the pilot after they had taken the decision to look for work. Some were told at a first or second meeting which they had initiated to discuss returning to work, whilst others were already attending regular meetings with an adviser (in the context of NDLP) when they were told about the pilot. Some of the latter had also participated in training prior to joining WSP. It was mostly the latter participants, who were regularly seeing an adviser when they joined WSP, who had found work at the time of the interview and moved from WSP to IWC. This is likely to be because of the longer period of time they had spent searching for work. However, this group tended also to have more recent work experience than those who had not found work at the time of the interview (who had all been out of the labour market for five or more years).

Most participants indicated that they had been informed about WSP and IWC at the same time, as a package of assistance. Nonetheless, some respondents said that they had subsequently forgotten about IWC while attending WSP meetings. There was little evidence of lone parents deferring looking for work in order to be eligible for WSP (i.e. to meet the criterion of being on benefits for a minimum of 12 months), although in one case, a respondent who had previously been '*half keeping an eye out for jobs*' indicated that her adviser had told her to wait for two months before enrolling on NDLP and starting to use Jobcentre Plus to search for work so that she would be eligible for WSP.

Some participants remembered being told about the details of the programme when they were first informed about WSP, for example, they knew of the period of eligibility and the conditions attached to receiving the payments, such as the requirement to attend a meeting with an adviser every two weeks. A few respondents, however, could not recall having been informed about the period of eligibility and said that they were unaware when they joined WSP that the duration of the payments was limited to 26 weeks.

Awareness of WSP among non-participants (in districts in which the pilot was operating)¹⁹ was difficult to determine, partly due to issues of customer recall about the content of QWFIs (12+). However, very few non-participants could recall receiving details about WSP.

4.2.2 Experiences and attitudes

Payments

None of the customers experienced administrative problems with receiving the WSP payments, although there was one case where there was a delay in payments over the Christmas period. Their use of the payments varied. Some referred to the payments as contributing to their general living expenses, while others had used the payments for job-search-related costs, such as newspapers, transport to job interviews and clothing for interviews. One had used the payments for driving lessons, since being able to drive was a requirement for the jobs she was looking for.

One respondent who lived in a rural area and had partly used the payments to cover transport costs to Jobcentre Plus for the fortnightly meetings, as well as to the Programme Centre she attended, felt that it was unfair that those living in rural areas 'lost out' on the twenty pound payments, which were absorbed by transport costs to fortnightly meetings. This respondent, and others who mentioned using the payments for transport and other job search costs, did not appear to have been offered assistance with these costs through other NDLP-related financial help, such as the Advisers' Discretionary Fund (ADF).

Most appreciated receiving the 20 pound payments through WSP. They were described as an 'added bonus', given the financial limitations of living on Income Support (IS).

'I really wanted to work and I thought, Well, they're going to give me £20 extra a week for looking for work, I'm happy with that, you know, I could do with the extra money.'

(LP3)

Respondents who had used the payments to cover job search costs emphasised that the payments were useful in supporting them to look for work in this respect.

¹⁹ That is, QWFI (12+) participants in WSP areas.

Structured meetings

All respondents on WSP attended regular meetings. While most referred to attending fortnightly meetings with their adviser, the frequency of these meetings varied. Two respondents from one district had attended weekly meetings, although this appeared to have been their choice as opposed to a requirement. A few others from another district had been required to attend meetings on a monthly basis, but were also attending a Programme Centre weekly in addition to these meetings.

Meetings with advisers involved looking at and considering the suitability of current job vacancies, as well as help with completing application forms. In some cases, information and advice on in-work financial entitlements, including Working and Child Tax Credit, were also referred to. A few respondents indicated that their advisers were in contact by telephone or post in order to update them on job vacancies that they might be interested in. Similarly, some respondents referred to contacting their advisers by telephone if they had any queries.

Most respondents were happy with the condition of attending fortnightly meetings under the WSP regime. Some felt that this was necessary in order for advisers to be able to ensure that participants were actively looking for work. Respondents' acceptance of, and support for, attending regular meetings was related to their commitment to look for work, given that most respondents had already made the decision to look for work when they joined WSP. Moreover, some were already regularly meeting an adviser in the context of NDLP when they joined WSP, thus fortnightly meetings under WSP were an extension of structured meetings they were already voluntarily participating in.

Of those who were happy with the meetings, reference was made to the benefits of seeing an adviser regularly in terms of support with the process of looking for work. This confirms previous research, mentioned in Chapter 2, that highlights the positive role that one-to-one adviser support can play. Indeed, the practical and emotional support of an adviser was said to be the most helpful aspect of WSP, rather than the £20 payments. The support of an adviser was valued in terms of information and advice on job vacancies and on in-work-benefit entitlements. Respondents who also had contact with their advisers by telephone appreciated this in terms of being able to consult them regarding any queries they had.

While most respondents appeared to be happy with the support of an adviser and the regular meetings, a few felt that their advisers had not been so helpful. One respondent, who had a change of adviser during WSP, felt that she did not have a good rapport with her new adviser and that he was not as supportive of her job-search needs. The respondent was also attending a Programme Centre for six hours a week and felt that it was a 'waste of time' having to address the same things again with her adviser. Another respondent felt that she had received very little support from her adviser during the meetings, and that she was being pushed to apply for job vacancies when she wanted information and advice on training, including

courses aimed at confidence-building, to support her back into work. As referred to later, the respondent did not stick with the pilot (albeit due to personal circumstances) and did not enter work.

Job search activities

Most respondents said that they were required to keep a diary or record of their job search activities, including job applications that had been made. An update on these activities then formed the basis for discussions with their adviser during the fortnightly meetings. This was viewed partly as being a condition for receiving the payments, and partly as a means for them to keep track of job applications and calls made to employers.

Some respondents felt that keeping such a record of their job search activities had been useful and that the discussions with their advisers around this had kept them motivated through the process of looking for work. By contrast, a few respondents did not like having to keep a record. They said that they would have preferred to just look at vacancies as they came up, without having to write everything down. They nevertheless agreed to keep a record during WSP and understood that they had to do this in order to provide evidence that they were actively looking for work.

Four participants from one district referred to attending a 'ready for work' course at a Programme Centre for six hours each week, delivered by a private training provider. Weekly visits to the Centre involved carrying out job search activities, including CV writing and looking for and applying for vacancies, with the assistance of staff of the provider. This assistance was generally considered useful. Two of the respondents said that they were required to apply for a minimum of three job vacancies each week, which was considered to be difficult to comply with given that new job vacancies appropriate to customers' needs and interests were not always available. The respondents' advisers, however, appeared to have been understanding of this issue and had not enforced this condition.

None of the respondents experienced any disagreements with their advisers regarding the job search conditions attached to WSP, and none had experienced any sanctions being imposed.

Other support

Some lone parents referred to additional support from Jobcentre Plus during their participation in WSP, including Better Off Calculations (BOCs), help with writing CVs, clothing allowances for interviews, information on in-work entitlements, such as childcare, and information on education and training. Although these types of support were provided by advisers in the context of the regular WSP meetings, respondents could also have accessed this support through NDLP even if they had not participated in WSP. Indeed, prior to joining WSP, some respondents had received other types of support in the context of NDLP, which had also assisted them in the process of trying to enter work. This included back-to-work courses, which were considered to have been helpful in building the confidence of some respondents.

Leaving WSP

Customers who left before eligibility ended

Not all participants stuck with the pilot. Three left WSP before eligibility had ended because they had decided to stop looking for work. This was due to personal circumstances rather than their experience of the pilot. Reasons related to caring responsibilities (childcare, care for other relatives) or health.

In one case, a lone parent stopped looking for work during the school holidays so that she could care for her son. She then resumed looking for work but did not return to Jobcentre Plus, feeling that she could look for work, as effectively on her own²⁰. Although she had attended fortnightly meetings during WSP she did not appear to have had much rapport with her adviser. She complained of not receiving any information or advice concerning childcare, despite this being an important issue for her.

Another respondent had stopped looking for work and left WSP because of ongoing difficulties related to her mental health. She also felt that it would be 'easier' to enter work once her youngest daughter was at nursery more frequently in the near future. She similarly had not had a good rapport with the adviser she had seen during WSP and felt that during meetings her adviser had been trying to push her to apply for jobs she did not want and had not offered assistance with the type of support she wanted (including training and help with confidence-building). It was difficult for her to attend Jobcentre Plus because of where she lived. She had been told by her adviser that she should rebook an appointment when she was ready to return to work, but she was undecided about whether to do this. At the time of her second interview, however, she had returned to Jobcentre Plus and her adviser had suggested that she pursue training. Subsequently she registered for a teaching assistant course.

With regards to these three respondents, the ending of WSP payments did not affect their longer term commitment to look for work. One respondent had resumed looking for work at the time of the first interview, one was planning to do so in the near future and the third was completing a course to improve her prospects of finding work. It is important to note, therefore, that although respondents had chosen to leave WSP before eligibility ended this was not a reflection of a decision not to work, but a result of their personal circumstances at that point in time. However, in two of these cases the respondents also felt that they could have been better supported by their advisers.

²⁰ She was currently contacting employers directly to find work. She wanted to work in a specific field (estate agency) and did not find that such vacancies were advertised through Jobcentre Plus.

Customers who left because eligibility ended

Participants who had left WSP because the period of eligibility had ended were either still looking for work at the time of interview or were retraining with a view to finding work at the end of the course. These respondents indicated that they had been unable to find work during WSP, despite their motivation to do so. There was no evidence of participants staying out of work in order to receive the full six months of WSP payments. All of them had been out of work for the past five or more years (for more than ten years in some cases) and seemed to have greater obstacles to entering work as compared to the group of WSP participants who entered work.

The reasons given for not finding work were sometimes related to not being able to find a suitable job. In some cases, respondents had been unable to find work in particular areas related to their previous experience. For example, one respondent, who had a background as a healthcare professional, had completed a refresher course prior to starting on WSP, but then had been trying to find work for a year without success. At the time of the first research interview, she felt demoralised and frustrated with the process, although she had a good relationship with her adviser who she felt was supporting her in finding the 'right job'. By the second research interview she had retrained in childcare and was about to start work in this field. Other respondents indicated that they had been looking for work for a fixed number of hours and/or hours that fitted with their caring responsibilities. Other respondents, particularly those who had been out of work for longer periods, emphasised their lack of confidence as an obstacle to entering work.

Where WSP payments had stopped because eligibility ended, this had not, on the whole, affected respondents' commitment to continue to look for work, although some felt demoralised with not finding work. Some indicated that they missed the payments and a few respondents who had not been informed (or did not remember) that the payments were for a limited period referred to being surprised and disappointed when the payments stopped. No-one felt that the ending of the payments had made them less interested or active in looking for work. Most were still in touch with advisers, although one respondent reported that she had stopped attending Jobcentre Plus because she was demoralised with not finding work. Another reported that she was relying more on informal means of job search (family and friends). At the time of the second interview this latter respondent was about to start work in catering, a job she had found through informal contacts. A couple of respondents had decided to retrain in different areas of work with a view to improving their job prospects in the future. These decisions were taken in consultation with advisers.

Customers who left upon entering work

Most of those on WSP who had found work had done so within the period in which they had participated in WSP. Some found work in a relatively short period after joining WSP (one to three months), including one respondent who found a job the day after she first met with an adviser to discuss returning to work. Most of these

lone parents had been out of the labour market for relatively short periods of time. Respondents did not refer to any problems with the transition from WSP to IWC.

4.2.3 Perceptions of impact

Commitment to look for work

Respondents felt that WSP had had little impact on their decision to look for work, as they had already decided that they wanted to work before they found out about WSP. Some were already actively looking for work when they found out about WSP. Their reasons for returning to work were said to be changing personal circumstances, for example, changes in their childcare responsibilities, such as children starting secondary school. Respondents therefore emphasised that WSP did not influence their commitment to look for work and that they would have looked for work regardless of the £20 payments. For example, one respondent, who participated in WSP for a very short period of time before finding work, said:

'I had actually gone in [to the Jobcentre Plus office] and wanted to do it myself anyway so it's just an added bonus really because, I mean, I'd do it anyway with or without the £20.'

(LP1)

Despite the fact that all WSP customers considered themselves to be committed to looking for work, regardless of WSP, it was nonetheless the case that some respondents did not subsequently go on to find work. However, none of these respondents had changed their longer-term commitment to entering work, although some had started to become demoralised by the end of the WSP period and a few had decided to defer work for a period of time in favour of retraining.

Job search intensity

There were mixed perceptions amongst respondents as to whether or not WSP influenced their job search activities. Some respondents did not consider WSP – either the money or the mandated fortnightly meetings – to have influenced their job search activities, and emphasised that they did not make any more effort to look for work after joining WSP than they had done before. Two respondents had found a job so soon after registering for WSP that they felt they had not participated in the programme long enough for it to have had an influence.

However, there were a number of respondents who felt that the job search conditions attached to the £20 payments *did* provide an incentive for them to keep looking for work. For example, one respondent with just one year's experience of working before having her son, had decided to start looking for work after completing a training course. She felt that she was already committed to looking for work and that WSP had not influenced her commitment, but that receiving the payments had motivated her in her job search:

'It's just an incentive to look. Not that I didn't want to look for a job, but it, you know, maybe some weeks you didn't want to look for a job, but you had to really, you know.'

(LP2)

Another respondent who had been out of work for more than five years indicated that the payments helped to motivate her in her job search on days when she felt despondent:

'It did give you an incentive to go out and look for work. It sounds stupid, but even just to go and buy a newspaper.'

(LP10)

Others referred to the regular meetings with their adviser, during which they discussed an update on their job applications, as providing the impetus to keep looking for work.

Most of those whose eligibility to WSP ended before they found work were still looking for work and visiting advisers at a similar level of intensity after WSP ended. However, there were a couple of customers, as mentioned earlier, who had become disheartened at not securing work and had either reduced their job search activities or were attending Jobcentre Plus less frequently. It is unclear, though, whether continuing on WSP would have made any difference to their decisions to wind down job search activities.

None of the WSP participants felt that being part of WSP had had any influence on the type of jobs that they were looking for and none spoke of feeling the need to accept 'any job' prior to eligibility running out. There were a small group of customers who, after finishing WSP without finding work, had decided to retrain to move into a different area of work or to increase their job prospects. However, only one of these felt that her adviser had been 'pushing' her into looking for jobs when she would have preferred to be pursuing training, while most took the decision on training in consultation with their advisers.

Ability to look for and enter work

Some respondents considered WSP to have had an impact in terms of their ability to look for and enter work. This was partly in relation to the £20 payments, which had contributed to job search costs such as newspapers and transport. Others referred to the support of their adviser as enabling. Some found the encouragement of an adviser in the process of looking for work to be important in terms of building their confidence:

'I think it did make a difference, it built my confidence...even in just looking for jobs, because I was nervous...and [an adviser] was behind there, sort of, rooting for you, you know.'

(LP3)

The information and advice provided by an adviser on the transition into work, particularly the implications in terms of in-work benefits entitlements, was also considered by some to have been very important in supporting them into work.

4.3 Lone parent and staff views compared

Staff and customer views on the WSP pilot were contrasting. Staff reported ambivalent feelings about the pilot, suggesting that the mandatory elements of the WSP regime, such as regular fortnightly visits to Jobcentre Plus, might be too much for some lone parent customers whom they felt preferred more flexibility. The accounts of lone parent participants on WSP, however, suggest that such negative views among lone parents were minimal. Most participants cited the benefits of the more regular meetings for maintaining their motivation and the momentum in the job search. They also welcomed the extra cash for job search related or day-to-day expenses. By and large, they also accepted the need for the regular meetings so that advisers could monitor their work search activity. Where customers had left WSP before finding work, this was usually due to personal circumstances changing rather than to a lack of satisfaction with the WSP regime.

However, these findings are from customers who participated in the pilot, the vast majority of whom were already actively searching for work before they entered the pilot (and some of whom continued looking for work after the pilot finished). This supports adviser accounts that the WSP pilot was offered selectively to those customers who they thought were already committed to looking for work. This makes it difficult to assess whether WSP might act as an incentive for those who have not yet decided to start a job search. There was little awareness of WSP among those attending QWFIs (12+) in areas where WSP was offered. Clearly lone parent advisers need to tailor the support they offer to the customers for whom it is relevant. However, it is possible that their selectivity might be unduly restricting the pilot to those who are already actively job searching, therefore reducing the potential for the pilot to act as an incentive for undecided lone parents.

5 In Work Credit

Summary

- In Work Credit (IWC) was overwhelmingly welcomed by staff who felt that it was a powerful work incentive, particularly for lone parents who were undecided about work. There was some concern that participants might be relying on the payments, but staff were generally optimistic that customers would remain in work after the payments ended.
- The majority of lone parent recipients were not aware of IWC before securing work, while those who did know in advance were generally told in the context of New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) when they were already searching for work. None remembered being told at a Work Focused Interview (WFI).
- The majority reported no problems with the administration of the payments, and where there were errors these were usually rectified quickly. There was little in-work contact with advisers whilst lone parents were in receipt of IWC.
- Lone parents were unanimously positive about the payments and spent them primarily on day-to-day living expenses, with a few saving them up for larger purchases. The amount and frequency of payments was welcomed, particularly the weekly schedule, which mirrored Income Support (IS) payments. The payments were more important to those who were in debt, had high childcare, housing or transport costs, or those with low and/or unreliable incomes.
- Where respondents left work (either prior to or after the 12 month period of IWC), this was primarily due to difficulties reconciling employment with childcare responsibilities or problems relating to the work itself (e.g. redundancy). There was only one instance of a respondent leaving work due to financial difficulties.
- Those who stayed in work after IWC ended often said that they had to 'juggle' their finances more carefully. Only a few were more severely affected, mainly because they had very low pay or their wages were unreliable. None had dropped out of work for this reason, although one was considering it.

- Some who had not yet exhausted their payments had plans in place for improving their earnings after payments ended, although only a small number had 'advanced' in the time they had been in work. None was planning to leave work on account of IWC ending.
- Lone parents felt that IWC alone had little impact on their work-related decisions. None felt that it acted as an incentive for them to enter work, although some spoke of IWC as an important part of a broader package of financial help (including Working Tax Credits (WTCs) and various benefit run-ons) that made work seem more feasible and less daunting.
- None felt that IWC alone kept them in work, although the vast majority felt that it had made a difference to their financial wellbeing whilst in work. To this extent it potentially reinforced lone parents' positive assessment of a working lifestyle.
- Both staff and lone parents concurred that IWC was a useful addition to the financial package which eased lone parents' transition from benefits into work. However, while staff saw it as a powerful incentive encouraging work entry, lone parents, by and large, did not. This must be qualified however, by the fact that the majority of participants only found out about IWC when they were already committed to finding work, therefore it is difficult to judge its potential incentive effect.

5.1 Staff perspectives

Jobcentre Plus staff, managers and advisers alike, were overwhelmingly positive about the In Work Credit (IWC) pilot. It received the highest praise of all three pilots, and was viewed as *'the best pilot the NDLP has seen'* and *'the best thing the New Deal adviser could offer'*. It was said to offer *'something to sell'* alongside work and to *'bring the crowds in'*.

Staff felt that IWC was effective both as an incentive for lone parents to enter work and as an aid to work retention. As a work incentive, they thought that it was especially useful for those lone parents whom they regarded as being on the 'border line' in their decision to enter work, since they felt that it offered that extra 'push' for them to start job searching. Conversely, some staff noted that it would make little difference for those lone parents who are either 'unable' or 'unwilling' to work due to difficult personal and family circumstances.

In relation to job retention, staff felt that the extra money provided an incentive for customers to stay in work because they *'get used to it.'* Advisers reported instances where IWC recipients who left work were motivated to find another job in order to continue with the payments. By virtue of encouraging work, IWC was associated with more general improvements in customer wellbeing. For example, it was thought to help lone parents gain benefits such as greater confidence, social respect, a positive 'work ethic', higher income and more material goods. Children

were said to benefit from having a positive working role model. However, staff also warned of customers whom they felt might not be able to remain in work once IWC had finished because the extra cash had become essential to their living expenses. For example, one adviser cited a customer who was using IWC to top up nursery fees.

Most advisers felt that weekly payments were the best way to deliver the IWC payments and that £40 was seen by customers as a sizable amount of money. A few suggested that the payments could have more of an incentive effect if they were paid in a lump sum every three or six months, but others argued against this, saying that the weekly payments helped lone parents cover day-to-day expenses such as childcare costs and general living expenses, as well as mirroring the frequency of Income Support (IS) payments.

The only criticism of IWC made by staff related to the extra administration required by the pilot. However, unlike with Work Search Premium (WSP), this did not seem to deter advisers from offering IWC to eligible customers, reflecting their positive view of the pilot. Advisers spoke of lone parents who wanted to delay their job search in order to become eligible for IWC, but they generally discouraged this tactic, explaining that in the time it took to find work they may well have reached the eligibility period anyway. Mandatory WFIs were reported to be the primary means for informing eligible customers about IWC. IWC was thought to have a particularly powerful effect on customers when introduced in the context of a Better Off Calculation (BOC) since it substantially increased the amount by which the customer would be better off. As one manager explained:

'You know, you tell somebody when they're working sixteen hours a week they are going to be eighty odd pounds a week better off²¹, three hundred and twenty pounds a month...it's quite a hit for us.'

(DIM)

The procedures for collecting payslips for monitoring IWC eligibility varied between districts and advisers. Some felt that their customers should be ultimately responsible for sending in pay slips and did the minimal amount of work to ensure that this was done. Others prompted their customers with a reminder by telephone or letter. In addition, some advisers encouraged their customers to bring in their payslips in person so that they could discuss how things were going, although if they could not manage to attend a meeting, advisers were mostly content for payslips to be sent through the post.

5.2 Lone parent perspectives

Fifty lone parents who received IWC were interviewed, including around half who had also participated in WSP and/or Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (QWFIs)

²¹ i.e. with wages, WTC and IWC

(12+)) prior to entering work and receiving IWC. Respondents had varying durations on IWC: some left IWC before their eligibility ended, others were still receiving IWC at the time of their last interview and just over half had exhausted their IWC payments.

5.2.1 Initial engagement

The point at which lone parents found out about IWC was partly reliant on their level of previous contact with Jobcentre Plus. Among those who participated in IWC only, the majority were only informed of the pilot after they had secured work. Most of these respondents had approached Jobcentre Plus for advice about ending benefits and claiming in-work tax credits and were told of IWC at this time. They had generally had little previous contact with Jobcentre Plus or only sporadic contact. Some said that they had already heard about IWC and other forms of in-work financial support from friends or family members who had advised them to contact Jobcentre Plus on starting work to learn about their entitlements. A smaller number had found out about IWC prior to finding work when seeing an adviser in the context of NDLP. There were some who had been in regular contact with Jobcentre Plus before finding a job, but did not recall their adviser having told them about IWC until they found a job, when it was introduced to them in the context of a BOC, to assist them in deciding whether or not to take the job.

Those in the sample who received IWC and had previously either received WSP or attended QWFI (12+) meetings were more likely to recall hearing of the pilot prior to starting work. This was particularly the case for those who progressed from WSP on to IWC, who usually said that they were introduced to IWC and WSP together as part of an integrated package of support. Nonetheless, some of these respondents remarked that they had forgotten about the extra 40 pounds while attending WSP meetings, and were pleasantly surprised when reintroduced to the idea after finding work. Respondents who progressed from QWFIs (12+) on to IWC varied in terms of when they first heard about IWC. Some stated that they were not told about it until they found a job and it was presented as part of a package of in-work entitlements or as part of a BOC. Others had heard about it whilst attending regular meetings with a personal adviser before finding work.²² However, as noted earlier, it did not appear that respondents attending QWFIs (12+) were told about IWC before they started meeting with an adviser on a more regular basis and were actively looking for work. Non-working QWFI (12+) participants were mostly unaware of the IWC pilot. It should be noted, however, that this is based on respondent recall and there is a possibility that respondents were told about IWC during QWFIs (12+) but had subsequently forgotten. The latter accords with adviser accounts that they offered IWC to everyone, with WFIs being the most common context for notifying eligible customers.

²² In districts with Employment Zones (EZs), respondents were sometimes informed about IWC by an adviser with the EZ provider rather than through Jobcentre Plus.

5.2.2 Experiences and attitudes

Administration

Lone parents were generally satisfied with the reliability and frequency of IWC payments, which were directly deposited into their bank accounts. Payments were conditional on showing proof of work through payslips and this system mostly worked well. Most lone parents visited Jobcentre Plus for this purpose, although for convenience some sent their payslips through the post. There were only a few cases where payments were delayed because a participant was not aware of the need to show payslips or because of a technical error with the issuing agency. One respondent, for example, had noticed that her payments had stopped after a few months and had never chased it up. By the time of the second research interview, however, she had contacted her adviser about the payments and was receiving IWC again. In other similar cases, the money was also rectified through back payments. There was just one instance where the relationship between a respondent and her adviser soured when the lone parent blamed her adviser for a delay in getting her payments. There was also a case of a lone parent who had had lengthy delays in payments a couple of times which had left him in financial difficulties. This was particularly acute because he was self-employed and his income was unstable. At the second interview, his payments of IWC had finished but he thought that he was still owed two month's money and spoke of being in financial difficulties.

Weekly payments

Practically everyone who received it was positive about IWC. When asked what they felt about the payments, lone parent responses included '*A really good idea*'; '*Great! Fantastic!*' '*Excellent! Marvellous!*'. In terms of the amount of the IWC payments, lone parents were generally very appreciative and many respondents felt that IWC was '*a lot of money*', especially after claiming benefits. Only one respondent was more ambivalent.²³ A number spoke of IWC as part of a broader package of financial help for entering work, which also included WSP (for those who had received it), in-work tax credits, IS and Housing Benefit (HB) run-ons. All those who received a Better Off Calculation (BOC) stated that the extra £40 was presented to them separately and this reinforced the view that the payments were 'extra'.

Participants used the £40 payments primarily to cover day-to-day living expenses (bills, food, transportation). As one lone parent with a school age child stated:

'Well, it's towards the shopping, like my weekly shop, basically that's what it's used for, bills, mostly food shopping, school dinners.'

(LP11)

²³ This was a male lone parent who stressed the financial disincentives to work and maintained that £40 was not that much money, particularly given that it only lasted for one year.

A smaller number of respondents said that they used the extra cash to treat their children to trips out or additional purchases:

'...usually to treat my kids, just to, sort of, because I'm working now and I'm not at home 24/7 for them, it is just something that we can go and do together.'

(LP8)

A few said that they applied the money to debt repayments, while a small number mentioned setting the money aside as savings for a holiday or a large purchase.

Respondents said that they liked IWC because it was extra income to put towards the additional expenses payable on starting work, for example bills such as rent and Council Tax, clothes and shoes for work, children's school dinners, and travel expenses. Sometimes these were unanticipated expenses, for example, one respondent found IWC useful to pay her rent because her BOC had under-estimated the amount that she would have to pay. Perceptions of whether it was 'enough' money understandably varied according to individual circumstances. Those more reliant on IWC were mainly those who had built up debt while on IS; those who had high childcare, housing or transport costs, which was more often the case in London²⁴; and those on very low pay or with an unreliable income, such as the self-employed or workers in sectors such as care. However, only one lone parent respondent commented that the amount of IWC should be varied according to financial need.

A few customers commented positively on the 'reliability' of IWC payments. For one customer this contrasted to her work income since she was self-employed, and another described it as a 'cushion' which she could rely on if she had to take unpaid leave from work due to childcare responsibilities. Its reliability and frequency also meant respondents could set it aside for necessary payments such as bills or use it for higher cost purchases such as clothes or treats for the children. Some also welcomed the weekly schedule of payments because it mirrored IS, in contrast to wages which were often paid monthly. For example, one lone parent with a preschool child explained:

'I thought it was a good idea, now that's forty pounds to help me, because I don't get paid till monthly and when you've got Income Support every week, you've got to start adapting.'

(LP2)

²⁴ Particularly for those living in private rented accommodation for whom housing costs were often prohibitively expensive, thus holding down working hours due to the interactions between earnings and HB.

Most participants said that they were not given any guidance by their adviser on how to use IWC. However, they were mostly aware that the payments were temporary and so tried to spend accordingly. Some expressed a desire to save the money but said that they were unable to because it was needed for household expenses. For example one respondent with two school age children, said:

'I couldn't afford to save it, put it that way. I just didn't, it went on things! I did try at first, but it just didn't work out like that...when you're getting your bills in and stuff.'

(LP27)

There were a number of cases where families experienced hardship managing their expenses on a working income. One lone parent mentioned difficulties repaying debt that had accumulated while she was not working, another had run up credit card debts after she started work.

In-work contact with Jobcentre Plus

It was rare for working lone parents to receive information or advice from their advisers once they entered work. Overwhelmingly, they did not consult their lone parent adviser nor did their adviser contact them, apart from reminder letters or phone calls for payslips. If there was any in-work contact, this usually occurred during the early weeks of starting a job and, in almost all cases, it was initiated by the lone parent. The need for advice centred around finances and sorting out benefits and tax credits. One lone parent with two secondary school children had been into Jobcentre Plus three times to see her adviser since starting work. She stated that it was the help she received in filling out the paperwork to apply for financial support that she valued most:

Most lone parents were content with the level of in-work contact as it stood. However, a few would have benefited from further in-work help when they experienced difficulties with IWC payments and some did feel 'abandoned' by Jobcentre Plus once they started work. For example, one lone parent who had some problems with sorting out Housing Benefit once in work, stated:

'There wasn't continuous help from the Jobcentre, once you've got a job, it's, See you later, Bye, Nice meeting you!'

(LP37)

Another respondent who had participated in QWFIs (12+) and then entered work talked of being '*dropped like a hot potato*' once she was in work.

Leaving IWC

The initial sample included lone parents who had left IWC because the eligibility period had ended and those who had stopped receiving payments prior to this. As discussed in Chapter 1, sampling occurred three to five months before interviews

took place and during this interim period, circumstances had sometimes changed, including work status. At the second wave of interviews, around three months after the first, circumstances for some participants had changed again.

Among those who left IWC early, most were still looking for work, although a couple had decided to defer work for retraining or because of changed personal circumstances (pregnancy) and one was in a different job. Of those who exhausted their eligibility and stayed in work, most were still in work at the time of the interview, although a small number had left their jobs and were looking for work, while some had changed jobs. Reasons for leaving work, for both groups of respondents, were mostly work-related issues (being made redundant, a temporary contract finishing, not getting on with a manager) or childcare problems. Only one respondent had left work due to financial circumstances. This was a respondent who had taken a telesales job with a very low basic wage and found herself unable to cope on the money. More detail about in-work trajectories and factors affecting work retention is provided in Chapter 6 (6.5.2).

Of those who had exhausted their eligibility for IWC, most said that they had been contacted by their lone parent adviser shortly before payments would end so that they would be prepared for the drop in income. Nonetheless, most said that they felt 'the pinch' when IWC ended:

'When that £40 stopped you really struggle, you do notice.'

(LP28)

'It was sorely missed when it was taken away again'

(LP29)

'It's a killer when it stops!'

(LP33)

All spoke of adjustments being needed when the payments came to an end. Some had planned for this by saving some of the money received from IWC, whilst others spoke about having to do without some of the 'extras', or having to 'juggle' their money more carefully.

Only a few respondents felt that they were more seriously affected when IWC ended and these were usually respondents on very low pay or with unpredictable income. For example, one respondent was thinking of leaving her part-time job as a catering assistant because it did not pay enough. She had wanted to increase her hours but had been unable to do so. She was also unhappy with her job as she found it monotonous and below the level of her previous qualifications and experience. When asked if she had considered leaving work, she replied that she had, but attributed this to her low wages rather than the IWC payments ending:

'I realise that financially I am not doing that well. In fact I'm having to struggle to make ends meet. But late, that's when I started thinking of even stopping work, because I'm expected to pay bills, and I don't even have enough to spend in my own house to buy the necessities, not just luxury.'

(LP12)

Another respondent faced particular difficulties because her part-time wages were irregular with her hours varying from one week to the next. She suggested that it might have been helpful if the IWC payments were reduced gradually to soften the impact:

'I wasn't really happy about that, when it stopped all of a sudden, because they should have just cut it to twenty pounds, slowly, slowly, instead of just cutting it altogether.'

(LP40)

Another respondent had a pre-school child and had to pay high childcare costs (despite receiving WTC). She talked about having to depend on family to help her once IWC ended. She also expressed negative views on the pilot as a result of her experiences since the payments ran out:

'I think that's a bad thing, me, I do. I think for them to give it, yes, then take it back...I were back to square one, and that's when, if any time I thought, Is this worth it? it were then, when that stopped.'

(LP33)

A self-employed respondent felt that the impact of IWC ending had hit him hard, causing him to get into difficulties with loan repayments. In addition to it being difficult because he was still establishing his business, he had had problems with IWC not being paid on time and having to wait for back payments, as mentioned earlier.

Some participants said that they were planning work-related changes in order to maintain their income once IWC ended. For example, one respondent mentioned that she was planning to find another part-time job to boost her income because she had become accustomed to the extra £40 a week. However, such plans were not always realised. For example, one lone parent spoke at the first research interview about wanting to get a second job in order to make up for the loss in income. However, by the time of the second interview, while she *had* changed her job, this was in order to ease her childcare arrangements and she felt that she had been pushed out of her previous job rather than making a positive choice. The pay in her new job was similarly low, but she had decided not to increase her working hours because she felt that it would impact on her finances negatively, due to the interaction between working hours and WTC payments.

A small number of respondents had received promotions or pay rises since they had been in work, which, although unrelated to IWC ending, had made up for the loss in income that they would have experienced. One respondent who worked in the civil service, for example, had been able to secure a transfer to a similar job nearer to her home, which had both assisted her in managing her childcare arrangements and had cut down her travel costs, which was primarily what she had spent her IWC on. While this change was unrelated to the IWC payments ending, it helped to offset the loss in income.

5.2.3 Perceptions of impacts

Work entry

It is difficult to assess the impact of IWC as a work incentive on the evidence from lone parents respondents because many participants in the study reported they were not aware of the pilot until they had found a job. Moreover those who knew about it beforehand generally said that they had already made the decision to start looking for work and were already seeing an adviser regularly (in the context of NDLP) when they were told about it. Therefore, it is not surprising that, in retrospect, the vast majority of lone parents said that the availability of IWC had not affected their decision to look for work.

Where IWC might be expected to have had a greater impact is on the intensity of job search, and hence on the time taken to find a job, and on decision-making with regard to taking specific jobs. With regards to the first of these, the overwhelming majority of respondents who had known about IWC in advance said that it had not affected their job search. There was just one respondent, who progressed from QWFIs (12+) on to IWC, who said that knowing about IWC had altered her motivation to work and made her look for work 'harder' than she would have done otherwise. There was no evidence of customers delaying their job search in order to ensure their eligibility for IWC.

With respect to decision-making around taking a particular job, again most lone parents said that the extra £40 did not make a difference. Respondents mostly emphasised that they would only take a job that was 'right for them', for example in terms of the type of work they wanted and with hours that would fit around their childcare arrangements. Some also stated that they would not be swayed by the IWC because they knew that it was only temporary. However, a few respondents did say that on hearing about the IWC in the context of a BOC, the additional £40 had been an important part of the overall package of financial support that encouraged them to enter work. For example one respondent stated:

'when I first said that I was interested in looking for work and [the adviser] had got this sheet made up, and on it, you know, all the workings out...and then at the end of it it's got Plus 40 pounds, so, say it's like £249 plus 40, so in effect it's £289 I'd be getting a week...and I thought, Well, OK, it's only for a year, so I wouldn't want to rely on it, but it was a bit of an incentive, yeah.'

(LP4)

IWC seemed to be particularly important to respondents who were entering self-employment because of the unreliability of future earnings. One self-employed respondent, when asked if she would have been better off in work (than on IS) without the IWC, said:

'No... Well, I probably would have been, but it didn't feel like it at the time, because it's kind of very scary going back to work after so long... It [the IWC] made it, it looked very nice and very, what's the word I'm looking for? It looked very viable.'

(LP29)

In these cases, the IWC payments reinforced the financial benefits of working and made the move from benefits to work seem less of a daunting prospect. However, there were only one or two cases in the sample where respondents specifically stated that it was the IWC that 'tipped the balance' in favour of them taking a job. One had found a job in telesales, consisting of a very low basic wage complemented by commission. In this case, the additional £40 made the job seem financially worthwhile. Once in work for a few months, however, this respondent found that she wasn't making enough money to pay her bills, even with the £40, and so eventually she returned to benefits. This case suggests that there are dangers in lone parents placing too much weight on temporary financial assistance like IWC when considering a particular job.

For the most part, IWC acted as an additional justification for work, because of the promise of a higher income, for those who were already committed to looking for work. Many respondents stressed that they wanted to work and the importance of work to their self-identity. Other priorities were also presented as more important in their decision to return to work than the extra money from IWC. A common sentiment, for example, was that they had returned to work when 'the time was right' for them personally. This is explored further in Chapter 6.

Work retention

Responses from lone parents as to whether IWC had any impact on job retention were similar to those regarding the decision to enter work. Only one respondent explicitly acknowledged that the extra money had made a difference to her staying in work. (This is the respondent noted above who worked in telesales and felt that initially the £40 a week payment had been an essential complement to her low basic wage, although she later left work.) Moreover, as noted earlier, none of the respondents who had exhausted their payments of IWC had left work due to the payments ending and only one had left work primarily due to financial reasons.

There was some evidence from the interviews, however, that staying in work during the IWC period had established work patterns and expectations of income. As noted previously, one lone parent stated that the loss of the extra money had motivated her to look for a higher paying job, and another was hoping to increase her work hours to compensate for the loss of income.

Likewise, all who were still receiving IWC at the time of the interview stated their intentions to stay in their job once the payments ended. Some emphasised that they were used to the extra income brought in by working and the routine of going into work, whilst again others stressed their personal commitment to working rather than claiming IS.

Financial Impacts

Even though respondents stated that IWC had little impact on their work decisions, the vast majority felt that it had made a real difference to their financial well-being. Practically everyone said that they had found the payments 'helpful.' For example

'I would have been better off working, but that £40 made me comfortable, it gave me a lot less to worry about.'

(LP21)

'It hasn't helped keeping me in my job, but it has helped me meeting day-to-day bills in the house.'

(LP12)

A self-employed respondent said that extra money had helped her 'stay afloat' during the first year in work.

Thus, whilst few respondents said that the extra £40 kept them in work, the extra cash did make a difference to their financial wellbeing during their first year in work. It may, therefore, have strengthened their positive assessment of a working life, thereby reinforcing positive work orientations.

5.3 Lone parent and staff views compared

IWC was received positively by both staff and lone parents. Both pointed to the usefulness of a financial supplement for easing lone parents' transition from benefits into work. However, advisers and customers had different views on the value of IWC as a work incentive. Staff believed that IWC did act as an extra incentive for lone parents to take up work, although it was acknowledged that it held less impact for those who were less receptive to work or those with particularly difficult circumstances. Staff felt that IWC was most effective for lone parents who were already decided about work but had not yet made the move to do something about it.

In contrast, lone parents downplayed the role of the extra cash in their decisions about taking up work. Instead they stressed their personal commitment to working or said that the time had become right for them. However, given that most reported that they were not aware of IWC before they had secured work, the effectiveness of the supplement as an incentive for work entry is difficult to gauge. Only a very small number felt that knowing about the IWC had made a difference to their job search activity. While lone parents acknowledged that being better off in work was a primary concern, other priorities also entered into their work entry (and exit) decisions, primarily issues around caring responsibilities for their children.

6 Lone parent work journeys

Summary

- Lone parents brought with them to the pilots a variety of backgrounds, personal and family circumstances, and orientations to paid work and to caring. They experienced and responded to the pilots differently, in part due to these factors, in combination with the situations they encountered during their journeys towards work and into work. Their journeys are divided into three phases: work receptivity, work preparation and in-work, providing a framework for understanding their interactions with the pilots and their outcomes.
- Respondents had a variety of previous work histories, ranging from limited or no previous work experience to more continuous work histories. Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (QWFI (12+)) respondents who did not enter work tended to have had a more lengthy period out of work and to have larger families. In some cases this was also combined with other circumstances which rendered work difficult for them.
- Work receptivity can be seen as a process whereby lone parents start to consider paid work as an option and become receptive to the idea. It can be a lengthy and protracted process and some may need a considerable amount of help and support. Lone parents who were unreceptive to work had concerns about childcare or about the financial feasibility of work, while those who were ambivalent found that life events, combined with lack of confidence, conspired to prevent them from taking 'the first step'.
- Respondents took different routes through work preparation, utilising Jobcentre Plus support through New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP), external training providers or independent means of job search. Those who had been out of work for longer particularly valued confidence building courses. Some respondents benefited from training providers (referred to by Jobcentre Plus) who offered paid work placements.
- The work transition period could be difficult and respondents spoke of financial adjustments as well as changes to family routines. Most managed financially, while those in more difficulty had debts or high childcare costs and low wages. Most were overwhelmingly positive about being in work, citing social and emotional benefits, as well as financial.

- In-work journeys followed one of three trajectories: steady, advanced or broken. Those who advanced tended to be in better paid work or to have a supportive employer with internal opportunities for career advancement. Broken work journeys were caused by job factors, such as redundancy, or difficulties reconciling work with childcare. A number who left work due to childcare problems subsequently decided to retrain or move into a more 'family friendly' area of work.

6.1 Introduction

Lone parents participating in the pilots brought with them a variety of backgrounds (work and benefit histories, education and skills); variety in their personal and family circumstances (number and ages of children, health, support available to them); and in their attitudes to paid work and orientations towards their caring responsibilities. They experienced and responded to the pilots differently, in part due to these factors and in combination with the situations they encountered during their journeys towards work and in work. The study sampling frame sought to capture diversity in the length of time participants had been on the pilots (see Table A.3 in Appendix A for further detail). By asking respondents to provide retrospective accounts of their experiences since starting on the pilots, the study was able to capture a substantial period of time in the lone parents' lives.

This chapter charts the journeys that the lone parents have taken towards work and into work. The types of journeys that emerged from their accounts are divided into three phases: work receptivity, work preparation and in-work. This provides a framework for understanding the lone parents' interactions with the pilots and their outcomes, since the pilots are also targeted at these phases of the work journeys (QWFI (12+) at receptivity and work preparation, Work Search Premium (WSP) at work preparation and In Work Credit (IWC) at in-work). Before considering the lone parents' journeys at each of these phases, there is a brief outline of what they brought with them to the pilots, which partly shape how they responded to the pilot interventions.

6.2 Personal circumstances

As discussed in Chapter 2, previous work histories and qualifications, together with number and ages of children, go some way to explaining the labour market participation patterns amongst lone parents. The lone parents in this sample had a range of family and work backgrounds which affected their ability to work and the ways in which they interacted with the pilots.

Age and number of children varied across the sample with age of youngest child ranging from 0 to 16 years (albeit from 12 to 16 years for QWFI (12+) participants due to the eligibility criteria). Most lone parents across all three pilots had either one or two children, however, QWFI (12+) lone parents who did not move into work were more likely to have two or more children.

The lone parents in the sample exhibited a variety of previous work histories, which range on a continuum from those with limited or no previous work experience and a lengthy period out of work, to those with more continuous work histories and shorter periods out of the labour market. On this basis, the respondents can be broadly divided into three groups:

- a group with a very long period out of work bringing up children (ten years or more) and with generally little prior work experience;
- those with some work experience and a shorter period out of work (around five–ten years); and
- those with a more continuous work history.

Within each grouping there is also considerable diversity. Refer to Appendix E for more detail on the work histories of these three groups.

An analysis of the personal and family characteristics among the sample shows that work histories and circumstances (age of children, family support, health, etc.) have implications for, but do not completely determine lone parents' ability to enter work. Those in the sample who had moved into work and those who hadn't (at the time of the interview) had a varied range of work histories and circumstances. Notwithstanding this, QWFI (12+) respondents who did not enter work (a small group) did tend to have particular characteristics. They tended to be almost exclusively those who had had a more lengthy period out of work and also to have larger families. In some cases this was also combined with other circumstances which rendered work particularly difficult for them.

6.3 Work receptivity phase

Work receptivity can be seen as a process whereby lone parents start to consider paid work as an option and become receptive to this idea. The majority of respondents in the study, at the time of interview, had already entered work, and so were, by definition, already receptive to work. These respondents were probed on how and when they became receptive to work. The small number of respondents (all QWFI (12+)-only) who were not receptive to work and had not started a work journey are discussed first. Then those respondents who appeared to be ambivalent about work are considered. Some of these people had started work, whilst others were still struggling to take the first step. Finally, the process of becoming receptive to work is considered, through analysis of the retrospective accounts of those who had subsequently entered work.

6.3.1 Unreceptive

Only two customers in the study were completely unreceptive to work. However, their accounts give an insight into a broader population of lone parents who are unwilling or unable to work.²⁵

The first of these respondents is an example of a lone parent whose circumstances render it impractical for her to work. She has two children, both teenagers and has been a lone parent for a number of years. Her daughter has special needs (behavioural and mental) and she has not worked because of this; nor does she feel that she can work in the foreseeable future. She has been called in for QWFIs (12+), but feels that they are a waste of time for her, since she does not want to work. Although she has been advised that she could work while her daughter is in school, she rejects this option because of concerns about what she would do in the school holidays and at other times that her daughter might not be at school:

'the Jobcentre's saying, Well you could do work in like the hours that she's at school, but they forget about all the holidays they've got, or the academic review days, I mean they have quite a few of those, or teachers' training days...and I mean not many employers will say, OK, you can have [the time off]'

(LP65)

In this case the customer is unable to use formal childcare due to her daughter's condition. She is very worried about what will happen when her daughter finishes school, and feels that Jobcentre Plus should be more understanding of her daughter's condition.

The second unreceptive customer expressed contentment with her non-working status. She said that her primary role had always been as a 'mother' rather than as a 'worker', and that she wanted to continue in the role of full-time mother while her children were teenagers. However, this orientation to be the primary carer for her children was also bound up with financial concerns, since she expressed the view that it was not financially viable for her to work. Her account is explored further in Example 1.

²⁵ The QWFI (12+) is the only pilot intervention, amongst the three, that captures lone parents at a time when they are undecided or averse to working. It should be noted that this study specifically sampled approximately equal numbers of those who had entered the QWFI (12+) regime and subsequently found work and those who had not, in order to capture a diversity of experiences. Thus those unreceptive to work (a sub-group of those who didn't enter work) are very small in number in this study. They do, however, give insights into a broader population of lone parents who are unwilling or unable to work.

Case 1 – Belle: Unreceptive to work

Belle, in her 40s, has three children all over the age of 13. She had little work experience before having children and had been out of work and claiming Income Support (IS) for the last 15 years. In the interview, Belle counterposes the role of motherhood to that of working. Since having her first child, she has always seen herself as primarily a mother and does not want to change this status. The justification she gives for this is that she is a positive role model to her children as a mother, which has not ended just because her children are now older. She says that her mother did the same for her and she thinks that parents *should* be at home for their children. She feels that she needs to be at home before her children go to school and when they come home and wants to be around to help them with homework. She feared that if she left the children to get themselves to school they would stay in bed. She also spoke of living in a 'rough' area and not wanting the children to get into trouble.

Her orientation towards being the primary carer for her children, however, is also intertwined with financial considerations. Because her main concern is to be at home when her children are out of school, she could only take part-time work, and feels that such work is not financially viable:

'to be honest with you I don't think there's any point me looking for work, I'm not vastly over-qualified at all...and I just couldn't earn enough to make it worthwhile...and then plus the fact when I come in and the kids want help with their homework, you know, everybody loses out really.'

She is particularly concerned about the fact that she might not be able to cover her mortgage payments if she moved off benefits and started work.

She was called in to attend a QWFI (12+) approximately eighteen months before being interviewed, but her financial concerns about work did not appear to have been addressed, and she had a negative view of Jobcentre Plus advisory support:

'Because they're not living in the real world...most of them are nearly a generation younger than me and we're just not in the same world.'

Belle did not appear to have been called back for any further QWFIs (12+) since then and remains extremely negative towards the idea of working. The only reason why she would work, she said, would be if she needed the money, and at the moment she can manage well on benefits. Earning a living through work is thus not important to her, and she does not think that there would be anything that would persuade her to work until the time when she is no longer eligible for IS:

*'As soon as the kids are sixteen, as soon as their Child Benefit stops and I stop getting money for **them**, then it would be worthwhile me going to work.'*

These two customers, in different circumstances, were adamant that they did not want to work. They shared a concern that it would be impossible to find a job that would make work feasible for them. In the first case, this was due to the need for employment flexibility in the light of difficult caring responsibilities and, in the second, to a combination of perceived financial constraints alongside a strong orientation towards providing parental childcare.

6.3.2 Ambivalent/ambiguous

A further group of customers were not completely negative towards the idea of working, but expressed ambivalence. While a common trajectory is for lone parents to become more receptive to work over time, as children get older and become more independent, this can be a lengthy process in which lone parents may vacillate, appear ambivalent and/or lack the confidence to begin job preparation. This suggests that receptivity is complex and should be seen as a process.

An example of one of these respondents is a lone parent who has not worked since her divorce twelve years ago. She thinks that it would be good for her family for her to be in work, but says that 'something has always got in the way'. She has a teenage son and adult daughter, and most recently was not able to work because her daughter was undergoing a difficult pregnancy. The concept of the 'time being right' is important to her, but she appears to struggle to find this time. She is aware, however, that because her son will soon be sixteen, her time on IS is coming to an end and then she will have to find work.

Another example is a lone parent with two teenage children who had not worked for 20 years when she was called in for a QWFI (12+). At this time she did not feel that she or her family were ready for work, although her vision of the future included a return to work eventually, in order to provide a positive role model for her youngest daughter. This desire, however, was counter-balanced by the need for her to be close to her daughter's school, since her daughter was sometimes sent home because of poor behaviour. The fact that she has to deal with the consequences of her daughter's challenging behaviour makes it difficult for her to adjust her current role, even to take up part-time work. She was also apprehensive about returning to work because of her age (in her 40s) and lack of experience, and expressed concerns about financial security. When last interviewed, she explained that personal problems and school holidays were still delaying her job search.

6.3.3 Becoming receptive to work

The majority of those lone parents in the study who were working could recall a time when they were unsure about the prospects of taking up paid work. They referred to their concerns about care for their children or leaving teenage children unattended, self-doubts about their work abilities, and unease about upsetting the family routine. They also had worries about whether they would be financially better off in work and whether they would be able to pay the bills. For example, one working lone parent with two children, who had been out of work for eight years, reflected on her concerns about starting work:

'...not knowing whether I was gonna have to pay somebody to look after the children, and the hours that I was gonna have to work, have to pay my rent full, having the Council Tax, having to put petrol in the car, you know, all the expenses that you don't think of...Is there any point me going out and doing all these bloody hours, and not spending time with my kids?'

(LP29)

Many of those who had come to a positive decision about returning to work often referred to this being a decision based on their personal circumstances, such that *the time was right for them*. This corresponds to research identifying the importance of the lifecourse and of change over time in shaping women's priorities with respect to work and parental childcare, as discussed in Chapter 2. The 'right time' for work was often judged in relation to perceptions of children's growing independence with age. Several respondents with teenage children said that they had been reluctant to use childcare when their children were younger, but were now considering work. Reaching secondary school seemed to be a common marker for children being seen as old enough to see themselves to and from school. However, many lone parents also commented on the need to take individual circumstances into account, and raised examples of where there might be ongoing care issues with older children, such as children with disabilities, children having problems at school, or concerns over children travelling to and from school independently in areas deemed to be unsafe.

Where lone parents with younger children were in work, employment was often restricted to the school day. For others, their receptivity to work was conditional on the availability of informal childcare. Although some lone parents used formal childcare many did not, citing issues of cost, availability and trust. Spells out of employment were also complicated in some instances by the breakdown of a relationship, resulting in a heightened desire for lone parents to 'be there' for their children's emotional wellbeing.

Those lone parents with more continuous work histories were more established in their receptivity to work and tended to express strong work identities. A common refrain was that they had 'always worked', and generally practical reasons for not working (finances, childcare availability) were emphasised in explaining any periods out of work, rather than a desire to provide parental childcare. For example, one lone parent with three children spent time at home with her older children but had returned to work before having her third child. In her account, she portrays herself as having an established identity as a worker. When asked why she returned to work just a few months after having her third child, she stated:

'Because I'd been working all the time, I'd only been off on maternity leave...because I'd always been...I'd been working for like five, six years, and I'd got used to being very self-sufficient. I think when you just come off benefits it gives you so much self-esteem and self-respect, and I didn't want to go back to being on benefits. I wanted to be a self-supporting person bringing the kids up not relying on anybody. It makes you feel good about yourself.'

(LP21)

These analyses of the processes of becoming receptive to work, from lone parents who are at different stages on this pathway, indicate the way that receptivity to work is shaped out of an interplay between previous work histories, family circumstances, such as number and ages of children, as well as personal orientations towards working and towards providing care for children. They also illustrate how this process may stall, suggesting that lone parents may need a considerable amount of help and support to move them along the pathway of receptivity.

6.4 Work preparation phase

The work preparation phase is a period when lone parents assess their readiness to enter work and start to prepare themselves, through various means such as confidence building, training or education and job searching. The extent and nature of job preparation varied according to lone parents' previous work experience, skills and work confidence, as well as their preferred field of employment. They can be broadly divided into two groups: those who sought work preparation support from Jobcentre Plus and those who were 'self-initiated', who prepared and/or found work on their own (or expressed a desire to do so). This division largely reflects the nature of the sample groups: those who participated in a QWFI (12+) or in WSP used the services of Jobcentre Plus in their work preparation, whilst those who had just participated in the IWC pilot may not have used Jobcentre Plus services before entering work (although some had).

Not all lone parents who entered the work preparation stage went on to find work. In some cases, this was a matter of the timing of the interview such that the study did not capture the eventual movement into work. However, work preparation could also be protracted and fragmented. For example, those looking for work might identify new training needs and pursue this; limitations on the hours available for work might make finding a job difficult; or life events may take over to interrupt the job search.

Individuals also followed varying trajectories through the work preparation phase, for example, some completed training and then began looking for related work, others decided to enter training after a period of looking for work unsuccessfully, and a few moved in and out of training and job search activities. Given these dynamics it is difficult to enumerate all the different work preparation routes taken by participants in the study. However, generally, there were four broad types of work preparation support, which respondents pursued singularly or in combination:

Jobcentre Plus supported

- Use of Jobcentre Plus job search services, primarily through the NDLP programme (and WSP in districts where it is offered).

- Job search support and/or vocational training through a local provider, which in some instances was a partner provider to Jobcentre Plus, e.g., through Employment Zone (EZ) arrangements.²⁶

Self-initiated

- Education or training through independent providers, which was usually self-initiated, and encompassed further and higher education courses.
- Self-initiated job search without Jobcentre Plus support. These respondents were usually 'walk-ins' who had found a job independently but then received IWC. They may have undergone other forms of supported work preparation in previous periods.

6.4.1 Jobcentre Plus supported work preparation

Given the nature of the sample, the majority of respondents had used the services of Jobcentre Plus for work preparation. Compared to those in the sample whose work preparation was self-initiated, this group tended to have been out of work for a longer period and so needed their skills upgraded, or had attained new skills but lacked work experience in the field and needed more support in searching for related work. Some also lacked confidence in their abilities.

Job search support through NDLP

Lone parents who used Jobcentre Plus job search services typically did so through the NDLP programme. This includes all of the WSP participants in the study, a number of QWFI (12+) participants who subsequently enrolled on NDLP and some IWC-only participants who used NDLP before entering work. Those who were undertaking this form of work preparation (as opposed to participating in training) were, by and large, those who were more job ready: they had either already undertaken training or had more recent work experience.

Services received included help with job searching, CV preparation, interview coaching, financial advice and advice about in-work benefits and help arranging childcare. Better Off Calculations (BOCs) were a particularly important part of this support for many people, since they were concerned about how work would impact on their finances. Usually respondents reported having a BOC performed once they had found a particular job, and some felt that it would be useful for advisers to do calculations earlier in the work preparation process. For example, one lone parent who had not worked for 12 years, felt that she needed more financial information to guide her job search:

²⁶ See http://www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk/JCP/Customers/Programmesandservices/Employment_Zones/ for more information on EZs.

'At this point I don't really know how much I need to earn or to cover what, if I'm looking for a job.'

(LP33)

Many of those who used Jobcentre Plus job search services spoke of the importance of the personal support and encouragement that they received from advisers, in addition to practical help with the job search. As reported in Chapter 4, WSP participants often felt the structured meetings helped to keep them motivated and focused in their job search. Respondents also pointed to the emotional support of an adviser in reassuring them about the transition from benefits to paid work.

Referrals to other providers

Some participants were referred by Jobcentre Plus to other providers for work preparation help. This was related both to the needs of the customer as well as to the provision available in local areas. Broadly, these were lone parents who were less job ready, usually having spent a longer period out of work, who required some work-preparation training, either in confidence building or in basic work skills. There were also some who were referred on to other providers for job search support because of the provision arrangements in their area, e.g. EZs.

Respondents who had been out of work for longer periods valued job preparation courses covering introductory work skills and confidence building. An example of this is given in Example 2. Some lone parents attending training provision through local partner agencies also benefited from combined training and job placement programmes.

Case 2 – Jenna: Needing support for work preparation

Jenna was a 26 year old lone parent with a primary school aged child. She had studied beauty therapy at college, but decided not to pursue work in that field and entered work in catering instead. After leaving the catering post, she worked in retail for a while until she had her child and then spent a few years out of work. During this time she had little contact with Jobcentre Plus. She received a couple of letters advising her of the support available for lone parents to return to work, and on the second occasion, since she was already feeling like she wanted to get back into work, she went to see an adviser. Her adviser referred her to a confidence-building course, which she was very positive about. Reflecting on what was most helpful in facilitating her move back to work, she stated:

'That course that I did... I honestly really believe that was just a godsend and it was just, it was amazing, because it's getting people to come out again and that is a big problem in single parents that have not got the confidence and have not got the social skills. They don't see themselves as an important person any more they just see themselves as like a person there to look after a child. So, it did, it made me realise that I've got to be me again, you know?'

Case 2 – Continued

Subsequently Jenna started looking for work in childcare and joined WSP, but then realised that she needed to have a formal qualification and so enrolled on an National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) course. At the time of the interview she was on a full-time course in childcare, consisting of three days in college and two days work placement. She was confident of finding work once the course had finished and planned to work full-time as a nursery nurse or teaching assistant.

6.4.2 Self-initiated work preparation

Lone parents who were self-initiated in terms of their work preparation include the so-called 'walk-ins', those who had already found work and went into Jobcentre Plus to seek advice about leaving benefits. There was also another group of self-initiated lone parents who had pursued training through further or higher education prior to entering work.

'Self-initiated' lone parents are characterised with relatively recent work experience (usually within the last five years) and a number had more continuous work histories with few breaks from the labour market. Other lone parents in this group had been working short part-time hours while on IS, and some had undertaken skill enhancing training during the period they were out of work. Caring responsibilities also tended to be less of a problem for lone parents in this group, either because they had older children or because they had previous experience of using childcare.

Lone parents differed in their reasons for not using Jobcentre Plus services. Some had sought support, or been called in for a mandatory Work Focused Interview (WFI), but had not found the support useful. Sometimes this was because of the nature of their needs, for example, they were looking for a specialist area of work that was not well-represented in Jobcentre Plus. However, there also seemed to be variability and inconsistency in the level of support received across offices and districts (as reported in other evaluations of Jobcentre Plus services, e.g. Dowson *et al.*, 2004; Hudson *et al.*, 2006) and there were cases where respondents had experienced both positive and negative encounters with Jobcentre Plus advisers at different times, sometimes by switching to a different adviser.

Other respondents stated a preference for finding a job through their own means rather than with the help of Jobcentre Plus. These respondents were often those with more recent work experience and with higher qualifications, who expressed a strong sense of direction in terms of their job preferences and job search methods. Some said that other agencies (including EZ providers) were more useful than Jobcentre Plus, while others preferred to rely on informal networks. A few distanced themselves from Jobcentre Plus and the 'kinds of people' that they thought frequented the offices.

6.5 In-Work phase

6.5.1 Transition to work

The majority of lone parents in the study had been in work at some point since enrolling on the pilots. Full-time work (30 or more hours) was just as common as part-time work (16 to 29 hours), while a few were working less than 16 hours while still receiving IS. The types of employment taken up were dominated by care work (mainly care assistants or childcare workers), administration or office work, retail, and education (mainly teaching assistants). There were also a smaller number of respondents who were employed in domestic-related jobs (such as cleaning or dinner ladies). A few respondents were working in more skilled occupations, such as training delivery or consultancy.

Overwhelmingly, those lone parents in work felt very positive towards their work experiences. They spoke of a range of reasons why they enjoyed being in work, including social, psychological and financial reasons, and the intrinsic interest of the work itself. A common sentiment was that work was important for social reasons, to 'get out of the house', to meet new people or for confidence building. One lone parent, who had been out of work for a year after splitting up from an abusive partner, said of her feelings about returning to work:

'Oh it meant a lot, it is socialising, it is everything, to me anyway, I'm not at home, I don't like being at home all the time, I like to be busy, and I think it builds your confidence up because you've got to deal with more...when I was off for a year I knew I needed the year off to look after my kids and sort them out, but you lose your confidence...I think it is good for any, I think everybody should work for that reason really, the confidence.'

(LP8)

Respondents also spoke of the importance of the financial rewards from work, either because they no longer had to struggle with paying bills and day-to-day necessities, which was especially the case for those who had built up debts while on IS, or because they were now able to afford treats or larger expenditures for the children. While most respondents felt that they were considerably better off financially in work, there were those that did not feel better off, usually in cases where respondents were working part-time on the minimum wage and in larger families. Many said that the social and emotional benefits of working outweighed the limited financial gain, but some nonetheless complained that they were not as well off as they thought they would be or for the sacrifices they had made in terms of spending less time with children. Some were less well off than a BOC had predicted because of changes in hours or wages which had then impacted on tax credits and other benefits.

Furthermore, it often took respondents a considerable period of time to adjust financially to budgeting on a wage rather than on benefits. A major concern expressed by lone parents in the early days of work related to financial security and

anxieties about shifting from benefits to a wage, including the transition from a weekly to a monthly income. Most lone parents needed assurance of their financial wellbeing in work and, especially in the London districts, that their earnings would cover their housing costs. During this early period, working lone parents particularly valued financial help towards work clothes, assistance with childcare costs that had to be paid up front, help with work travel costs and 'run ons' of Housing and Council Tax Benefits to ease the transition. In addition, they mentioned problems with budgeting their work income on expenses they were unaccustomed to having, such as rent, Council Tax, transport, school uniform, and school lunches and trips.

The ease with which lone parents adapted to work varied according to how long they had been out of work and other personal circumstances, such as the age of the children, the childcare arrangements, their hours of work, and the extent of flexibility granted by their employer. One lone parent, working in administration after being out of work for 13 years, spoke of the different adjustments necessary:

'It's a little bit of everything that you have to adjust to, it's making sure that you're not getting up ten minutes later in the morning, so you're setting off at the right time, it's making sure, well you're not getting money into an account every week,'

(LP43)

There were very few instances of lone parents leaving a job because they could not cope financially. However, one example mentioned in Chapter 5 was a respondent with a primary school aged child, who left her job in telesales after six months because of low commission-based wages and high childcare costs. She felt that it was not worth her while to stay in employment, even with IWC, as she had incurred debts with her rent and Council Tax. Whilst most respondents managed to remain in work, in retrospect several said that their first weeks of work might have gone more smoothly if they had had better advice on what financial help was available and how to access the help.

Respondents also pointed to other negative aspects of being in work, such as less free time, lack of energy and, most importantly, less time with children. During the early weeks and months of work they had to adapt to changes in family behaviour such as new morning and after-school routines and juggling childcare with the work journey. One respondent with a three year old child, who had been working for ten months, captured it well:

'You think, Oh god I feel so wicked, and sometimes I sit there and say, Please, come on, for mummy, come on, we've got to go, and he says, No, and he throws himself on the floor, and I'm saying, I really haven't got time for this, like, I've got to get to work, mummy's going to be late and I'm going to end up getting sacked, I really don't have time for this, we can sort this out when you come home from nursery, like, please come on, come on, and at times, Oh, sometimes it's a nightmare!'

(LP23)

Despite these drawbacks, many spoke of the independence and 'self-respect' that work provided. Many working lone parents exhibited strong work identities and said that they would not give up their work status lightly. Those who were dissatisfied with their job or their pay talked of looking for better work rather than returning to benefits and those satisfied with work could not foresee a time when they would not want to work (unless something serious occurred with their child(ren) which required parental care). Many also emphasised the positive role model they provided to their children as a worker:

It sort of gives them something to look forward to themselves, to know that it is better for you to go out there and earn your money and get more for it rather than stay on the dole.' (LP62)

6.5.2 Work retention

There were also ongoing adjustments that respondents had to adapt to beyond the work transition phase. These included difficulties paying bills, breakdown in childcare arrangements, temporary contracts ending, or family difficulties. In many instances these were unpredictable and therefore difficult to plan for. There were also cases where lone parents thought that they had sufficiently prepared for work, but once in work discovered unexpected barriers to retaining employment. Thus the period of transition into work can be protracted and of uneven length.

Due to these ongoing adjustments, lone parents experienced varying in-work journeys. These can be broadly categorised as 'steady', 'advanced' and 'broken'²⁷. The nature of these journeys was partly shaped by the length of time the lone parent had been in work (which ranged among the sample from six months to over two years), but changes also occurred at different rates for different people. Some experienced changed work circumstances in a relatively short space of time, while others experienced little change over a longer period.

²⁷ There is inevitably a subjective element in categorising these trajectories, particularly in determining 'advancement'. For example, a lone parent might take a decision to leave work to pursue training with a view to getting 'better' work in the future, or to take time out of the labour market to prioritise their caring responsibilities. Such journeys are ambiguous: they may be assessed negatively, as judged by the criterion of staying in paid work, but positively in terms of the individual's own assessment of their trajectory. Similarly, reducing hours to better combine work with caring responsibilities may be viewed negatively in terms of income or positively in terms of work retention, since it may allow that individual to stay in work. Moreover, individuals' own assessments of the journeys they have made are often ambivalent too, e.g. reducing hours may have benefits in terms of improving work-life balance but negative implications for financial wellbeing. See Hoggart *et al.* (2006) for more detailed consideration of the varied meanings and forms that advancement can take.

Steady

The majority of working lone parents in the study essentially started a job and remained in that same job with the same hours for the duration of the study. Most of these people were satisfied with their work situation, although there were some who had remained in the same job despite their intentions to move on to something 'better'.

One example of someone pleased with their working lifestyle is a lone parent with four children, two of whom were still living at home. She had never formally worked before, aside from some cash in hand jobs, as she had her first child soon after leaving school. After attending WFIs over a few years and then QWFIs (12+) she found full-time work in a health-related field. Despite some concerns over her teenage son being unsupervised after school, she enjoyed being in work, feeling financially better off and able to purchase more things for herself and her children:

I've become independent, we've always got food in the house... the kids – they get something once a month, when I get paid.'

(LP39)

In contrast, another respondent had stayed in the same job for nearly a year despite being unhappy as a part-time cleaner. Whilst she was better off financially, she was not happy with the repetitive nature of the work and the lack of opportunity to meet other people. Consequently, she was looking for a better job, but had not succeeded in this by the time of the second research interview.

The different attitudes expressed by lone parents towards their work depended on the nature of the job they had moved in to and how their experiences compared to their previous plans and expectations.

Advanced

A small group of working lone parents had experienced some form of progression in their work during the study. These tended to be respondents who had entered 'good' jobs that were supportive of advancement or training, or people who were very motivated and had a strong commitment to a particular type of work and had progressed largely through their own efforts. Progression usually entailed 'formal' types of advancement such as increased hours or promotion to a role with more responsibility and usually with better pay, but could also include more subjective improvements to achieve a better work-life balance. An example of the latter is a lone parent with two children. She was university educated and had experience with self-employment and other 'small' jobs before having her first child. Whilst on IS, she completed a first degree followed by a post-graduate qualification and then secured a professional post working in the field of her studies. However, she found the hours difficult to co-ordinate with after-school childcare and after a year switched to a similar job that permitted a better balance between her work and caring responsibilities.

It was not only those with higher qualifications who secured advancement. Some respondents with fewer qualifications and work experience were able to take a job with an employer that supported training and career progression. In one district a number of respondents found work through a local training provider (to which they were referred through Jobcentre Plus) which provided combined training and (paid) work placements. The organisations that these respondents were placed with tended to be supportive of and have opportunities for career advancement. An example of this is provided in Example 3.

Case 3 – Penny: Advanced in work

Penny had not worked for 13 years while caring for her child when she was called in for a QWFI (12+). Before becoming a parent she had worked for a number of years in administration, but her attempt to return to her job when her child was younger was thwarted because she felt that formal childcare would be unsuitable. At the time of the QWFI (12+), Penny had started to think about returning to work but had not yet made any moves in this direction. At the meeting, she expressed an interest in upgrading her computer skills and was referred to a local provider that offered training and work placements. Here she was offered a work placement with a social care charity as a support worker, with a one day release to attend computer training. While a permanent job was not guaranteed, at the end of the six-month placement, there was a part-time post available which she took, and she also started to do additional courses in health care, which allowed her to work a few extra hours per week as an adviser and earn some additional income. When she was interviewed around 15 months later, she reflected on how quickly her life had changed:

'In life sometimes doors just open and you just have to go for it...I wasn't expecting that within a fortnight I'd be working four days, but it came up and I thought, I'll give it a go.'

By the time of the second interview, Penny had continued to advance, moving from the support worker role to an administrative position in the same organisation, with a corresponding salary increase, and she was continuing to work additional hours as a healthcare adviser.

Penny attributed her success with advancement to a number of factors, including the QWFI (12+) coming at the 'right time', when she was already thinking about returning to work; a helpful Jobcentre Plus adviser who reassured her of her financial wellbeing in work; and a supportive employer who allowed her the flexibility to pursue training whilst in work and then provided her with an opportunity to utilise her skills through an internal promotion. Penny's positive experience of advancement in work has reinforced her self-identity as a worker and she now feels that she will remain in paid employment:

'And as I say, I love, I really do love working, I could never imagine not working now, I really could not, I like it so much...I think it's given me, it's definitely given me my confidence back for sure. I was really, really lacking in confidence you know, I thought, Oh my God, I've been out of work for so long...and I've got lots more energy, I'm more focused. I think probably I'm more interesting as well, you know!'

Broken in-work journeys

Some respondents' in-work journeys were interrupted due to a range of factors, including work-related factors (redundancy, temporary contracts) and problems reconciling work with care responsibilities. The latter included cases where the hours required by the employer did not fit in with childcare arrangements (such as being required to work evenings, weekends or nights when childcare was not available), or unanticipated changes in care requirements which necessitated a move out of work (such as a child having an accident and requiring parental care, a relative no longer being able to provide care, or a child becoming too old for a particular provider and there being nothing else available).

A few of these individuals returned to work relatively quickly, to a similar type of job. This was usually in cases where an unexpected event had caused a temporary setback but did not require working and caring options to be fundamentally rethought. One example was a lone parent who had to leave her part-time job in a shop because the private nursery she was using stopped admitting children of her daughter's age. A month later, she was able to find suitable childcare and returned to work in a similar job.

It was rare for individuals to leave their job voluntarily, but unexpected problems sometimes led to a job exit and then this subsequently encouraged people to rethink their arrangements and options. One common pattern was for lone parents to leave a job which they found to be inflexible or incompatible with their childcare arrangements in some way and then subsequently to move into 'better' work, e.g. work with more convenient hours, that was more fulfilling or that had better opportunities for advancement. An alternative was to retrain with a view to moving into better work. For example, one respondent had been in work three months when her youngest child had an accident. She did not want to leave work but could not find suitable care for her child and was unable to take extended leave from work. When her child returned to school she started reapplying for similar work but then started to reassess her options and – in consultation with a Jobcentre Plus adviser – decided to retrain in advice work. She stated:

*'I was thinking about going to work in school kitchens, because the hours fit round me children. But if I could get to do what I **really** want to do, I'd be earning enough to pay the childcare...I've got a five year old who needs basically, through the school holidays, full-time childcare, and it is expensive...So it's a good salary, and we'd be able to live comfortably, and pay the childcare and pay the bills, and still be able to have family treats...So I'm looking at the long-term. I think it's something I'd enjoy, so it wouldn't just be earning, it'd be job satisfaction as well.'*

(LP21)

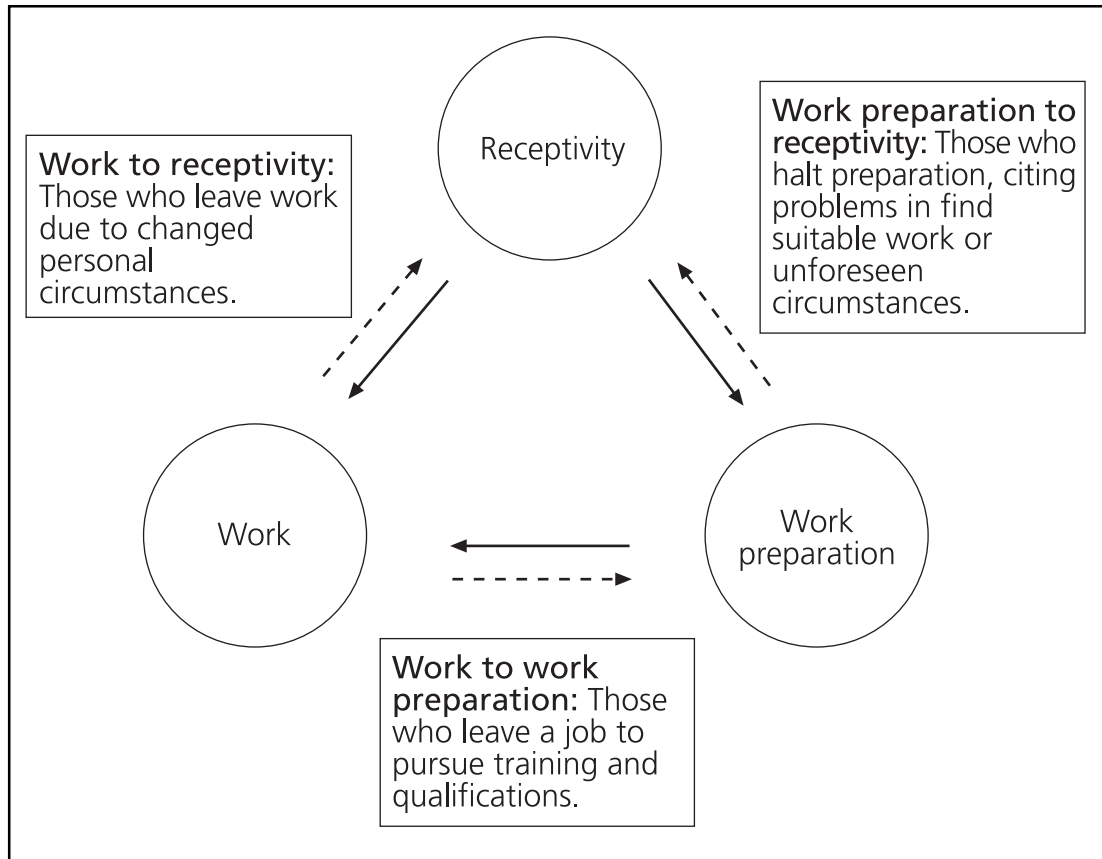
A small group of individuals who left work subsequently decided to defer returning to work due to a change in personal circumstances, which meant that they were no longer able or no longer interested in work, for example, they re-partnered, had another child or became ill.

Finally, there was a group of people with broken work journeys who remained out of work during the timeframe of the study despite looking for further work. These tended to be lone parents with fewer skills, who had been out of the labour market for a longer time. They often had greater barriers to entering work initially and these resurfaced in their later job search. Only one of these respondents was in regular contact with a Jobcentre Plus adviser, while others were in more sporadic contact or had stopped actively looking for work after becoming disheartened. One of these respondents, for instance, had six children (although only one was under 16 years) and had not worked in over 30 years. She found work in a shop after attending QWFIs (12+) but left after only a month due to differences with the manager. A year later, she was still looking for work, although only visiting Jobcentre Plus occasionally, and felt her options were limited because of a health condition and her obligation to provide support for a sick relative. Similarly, a lone parent of three teenage children, who had not worked in over 15 years, had to return to IS when her hours at work were cut from 16 to 10. She was still looking for work at the time of the last interview but had not, so far, sought the help of a Jobcentre Plus adviser.

These journeys demonstrate a range and variety of in-work trajectories that can include elongated and multiple transition periods. There are patterns to the different trajectories, with the nature of caring responsibilities, previous work experience and qualifications, the type of job taken and attitudes to work all playing key roles. However, there are also unexpected events – often job-related – that can alter journeys and which can be difficult to anticipate. It was evident that the nature of the jobs taken, in particular the opportunities for progression and support for combining work and caring responsibilities (which often go hand-in-hand) were key factors in shaping the work outcomes for lone parents.

6.6 The dynamics of work journeys

Figure 6.1 illustrates the dynamics of the work journeys. While the usual trajectory through time is for individuals to move from becoming work receptive, to preparing for work, to entering work, the multidirectional arrows also indicate that shifts between the phases can take place in the reverse direction.

Figure 6.1: Dynamics of work journeys

7 Discussion and recommendations

The three pilots offer combinations of different types of support: Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (QWFIs (12+)) offer advisory help, In Work Credit (IWC) offers financial help and Work Search Premium (WSP) combines the two. The three pilots also operate at different stages of the work journey: QWFIs (12+) operate at the receptivity phase, bringing lone parents into Jobcentre Plus offices and familiarising them with the available services; WSP operates at the work preparation phase, aiming to reinforce job search behaviour with financial help tied to regular adviser meetings; while IWC operates at the in-work phase, helping to make employment financially worthwhile by topping up wages during the first year of work. The assessment of the three pilots in this chapter is structured by these three phases of the work journey.

In assessing the pilots from the perspective of lone parents, it is important to bear in mind the nature of the sampling frame used for this study. Lone parents who had participated in different combinations of the pilots were purposively sampled in order to explore a range of possible experiences and trajectories. Interviewing QWFI (12+)-only participants in areas where the other pilots were offered provided an opportunity to explore the experiences of those who declined to participate in WSP and IWC. However, as it turned out, QWFI (12+)-only participants were mostly unaware of the other pilots, due in part to the selective way in which WSP and IWC were marketed, but possibly combined with difficulties of customer recall. Thus, the research is unable to report on the perspectives of those who declined to participate in the pilots. Moreover, given that the majority of the lone parents in the sample had entered work or were participating in a job search, lone parents in the study sample are likely to have a more positive view about working compared to the entire eligible lone parent population.

7.1 Impact on work receptivity

It was proposed, in Chapter 6, that becoming receptive to work is a complex process by which a non-working individual moves towards considering paid work as a viable option in their life. For many of the lone parents in the study, becoming work receptive occurred over a protracted timeframe, given that many had been work inactive for more than five years. This section considers the role of the pilots in altering work receptivity. Of the three, it is the QWFI (12+) pilot that is primarily targeted at this stage of the work journey, attempting to alter customer perceptions about moving into work by informing them of the support available through Jobcentre Plus and elsewhere. However, the other two pilots, if marketed to customers who are undecided about work, are also potentially able to impact upon customers' work receptivity.

7.1.1 Adviser contact and work receptivity

The mandatory QWFI (12+) is a mechanism for bringing out-of-work lone parents into frequent contact with Jobcentre Plus and its services. Targeting those in receipt of Income Support (IS) with children aged 12 or over, it is intended to capture lone parents who may be starting to think about returning to paid work as their children are entering secondary school and becoming more independent. The QWFI (12+) participants in this study, while having similar aged children and similar (in most cases, lengthy) periods out of work, were nonetheless at different stages of the work receptivity process when first mandated to attend a QWFI (12+). Some stated that they were already thinking about returning to work when they were called in for an interview, and some quite quickly started a job search once they were reassured of the support available to them. Others, however, asserted that they were not ready to think about work at that time.

The majority of QWFI (12+) participants did not feel that the QWFIs (12+) had an impact on their attitudes to work or on their decision to start looking for work. Rather, they referred to how the time needed to be right for them.

Lone parents who entered work subsequent to a QWFI (12+) mostly stated that the QWFIs (12+) had come at the 'right time' in their lives, when they were already considering work. Conversely, **those who were not receptive to work viewed the repeat meetings as irrelevant and unhelpful, and not offered at an appropriate time in their lives. Advisers similarly expressed frustration with the perceived inflexibility of the QWFI (12+) regime and their inability to defer interviews where they felt this was needed.** Advisers claimed that they could generally distinguish receptive from non-receptive lone parents and felt that more frequent Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) would not have any impact on those who did not want to work. The importance of the timeliness of meetings in relation to their effectiveness is also supported in other research on WFIs (Davies *et al.*, 2004).

There was some evidence, however, to suggest that receptivity to work could change with regular Jobcentre Plus contact over time. Both advisers and lone parents acknowledged that regular meetings helped to build a rapport which could then facilitate work-related support when it was needed. At least one participant referred to regular contact (including both WFIs and QWFIs (12+)) pushing her towards thinking more seriously about work. This coincided with changes in personal and family circumstances that helped to make work seem more practical. In other instances, customers had started to think about work but had not yet done anything about it, so the QWFI (12+) gave them that additional 'push' to initiate a job search. For these cases, QWFI (12+) meetings can potentially expedite the process of becoming receptive to work and encourage an earlier job search.

As discussed in Chapter 3, there were some QWFI (12+) participants who expressed an interest in paid work but did not feel that their QWFI (12+) meetings were helpful. They tended to be lone parents who had more difficult circumstances which made it harder for them to work. They felt that they were not being helped with various needs, such as pursuing training, to move them closer to work. There were also concerns expressed by respondents about the financial implications of work which did not appear to have been allayed in the QWFI (12+) meetings. These findings echo previous WFI research which found that advisers did not always take a holistic view of individual and family circumstances, nor necessarily address the longer-term needs and aspirations of their customers (Thomas and Griffiths, 2006).

Given adviser doubts about changing the views of non-work receptive lone parents, it is possible that advisers offered information about the work-related help available through Jobcentre Plus selectively, to those who expressed more interest in taking up work. This is supported by the finding that those QWFI (12+) participants who did not enter work were mostly unaware of the other pilots (WSP and/or IWC) available in their area.

The QWFI (12+) regime brings advisers into contact with the challenges of a lone parent population, many of whom have been out of work for a long period of time and who are accustomed to their non-working lifestyle. The research findings support regular lone parent engagement with Jobcentre Plus as desirable for presenting options and for providing information and guidance (work and non-work related) that is either immediately relevant or might be relevant when the 'time is right' for work. However, some lone parents require a great deal more time in order to become work receptive, while others may not be able to work during or even beyond their status as a lone parent. A QWFI (12+) programme and advisers delivering such a programme need to be flexible and to have the capacity to anticipate and to deal with all these eventualities. The current research cannot conclude that the QWFI (12+) was fully meeting this requirement at present.

7.1.2 Work receptivity and financial incentives

Both WSP and IWC offer financial supplements, in the form of additional weekly payments, to encourage lone parents to move more quickly into work.

Advisers were on the whole more positive about the effectiveness of using money as a motivational device than the lone parent respondents were. The IWC pilot was overwhelmingly welcomed by staff who felt that it contributed an additional element in the package of financial support that they could offer lone parents. This was connected to their view that financial considerations are paramount for lone parents considering work entry. Therefore **advisers almost unanimously regarded IWC as a powerful work incentive and felt that it helped 'tip the balance' if a lone parent was ambivalent about taking up work.** It was said that, for most customers, an extra £40 a week was substantial enough to convince them of the financial benefits of working. However, some felt that if it were paid in larger, lump sum 'bonuses' it might have more of an incentive effect. WSP, on the other hand, was not considered to be as effective by advisers because of its lower cash value and the conditionality of the mandatory meetings.

Lone parents, in contrast, generally downplayed the importance of the financial support, at least in terms of its impact on the process of becoming receptive to work. (As detailed later, financial help was valued in smoothing the process of transition to work.) According to participants, IWC carried little weight in their decision to enter work, or to take a particular job. Instead, they emphasised their personal motivations like their intrinsic interest in a particular vocation and their work ethic, as well as circumstantial reasons (often the age of children) that rendered the time right for them. However, many of the IWC participants and almost all of the WSP participants, were not aware (or could not recall awareness) of the pilots before they had decided that they wanted to work. These participants were therefore unable to reflect upon the role of the pilots in altering their receptivity to work. While staff felt that IWC would be most effective as an incentive for those customers 'on the border' (those who had thought about working but were undecided or unsure), it was rare to find lone parents in the sample who had been offered WSP or IWC at this stage.

As discussed earlier, when working and job-searching lone parents were asked to reflect on becoming receptive to work, they talked about the importance of identifying the 'right time' in their personal lives. Most often, the 'right time' was defined with reference to their children. This same sentiment was also found in lone parents' reactions to hypothetical scenarios used during the interviews. For example, lone parents in areas where WSP was not offered were asked to speculate on the attractiveness of a programme that offered extra money towards a structured job search. Overwhelmingly, respondents emphasised the importance of having a choice and having control over the decision about when and how much to work. Additional evidence was obtained from WSP or IWC participants who were asked if they would have considered work sooner if the extra money had been available at an

earlier time. Again, respondents tended to weigh the money with reference to their circumstances at the time. Many said that extra money would not have made a difference because their life circumstances would not have been compatible with work at that time. Some participants, however, felt that knowledge of in-work financial support (including IWC and other forms of support, such as Working Tax Credit (WTC)) at an earlier time would have enabled them to return to work sooner. These were cases where lone parents had wanted to work sooner, but felt that they had been prevented from doing so because of financial *disincentives*.

These **findings suggest that the power of the financial incentives were mediated by other priorities in lone parents' lives. They suggest a role for financial incentives in facilitating and perhaps expediting a move into work once receptivity has been reached. However, as previously highlighted, becoming work receptive is a dynamic process that varies for individuals, according to their circumstances and their varied orientations to work and care. Financial incentives per se are unlikely to substantially alter this process.** Of course, these results are limited to the specific incentives on offer in the WSP and IWC pilots and may not apply to different cash values.

7.2 Impact on work preparation

Lone parents who entered the work preparation phase were already receptive to work and went on to pursue various options for improving their employability or searching for jobs. Among the pilots, WSP was the primary intervention at this stage, while the QWFI (12+) played an intermediary role in introducing lone parents to the job preparation support available.

In a number of cases, QWFIs (12+) acted as a springboard towards other work-related services, primarily the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and other local agencies that provided training and job placements. Through QWFIs (12+) (and subsequent NDLP meetings), lone parents who were receptive to work stated that they received financial advice regarding in-work benefits and tax credits (although Better Off Calculations (BOCs) were rare until a specific job was found), childcare advice, and self-employment advice. In some instances, it was the reassurance provided by advisers about the financial support available for moving into work, that tipped the balance in favour of them taking a job. As noted previously, it was rarely IWC alone that did this, but rather a package of financial help that made work worthwhile. **Adviser support in presenting the information clearly and comprehensively and in providing emotional reassurance was also key.**

Regarding WSP, the research found that the pilot was primarily offered to lone parents who were already looking for work, or were ready to do so. This is corroborated both by advisers, who mostly said that they gave preference to lone parents whom they judged to be *committed* to job search, and by lone parent participants who reported they were already job searching and, in some cases,

already meeting with an adviser on a regular basis, when they were told about WSP. **There is therefore strong evidence to suggest that the marketing of the pilot targeted a sub-set of eligible lone parents, effectively limiting participation to those who were more job ready.**

Consequently, most participants in the WSP pilot claimed that it had little impact on the intensity of their job search or their commitment to job search, since they were simply continuing with previous behaviour. Despite this, most participants viewed the routine of mandatory fortnightly meetings and producing evidence of their job search positively, which contrasts to the discomfort expressed by a number of advisers about introducing a mandatory element into the voluntary NDLP programme. **Lone parents said that they valued the encouragement and support that they received from their advisers at the regular meetings and often felt that they benefited from this relationship as much as from the extra £20 weekly payments. Therefore, for most participants, WSP helped focus the job search. It did not fundamentally change their job-search behaviour, but it helped sustain the momentum of a supported job-search routine (alongside NDLP services).**

It is possible that adviser selectivity may have excluded some lone parents who could have benefited from WSP. For example, some advisers stated that they did not offer WSP to eligible lone parents they deemed to be 'uncommitted' to a job search. This was partly to avoid the extra administrative work that would be required to cancel the weekly payments if a participant did not comply with the conditions. By implication, this practice would exclude lone parents who expressed reservations about working. Similarly, other lone parents may not have been offered the pilot if they were undertaking other work preparation elements, like training for skills and qualifications. Clearly lone parent advisers need to tailor the support they offer to those customers for whom it is relevant. However, it is possible that their selectivity might be unduly restricting the pilot to those who are already actively job searching, therefore reducing the potential for the pilot to act as an incentive for undecided lone parents to move into work preparation.

While the majority of lone parents participating in WSP were satisfied with the routine, there were a small number of lone parents who did not find work during the six month timeframe, who were less satisfied with their experience. One lone parent reported that she was discouraged from taking up training while registered with WSP, and a number of participants who did not find work subsequently took up training after their participation in WSP ended. This suggests that **some lone parents might have benefited from a more flexible programme, such as one that was more open to combining a job search with training.** In addition, there were a few cases where early-leavers from the pilot had not developed a good rapport with their adviser and were not planning to resume contact with Jobcentre Plus. The option to change personal advisers may have rectified this situation.

7.3 Impact on lone parents in work

All of the lone parents who entered work during the study received the extra financial support through IWC. As reported earlier, IWC was overwhelmingly welcomed by staff who viewed it as a powerful work incentive. However, by contrast, lone parents felt IWC alone carried little weight in their decisions to enter work or to remain in employment once they had started a job.

The evidence was stronger, however, for **IWC as an aid for employment retention**. The majority of lone parents stated that the extra cash helped to make work more manageable for them. **Alongside their wages, IWC enhanced their financial status and their associated material wellbeing. Participants mostly reported they were much happier being a working person compared to their time on benefits. The evidence therefore suggests that IWC reinforced lone parents' positive assessment of a working life and this carried through in their intention to remain employed.** Among those who had exhausted their payments, the majority were still in work at the time of the last interview, and those who had left work had not done so for reasons relating to finances (except in one instance, where the commission-based wages of the job had been unsustainable).

In terms of the amount of the IWC payments, lone parents were generally very appreciative and only one thought it an insignificant amount. Frequently it was the regularity of the payments (particularly weekly rather than monthly) that respondents said they most welcomed, given their transition from weekly IS to monthly wages. Those more reliant on IWC who faced (or were anticipating) particular difficulties when it ended were mainly those who had built up debt while on IS; those who had high childcare, housing or transport costs, and those on very low pay or with an unreliable income, such as the self-employed.

Notwithstanding the beneficial financial effects of IWC, the analysis of the lone parents' in-work journeys shows that not all transitions into work proceeded smoothly. Some lone parents talked of difficulties they faced in adjusting financially to work, whilst a number had 'broken' in-work journeys, moving out of work for one reason or another. This suggests that ongoing in-work advisory support might have been beneficial for some of these respondents. Indeed, some voiced disappointment at the lack of advisory support when they entered work. In particular, respondents received little advice on how to budget their IWC payments, or how to prepare for the payments ending. While some were planning changes to their work behaviour to make up for the lost revenue when IWC finished, such as increasing their hours or taking another job, by the second interview not all had been able to successfully execute such plans. It is possible that some of the difficulties that lone parents encountered in work could have been avoided if advisory support had been more systematically available.

Two principal reasons for broken in-work journeys were labour market factors (such as temporary contracts or work redundancy) and incompatibility between work and caring responsibilities. For instance, some lone parents had left work due to problems with combining work and childcare and had subsequently gone on to retrain, and in some cases to re-enter, a new area of work that was deemed to give greater flexibility for combining work and caring (often in childcare-related jobs). Sometimes these decisions were taken in consultation with a Jobcentre Plus adviser, again suggesting that continued in-work contact can be beneficial in helping lone parents successfully move in-work journeys back on track. The broken journeys also highlight the importance of anticipating such setbacks, as well as securing the appropriate job in the first place.

7.4 Who benefited most?

The findings from the research have emphasised that whilst, broadly, all three pilots were welcomed by most participants, there was only a relatively small group of participants who felt that the pilot(s) had made a substantial difference to their work-related behaviour or journey.

7.4.1 QWFI (12+)

The QWFI (12+) pilot was effective in signposting those who were receptive to work towards appropriate services for support with job preparation. There was also some (more limited) evidence that if the QWFI (12+) came at the right time (when a respondent was in the *process* of becoming job receptive) it could prompt people into taking steps towards job preparation sooner than they might have done otherwise. **However, QWFIs (12+) did not appear to effectively meet the needs or alter the views of those 'further' from the labour market, with more complex barriers, who were often unreceptive to or ambivalent about working.**

7.4.2 WSP

There was no evidence that WSP had an impact on the work receptiveness of participants, since all WSP participants in the study were already committed to work and to starting a job search. The evaluation is unable to tell, however, whether it might have an incentive effect on a broader population more ambivalent about starting job preparation, because of the selective way in which it **was marketed to 'work-committed' lone parents only.** By and large, **WSP seemed to have little impact on the intensity of lone parents' job search, although some participants felt that it kept up their momentum and motivation.** In such cases, WSP could be effective in maintaining job searching (and thus promoting work entry) for lone parents who may otherwise lose momentum and drift away from their job search and/or Jobcentre Plus contact.

7.4.3 IWC

IWC did not appear to have acted as an incentive to taking up work for the study participants either. **IWC was generally viewed by participants as a lucky 'windfall' rather than as an incentive. However, given that many recipients were 'walk-ins', who did not previously know about IWC before gaining work, there was limited opportunity in the study to explore the incentive effect.** It is possible that this sampling effect partly explains the discrepancy between the accounts of advisory staff, who felt that IWC operated as a powerful work incentive, and accounts of lone parents, who downplayed the role of IWC in their work-related decisions. One or two respondents in the sample who were on the 'border line', i.e., broadly receptive to work but still unsure, *did* feel that IWC gave them an extra spur to find work, and for others, IWC added to the overall package of in-work financial support which made work attractive to them. **There was no evidence to suggest that those who had been on IS for more than 12 months were more likely to need, or to be receptive to, an additional financial inducement to work, since there was a wide range of both work histories and attitudes to work amongst the sample of IWC recipients.** Some, while qualifying for the 12 month eligibility period, had more continuous work histories and were strongly committed to finding work.

Almost all IWC recipients benefited from the additional financial support whilst in work, but few said that it made the vital difference to them staying in work. **IWC had a more visible impact in increasing financial wellbeing for those lone parents with low wages, with high childcare or housing costs, or for those who had built up debts while on benefits.** In this regard it could be said to have reinforced their positive assessment of a working lifestyle and their commitment to continue working. **There was little evidence that IWC 'artificially' kept people in work by supplementing income for the duration of the pilot, since no-one dropped out of work because IWC ended. Instead it was largely other issues that threatened participants' work retention, primarily problems reconciling working hours with caring responsibilities.**

The analysis in Chapter 6 highlighted the heterogeneity of the lone parent population and how this diversity shapes their work-related experiences. By implication, the three pilots in question, alongside other Jobcentre Plus services, must be sufficiently flexible to meet a disparate set of needs. However, given the selective marketing of the WSP and IWC pilots to work-committed lone parents, and the limited value of the QWFIs (12+) for lone parents with more complicated constraints on work, **it seems that at present, the pilots have been the most helpful for those with the greatest work readiness. The pilots were less likely to support effective engagement of those lone parents in need of more intensive support. This mirrors the findings of previous research on WFIs and NDLP, and suggests that other ways need to be found for more effectively engaging with and helping lone parents with more complex support needs who are at a greater distance from the labour market.**

7.5 Recommendations

7.5.1 Adviser capacity building

The tendency of all three pilots to benefit those lone parents who are the most work receptive and the closest to the labour market is a key finding from this research. It is recommended that adviser capacity for effectively engaging with and supporting those customers 'further' from the labour market, with more complex support needs, is a priority. This could include enhancing the training given to advisers and ensuring that it is ongoing and combined with support mechanisms, such as case conferencing and sharing best practice, to help ensure techniques learned are put into practice. The New Deal Plus for Lone Parents pilot is addressing the issue of adviser training and the separate evaluation of this pilot has a role to play in developing solutions to this issue.²⁸

7.5.2 Incentive structures

In addition to staff training and support mechanisms, it may be necessary to rethink the incentive structures for advisers, in order to ensure that there is effective engagement with lone parents who have more challenging circumstances, and to address current problems of adviser selectivity for the easier-to-help cases.

7.5.3 Administrative support

The administrative burden was cited by advisers as a key issue affecting their attitudes towards the WSP pilot. Additional administrative support would help alleviate the extra paperwork associated with both the WSP and IWC pilots. Combined with other factors (such as training and support) this could encourage advisers to offer WSP less selectively, thus allowing the pilot to operate as a potential work incentive for those not already job searching. Centralising the administration of IWC would also help standardise procedures for the collection of customer payslips and perhaps reduce any delays in payments to customers and save adviser time spent resolving such problems. Alleviating administrative workloads would also provide more adviser time for one to one work with individual lone parents. Again, the New Deal Plus for Lone Parents (ND+fLP) pilot is addressing these issues and its evaluation has a role to play in developing solutions.

7.5.4 Partnership working

Further development of partnership working between Jobcentre Plus and outside agencies would be useful to offer more options to support both work and non-work related lone parent needs. Evidence on the array of circumstances that need to be

²⁸ The report for this evaluation is forthcoming. There is also an impact assessment of a number of lone parent pilots, including ND+fLP, see Brewer, 2007, DWP research report 415.

'right' for lone parents to make a success of work, supports taking a more holistic view of the work preparation process. Partnership relationships with other institutions in the community used by lone parents could be utilised for more proactive marketing of WSP, IWC and any future pilot initiatives in order to reach a greater number of eligible lone parents, thus improving the chances of take-up and success.

7.5.5 Income and budget advice

Lone parents need to be reassured that work is financially worth the effort. Better Off Calculations (BOCs) itemise income and outgoing payments to provide concrete proof of the impact of work on household finances. Lone parents with experience of this welcomed it and those who did not would have liked it. BOCs could be offered more consistently, including prior to obtaining a job (e.g. during WFIs and QWFIs (12+)) to alter perceptions about the financial advantages of working and to assist better targeting of job search. However, the 'provisional' nature of these BOCs needs to be made clear to customers, due to the complexity of the different interacting factors in the calculation, small changes in which could alter the outcome.

7.5.6 Support during work related transitions

While many lone parents received some initial in-work support from Jobcentre Plus advisers in the very early days of work, there is some evidence that more in-work support would be useful. There was inconsistency both in the extent to which lone parent respondents felt entitled to in-work support, and in the extent to which they had received support when needed. Some expressed a wish to have greater help with settling in to work, and others described difficulties during this phase which suggested that an intervention might have been useful. Greater in-work support from Jobcentre Plus advisers might be helpful in some cases, alongside better signposting to other providers for specialist help, e.g., with debt issues. One suggestion for in-work contact would be for advisers to contact lone parents to discuss financial and other options, if desired, around the time of the last IWC payment. Findings show that some lone parents were hoping to increase hours or take additional jobs to compensate for the lack of income, but few had been able to achieve this in the timeframe of the study, while others were unsure of the financial implications of such a move (because of interactions with WTC). Adviser support could be usefully deployed at this time.

7.5.7 Duration, amount and phasing of In Work Credit

The findings from the research suggest that the duration, amount and phasing of IWC, or any similar future initiative, should be reviewed:

- Evidence from lone parents' in-work journeys suggests that the greater financial need occurred during the initial work-entry transition period, usually within the first few weeks and months in a job. Overwhelmingly, lone parents referred to this timeframe as the period when the extra weekly payments through IWC were the most helpful for dealing with unanticipated expenses. Thus it may be useful to review the duration of any future in-work incentive payments to better target the earlier in-work phase.
- There was greater reliance on IWC payments, and greater hardship after they had been exhausted, among certain groups of lone parents; those in debt, those with high childcare, housing or transport costs, and those on very low pay or with an unreliable income, such as the self-employed. It could be useful to review the amount and the eligibility criteria of any future in-work payments, to better target those in the most need.
- A phased removal of in-work financial help might ease the effects of the reduction in income caused by payments ending.

7.5.8 Employer engagement

One important factor threatening work retention for many of the lone parents in the study was the difficulty of reconciling their employment with their childcare responsibilities. This was often due to employers' lack of flexibility and understanding. Employers therefore need to take on more responsibility for making work manageable for lone parents. Jobcentre Plus could help in this process by working with employers, and by making sure that lone parents in work are aware of their employment rights.

Appendix A

Sample tables

Table A.1 Case study districts

Case study district	QWFI (12+)	WSP	IWC
A	✓		✓
B			✓
C	✓	✓	✓
D	✓	✓	✓
E		✓	✓
F		✓	✓

Table A.2 Achieved sample group numbers

	Sample group	N
1	WSP and IWC	10
2	IWC only	8
3	IWC leavers prior to 52 weeks and returned to benefit	7
4	IWC leavers prior to 52 weeks and did not return to benefit	1
5	IWC leavers after 52 weeks and returned to benefit	6
6	IWC leavers after 52 weeks and did not return to benefit	4
7	QWFI (12+) and IWC	12
-	QWFI (12+), WSP and IWC	2
8	WSP only	10
9	QWFI (12+) only	9
-	none	1
Total	All interviewed customers	70

The table shows figures for the achieved sample groups. In a few cases, the customer situation changed between the time of sampling and the first interview. This was partly due to errors in database from which customers were sampled and partly due to customer dynamics in the three to five month interim between sampling and interviews. Specifically:

- one group 9 participant (QWFI (12+) only) had subsequently entered work and moved into sample group 7 (QWFI (12+) and IWC);
- two group 7 participants (QWFI (12+) and IWC) had also participated in WSP (although they remain in sample group 7 for the purposes of the analyses in the report since they are not a large enough group to consider on their own);
- one group 7 participant (QWFI (12+) and IWC) had not had a QWFI (12+) and so was re-categorised as group 2 (IWC only);
- one group 9 participant (QWFI (12+) only) had not had a QWFI (12+) and thus had not participated in any of the pilots;
- of the five group 5 participants (leaving IWC before 52 weeks and not returning to benefits), only one remained in this group, while two were in fact on benefits (group 3), and two were still receiving IWC (group 2).

Table A.3 Duration of time in pilot measured at final interview

Pilot group	Duration since pilot participation started					Total*
	0-6 months	7-12 months	13-18 months	19-24 months	25 months +	
ALL QWFI (12+) participants	0	3	11	11	0	25
ALL WSP participants	1	12	9	0	0	22
ALL IWC participants	1	18	18	10	3	50

* column adds to more than 70 because the three groups are not mutually exclusive, i.e., some respondents participated in more than one pilot.

Table A.4 Respondent demographics

	N
District	
A	14
B	9
C	20
D	10
E	9
F	8
Gender	
Female	67
Male	3
Age	
<25	4
25-34	18
35-44	32
45-54	12
55-64	2
missing	2
Ethnicity	
White	50
Non-white	20
Age of youngest child	
<5	13
5-10	23
11-15	27
16-20	7
Number of dependent children	
1	32
2	20
3+	18
Work history category	
Worked in last 2 years	12
Worked 2-5 years ago	14
Worked 5+ years ago	38
Never worked	6
<i>Base:</i>	<i>70</i>

Appendix B

Research methods

Case study districts

Various combinations of the three pilots have been introduced in Jobcentre Plus districts. Work Search Premium (WSP) is being piloted in some districts where In Work Credit (IWC) is also being offered, whilst IWC has been implemented alone in other districts; and Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (QWFIs (12+)) are being piloted within Extended Schools Childcare (ESC) districts, some of which are also running WSP or IWC and some of which are not. The fieldwork for the qualitative evaluation covered six districts, purposively selected to represent different pilot combinations, in order to allow an examination of possible differences between the contexts in which the pilots are delivered. The districts and their pilots are shown in Table A.1 in Appendix A. The case study districts include two districts (C and D) offering all three pilots, two districts (E and F) with WSP and IWC, one district (A) with QWFI (12+) and IWC, and one district (B) with IWC only.²⁹ Two districts were also amongst the early implementers of the IWC pilot in April 2004. The case study districts were selected to cover different areas of the UK. All of the districts have significant ethnic minority populations in at least some areas, and one of the districts combines both urban and rural areas. Two districts also overlap with Employment Zones (EZs)³⁰ and three districts are running the New Deal Plus for Lone Parents (ND+fLP) pilot³¹.

²⁹ Districts where only QWFIs (12+) are being piloted are excluded from this evaluation to avoid duplication with the evaluation of the ESC pilot.

³⁰ The two districts which overlap with EZs are both in London. In the London EZs, lone parents receive services from an EZ contractor rather than from Jobcentre Plus, hence in these areas IWC might be marketed through the contractor. For more information on EZs, see http://www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk/JCP/Customers/Programmesandservices/Employment_Zones/.

³¹ There is a separate qualitative evaluation of this pilot which is due to report in Spring 2007.

Research methods

The qualitative evaluation consisted of three stages:

- **Stage One:** Review of the relevant literature;
- **Stage Two:** Fieldwork with Jobcentre Plus staff;
- **Stage Three:** Focus groups with advisers.

Stages Two and Three are described below.

Stage Two research methods

Stage Two of the research was conducted between June and November 2005 and focused on the implementation, processes and contexts of the three pilots. The research methods consisted of:

- telephone interviews with District Implementation Managers (DIMs);
- familiarisation visits to districts;
- focus groups with advisers.

Telephone interviews with DIMs

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone with ten³² DIMs responsible for the delivery of the pilot(s). Respondents were asked about the organisation of the pilot(s) at district and office levels, line management, staff training and ongoing support, pilot profile in the district, and views on the strengths and weaknesses of the pilot(s) to date.

Familiarisation visits

Familiarisation visits to each district were carried out to inform instrument development and interpretation of the data. Two to three Jobcentre Plus offices were visited in each district, selected in consultation with DIMs to cover a variety of implementation settings (e.g. large and small offices, urban and rural, etc.). Researchers observed QWFIs (12+) and other customer meetings where WSP and/or IWC were discussed (with the consent of customers). Researchers also spoke informally with advisers and office management.

³² In four districts, two interviews were conducted; in three cases because QWFIs (12+) were managed separately to the other pilots and in one case because responsibility had been passed from one member of staff to another over the course of pilot implementation.

Focus groups with pilot delivery staff

One focus group was held per district. In consultation with DIMs, four to six advisers were selected to participate, including staff from different offices and with experience of the range of pilot(s) operating in the district. The focus groups lasted from one to one and a half hours and sought to ascertain adviser views about the composition of their customer group, the support needs of these customers, and the working practices and incentives that are considered to be the most effective for these customers. Staff were asked about their experiences of and views about the pilot(s), and asked to speculate about the possible impact on customers of different policy scenarios, i.e. combinations of the three pilots and other possibilities.

Stage Three research methods

The fieldwork for Stage Three of the research was conducted between February and September 2006 and focused on the participants' experiences of and views on the three pilots. The research methods consisted of:

- in-depth face-to-face interviews with 70 lone parent participants³³
- longitudinal telephone interviews, three to four months later, with 40 participants

Lone parent face-to-face interviews

Interviews took place in respondents' own homes or in another place convenient to them. They sought to ascertain participants' experiences of, and views on, the pilots within the context of their work and benefits histories, their feelings about work, their understandings of their caring responsibilities and the other forms of support for work entry and retention they had experienced. Respondents were also asked to reflect on their decision-making processes about work, and to speculate about the potential impact of different policy scenarios on these decisions. The interview topic guide is included in Appendix C.³⁴ Questioning was focused around the following topics:

- Contextual information about the respondent (current work and home situation; work and family history, feelings about work and care);
- Previous Jobcentre Plus experiences and experiences and views of the pilots;
- Impact of and reflection on the pilots (which of the pilots and which elements of help and support have made the most difference to the respondent);
- Scenarios (asking respondents to speculate as to how they would react to pilots they have not been offered or to being offered pilots at different times in their lives).

³³ Where respondents are quoted in the text, they have been assigned labels for anonymity. The labels start at LP1 and run to LP70.

³⁴ Only the topic guide for the face-to-face lone parent interviews is included in the Appendix, for illustrative purposes. Readers may contact the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) or the authors for information about other topic guides used in the evaluation.

Follow-up telephone interviews

A subset of participants were subsequently re-interviewed by telephone three to four months after the initial face-to-face interview, to examine any changes in experiences, perceptions and outcomes of the pilots at a later point in time. Participants were purposively selected to capture a range of experiences and situations at the time of the first interview, and those with an expected change in state were over-sampled (e.g., having left a pilot, changed job or completed training). Interviews lasted between fifteen and thirty minutes and questions focused around:

- Changes to work behaviour since the previous interview and feelings about this;
- Changes in contact with Jobcentre Plus including that related to the pilots;
- Feelings about the pilots and whether views had changed;
- Perceived impact of the pilots with respect to any changes in behaviour or attitudes.

Analysis

All face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews and focus groups from Stages One and Two of the research were recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were subsequently coded and analysed using the NVivo2 software package. Analysis took place in two stages

Stage One: Thematic analysis

Researchers conducted preliminary thematic analysis on a small number of transcripts in order to develop a coding frame. Initial codes were then reviewed and revised amongst the research team. The coding frames for the staff and customer interviews are included at Appendix D. NVivo code reports were produced and researchers created thematic summaries that identified common themes, contrasts and patterns. Specifically, staff accounts were analysed for common themes arising for each of the pilots, and adviser and manager views were compared. Lone parents' experiences and views of the pilots (from face-to-face and telephone interviews) were also analysed for common themes and contrasts across the sample and respondents with different trajectories through the pilots were compared. The views of advisers and of lone parents on the three pilots were also compared and contrasted. An iterative process was undertaken whereby team meetings were frequently held to discuss emergent findings; themes were then cross-checked and refined by returning to the original transcripts for verification.

Stage Two: Journey analysis

Whilst coding the lone parent interviews, researchers developed a case summary to provide key information on each respondent. The summary was updated for respondents who participated in a second interview and any changes in the respondent's views and circumstances were noted. The summary included details

on the individual's circumstances, pilot experiences and attitudes and views. A descriptive narrative of a 'work journey' was then produced for each individual, covering family and employment background, becoming receptive to work, preparing for work, and entering and remaining in work. This involved looking at the data for each individual in a holistic way, in contrast to the cross-sectional thematic analysis. Different types of journeys were identified, the factors affecting these journeys were explored and the role of the pilots in shaping the journeys was assessed.

Appendix C

Research instrument

Stage 2 Customer Interviews (face-to-face)

Introduction

Section 1: Contextual information about the respondent

This section is to consider:

- What is the current work/home situation;
- How has the customer got to this point (work and family history);
- How work orientated is respondent (vis-à-vis family orientation).

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself – what you are doing at the moment in terms of home life, family, work, etc.?

- Family – number and age of children.
- Current work – type of job, full or part-time, how is it going. If not full-time speculate on increasing their hours.
- Any current education or training.
- Other activities, e.g. other caring responsibilities, voluntary work, anything else?

2. If not in work – Are you looking for work at the moment or do you plan to in the future?

- Is there anything making it difficult for them to work, e.g. childcare, health, other caring responsibilities, qualifications, work experience? [probe around these to get full picture]
- What kind of work are they hoping for – full or part-time?
- If they are not looking for work or do not plan to, why?

3. Can you tell me a bit about the things you've been doing in the past? [We are interested in their account of WHY they did things, e.g. why they left a particular job].

[Try to keep this section brief]

[Note: If respondent has left IWC, probe about job performed during receipt of IWC.]

- Establish a time line of the employment they have been in. [Previous work and benefits, tax credits and child support and periods out of the labour market - try and get a sense of whether mainly full or part-time work, why left jobs, what prompted any non-work periods.
- how long have they lived in the area/current accommodation, family near by?
- Previous education and training.

4. What did/would it mean to you to get a job?

- How do they feel about working – what are [what do they think will be] the likes and dislikes?

[reword for those not in work]

- How does being in work compare to when they weren't working?
- Do they think they've changed as a person since they've started work?
- How important is work to them?
- What impact has work had on their life?
- What impact on their children/other family members?
- What do their children/other family members/ friends think about them working?
- Do their friends/neighbours and family work and what do they think about this?

IF IN WORK

- Do they think they are 'better or worse off' either financially, socially, emotionally or in any other way?

5. How was the transition period when you first entered work [how do you think it will be]?

- Consider any problems and how they were/will be overcome.

IF IN WORK

6. Would anything make you think about giving up work?

- change in circumstances, e.g. re-partnering, childcare problems, sickness.
- what would help you stay in work in these circumstances?

7. What childcare arrangements do you have? [Reword if not currently using]

- What type of childcare are they using? (Friends and family, childminder, after school club etc)
- Why did they choose that form of childcare? (Consider things such as availability, location and cost)
- What have they used in past? Does child's age make a difference?
- Have they had any problems?
- How do the children feel about it? How do they think it impacts on their children?

Section 2: Procedures

This section considers the organisation of the pilots and customers' experiences/ views of the pilots.

Ask All [Most customers have attended a WFI, so have had some contact].

1. Please can you tell me about your previous contact with the job centre?

[Concentrate on the time prior to the pilots. If a QWFI (12+) customer, keep in mind the date of their entry to the QWFI (12+) regime.]

- When did they first visit the Jobcentre? Try to establish a time line of their Jobcentre Plus contact (refer to work history).
- Establish who initiated contact – did they receive a letter inviting them in to attend an interview.

QWFI (12+) [Districts A/C/D, where their children are 12+].

If participation in QWFI (12+) not already established:

1. This section of the topic guide is about Work Focused Interviews at the job centre, can I confirm that you are currently attending meetings at the Jobcentre four times a year? [refer back to the date of their first QWFI (12+) for clarification]

2. Can you remember how you found out about your recent meeting(s) with a Jobcentre adviser and what you discussed? [Build from previous questions]

- Who established contact?
- Try and find out if meetings compulsory (failure to attend a meeting) and how they feel about this.
- Expectations of meeting (how useful did they think it was going to be?)

- Frequency of visits.
 - Has this changed over time [try to establish difference between WFI and QWFI (12+) if not already come out].
 - Do they see the same adviser each time? How do they feel about this?
- Individual or group sessions.
- Types of discussions.
 - Go into detail about everything that is discussed, prompt on help with childcare, discussion of WSP and IWC, training, job search, referrals for help, etc.
- Likes and dislikes.
 - Including what they think about the adviser.
- Usefulness after attending meeting.
 - How did it compare to expectations?
 - Anything more/different they would have liked?
- Outcomes/further actions – what have they done as a result of the meeting(s).
 - Has it changed their views about finding a job in any way?

3. Do you think that having more regular meetings at the Jobcentre has made a difference to the idea of you working/ finding a job? [word according to what's appropriate].

- What about if they had had these meetings in the past? [as appropriate] Would it have made a difference then?

4. Would you recommend more frequent meetings with a Jobcentre Plus adviser to other parents?

- probe on their views.

Work Search Premium [Districts C/D/E/F]

1. Can you remember how you found out about the possibility of getting £20 a week to support you in your job search (WSP)?

- Establish how it was marketed to them.

2. What did you think when you first found out about the £20?

- Why did they decide to [not] take it up?
- Did the advisor place any conditions on it? [If not already established].
- Consider regular compulsory meetings.

If participation in WSP not already established:

3. Can I check if you have received these payments?

If not, go to next section.

Questions 4 to 10 are only for those who have received the payments.

4. Are you/were you doing anything differently in your job search because of the extra £20?

- Did it influence their decision to look for work?
- Any impact on attitude towards work?
- Impact on intensity of job search.
- Impact on types of jobs looking for.
- Impact on actually finding work.
- Impact on type of job taken.

5. How often do you/did you attend the Jobcentre while searching for jobs?

- What are their feelings on this?
- Do they see the same adviser? Is this important?
- What happens at the meetings?
- How useful are they?
- Is this what they expected (level of contact and support)?
- Any further types of help that would be useful?

6. How have you been using/did you use the WSP payments?

- Check whether using for day-to-day expenses or saving for 'luxuries'.

7. [If in work] Did WSP make a difference to you finding a job?

- Length of time it took.
- Type of job.

8. Are you still receiving WSP payments?

If the payments have stopped:

- Establish why, i.e. eligibility ran-out, non-compliance found a job.
- How did they feel about this?
- Has it prompted a change in behaviour (i.e. in job search behaviour)?

- Has it affected them financially?
- If they found a job consider the relationship between WSP and IWC, especially in relation to the financial incentives [IF APPLICABLE].

If the payments have not stopped:

- How will they feel when the payments stop?
- Will it affect their job search behaviour?
- Will it affect them financially?

9. What difference do you think it would have made if the £20 had been available to you previously?

- Why/why not?

10. Would you recommend this scheme (WSP) to other parents?

- probe on their views.

In Work Credit [All districts]

1. Can you remember how you found out about getting an extra £40 a week if you started work (IWC)? [They may have told you about this under the QWFI (12+) section, so refer back].

- Establish how it was marketed to them.

2. What did you think when you were first told about the extra £40?

- Did the advisor place any conditions on it? [i.e., work hours, payment slips].
- Establish if they had a Better Off Calculation and how the £40 was presented to them, i.e., was it part of the calculation or seen as an extra?
- Probe whether they would have been better off in work without the extra £40.

3. Are you/were you doing anything differently in your job search because you knew you would be able to get the extra money? [Consider in relation to their WSP responses where applicable].

- Did it influence their decision to look for work?
- Any impact on attitude towards work?
- Impact on intensity of job search.
- Impact on types of jobs looking for.
- Impact on actually finding work.
- Impact on type of job taken.

If participation in IWC not already established:

4. Can I check if you have received the payments of £40 a week?

If not, go to next section.

Questions 5 to 10 are for those who have received IWC.

5. What contact have you had with the Jobcentre since starting work?

- What happens during meetings with an adviser?
- Do they see the same adviser? Is this important?
- Any help with problems at work?
- Any advice on what to do with IWC payments?
- Any problems with IWC payments/ any difficulties in claiming?
 - if yes, then what impact did this have on their circumstances or did it effect their attitude towards working?

6. How have you been using [did you use] the IWC payments?

- Check whether using for day-to-day expenses or saving for 'luxuries'.

7. In the period since you've been in work [that you were in work], do you think anything would have been different if you weren't receiving the extra £40?

- Probe on role of IWC in work retention.
- Any financial problems since starting work?
- Any times thought about leaving work?

8. Are you still receiving IWC payments?

If the payments have stopped:

- Establish why, i.e. eligibility ran-out, didn't take in pay slips, left work, reduced hours, etc.
- How did they feel about this?
- How has it affected them financially?
- If left work, what are their plans for the future?
- If still in work, has it prompted a change in behaviour (eg. might they leave work)?

If the payments have not stopped:

- How will they feel when the payments stop?
- Have they planned for this?
- Will it affect them financially?
- Will it prompt a change in behaviour (eg might they leave work)?
- If so, what would prevent this?

9. What difference do you think it would have made if this money had been available previously? [refer to other periods when they were in work, if appropriate]

- expand on reasons why.

10. Would you recommend this scheme (IWC) to other parents?

- probe on their views.

Section 3: Impact of and reflection on pilots:

This section aims to consider which of the pilots and which elements of help/support have made the most difference to the customer

1. You have told me a lot about what has happened over the last year/six months [adjust accordingly and maybe mention a couple of things customer has told you], **do you think you have changed at all?**

- What do they think about these changes.

2. What do you think has been the most helpful to you?

- Try to clarify what they felt made the most positive difference to them, e.g., the money, the childcare, their adviser, changing circumstances.
- Probe on what was most helpful both practically and in terms of changing their attitudes/ orientations.
- Suggestions for changes/improvements.
- Any support from Jobcentre Plus that was particularly helpful, what could have been better.

Section 4: Scenarios

Now I am going to ask you about other possible schemes that could be offered by Jobcentre Plus to see if you think that any of these might have helped you. [Only ask in districts where pilot not offered.]

Not offered QWFI (12+) [Districts B/E/F]

1. What would you have thought in the past if you had been invited in to the Jobcentre to see an adviser every three months?

[If currently on benefit how would they feel now?]

- Would this have been useful? [Refer to specific periods when out of work as detailed earlier].
- What would they want to discuss?
- Do they think the meetings should be compulsory? Why or why not?

Not offered WSP [Districts A/B]**2. What would you have thought if you had been offered an additional £20 a week on top of your benefits for a set period of time, in exchange for actively looking for work and attending a fortnightly interview at the Jobcentre?**

- What does 'actively seeking work' mean to them? Do they feel Jobcentre Plus should monitor this?
- Would they take it up? Why?
- Would it make a difference? Why?

Ask All**3. Do you think it would be useful for Jobcentre Plus to offer assistance in relation to childcare?** [Consider what they have already told you]

- Have they ever received this kind of assistance? How useful was it?
- Would this best come from Jobcentre Plus or elsewhere?
- What kind of support/information would they like?
- Would they like the opportunity to talk to someone in detail about using childcare?
- Would they like to try childcare if they are not already using it?

Closing**1. Considering all of the different forms of help from Jobcentre Plus that we have been discussing** [both those they received and those they did not] **which ones do you think would have the biggest effect?****a) on parents returning to work?**

- Why?
- What more could help?

b) on parents staying in work?

- Why?
- What more could help?

2. What advice would you offer other people in your position about going back to work?

- Probe on their views.

3. What do you think about the Government introducing various different initiatives to encourage more parents into work?

- Probe on their views.

4. What advice would you give the Government about supporting lone parents with the transition into work?

- Probe on their views.

Appendix D

Staff and customer coding frames

Staff coding frame:

- Role and Background
- Pilot (repeated for QWFI (12+), WSP, IWC)
- Organisation
- Strengths
- Weaknesses
- Marketing
- Pilot profile
- How change pilots
- Staff training and support
- Admin. support
- Examples
- Targets
- Types of customers
- Financial incentives
- Scenarios
- Procedures
- General opinions
- Government aims
- Other

Lone parent coding frame:

- Circumstances
- Current work
- Training
- Work history
- Work barriers
- Transitions into work
- Work attitude
- Child related
- Jobcentre history
- Pilot (repeated for QWFI (12+), WSP, IWC)
 - Initial engagement
 - Experiences
 - Impact
 - Scenario attitude
- Other Jobcentre support
- Other experienced non-Jobcentre support
- What helped most
- Views on policy
- Other
- What happened next (follow up interview only)
- Future plans (follow up interview only)

Appendix E

Lone parent work histories

The lone parents in the sample exhibited a variety of previous work histories, which range on a continuum from those with limited previous work experience and a lengthy period out of work, to those with more continuous work histories and shorter periods out of the labour market. On this basis, the respondents can be broadly divided into three groups (with inevitable overlaps between them): a group with a very long period out of work bringing up children (ten years or more) and with generally little prior work experience; those with some work experience and a shorter period out of work (around five–ten years); and those with a more continuous work history. Within each grouping there is also considerable diversity.

Longer work breaks

Those with a longer spell out of work and more limited work experience were primarily Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (QWFI (12+)) participants³⁵, while there were also a smaller number of those who had received Work Search Premium (WSP), and just a few In Work Credit (IWC)-only participants. The length of time spent out of work ranged from 12 years to over 30 years) while the extent of previous work experience before leaving work, and the extent to which training, voluntary work or part-time work (of less than 16 hours) had been undertaken whilst raising children varied within the group.

³⁵ Although the eligibility criterion for a QWFI (12+) is not tied to time on out-of-work benefits, previous research on lone parent Work Focused Interview (WFI) participants similarly shows that most non-working lone parents with a youngest child in secondary school have been out of the workforce for longer than one year (see, for example, Knight and Kasparova, 2006).

An example is one 45 year old lone parent with two children aged 18 and 15 who was unable to re-enter work due to caring responsibility for a disabled child. She had done office and factory work prior to having children, and did not work after having her first child. She also felt she was needed at home to emotionally support her children after the breakdown of her marriage. On the other hand, there were those who had been able to continue with part-time work whilst they were raising children, who therefore had more work experience to draw upon. One example was a 43 year old lone parent with a 16 year old child. After leaving school, she had worked in retail, but then left after getting married and having a child. Once her child entered school, she took a part-time job as a dinner lady which she did for 11 years, alongside some voluntary work at the school. More recently she completed a computing course, followed by training to become a teaching assistant, in which field she eventually took work.

All of the WSP and IWC participants with longer periods out of work tended to be in this sub-group of those who had maintained part-time and/or voluntary work whilst raising children. Moreover, two of the IWC-only participants in this category were unusual in that whilst they had limited previous work experience, they were more highly educated (to degree level) and had pursued voluntary work whilst out of work.

Shorter work breaks

Another dominant group were those who had some work experience prior to having children and had taken shorter periods out of work (between five and ten years). They were at the stage of just returning to work at the time of their participation in the pilots. This group were a mix of IWC-only participants (the most numerous), WSP participants and just a small number of QWFI (12+) participants (all but one of whom had gone on to enter work). Again there was diversity amongst the group according to the amount and type of prior work experience, the length of time spent out of work and the extent to which part-time work had been pursued during childraising.

Within this group were a number of respondents who had a more lengthy work history before leaving work to be with children, sometimes in better paid occupations, as well as respondents who had continued working part-time for at least some of the time after having children. The small number of male lone parents in the sample also all fell into this category, having had continuous work histories before becoming lone parents and then taking a short period out of work on benefits (four–five years) while adjusting to their role as a sole carer.

Often it was the break-up of a relationship that had prompted a move out of work, since prior to this, the support of a partner had allowed part-time work to be maintained. One 41 year old lone parent with a 12 year old child had worked in an office for seven years, but was made redundant when she was pregnant and subsequently re-trained as a childminder. She worked as a carer for five years and did

home sales on the side, juggling childcare with her partner. After the break up of her relationship, she left work in order to spend time settling the children, and subsequently did not work for seven years, primarily because she felt she could not afford to work due to the high cost of her private rental accommodation. However, she continued to look after her sister's child and did some voluntary work, and at the time of the interview had gained work in office administration.

Continuous work histories

A smaller group of lone parents are characterised with a more continuous history of participation in the workforce. These respondents were all IWC-only participants (the majority) or WSP participants, and all but one were in work at the time of the interview. Within this group there were some respondents who had more or less continuous work histories, with any periods out of work accounted for by pregnancies or unemployment (and job searching). However, more commonly, respondents had a continuous but patchy work history, with periods in work interspersed with short periods out of work related to the age of children and other family circumstances. There is some overlap here with those who took short breaks from work (above) (since very few participants had no periods at all out of work³⁶), but the respondents in this group were at a different stages in their work history, having already returned to work some years previously, rather than approaching the pilots immediately following a work break. As illustration, one 36 year old lone parent (with children aged 11, nine and three) had worked in retail for a few years after leaving school and took a few years out of work after having her first child. She then returned to a job in administration which she pursued on and off for five years. Prior to receiving IWC, she had retrained in law and done some voluntary work for a small solicitor's firm, before gaining a public sector job as a legal assistant.

Finally, there were a small group of young lone parents (all under 26) and all with just one child, who also had more complete work histories, returning to work after a maximum of two years out of work with their child. For instance, one 25 year old with three year old child worked in various temporary agency jobs after leaving school and before having her child. She remained at home with her children for two years before returning to temping work. At the time of the interview she was working in two part-time jobs.

³⁶ Participation in the WSP and IWC pilots required a 12 month minimum preceding period on benefits.

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