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Sanctions: Qualitative summary report on lone parent customers

Lucy Joyce and Karen Whiting

A report of research carried out by BMRB Social Research on behalf of the
Department for Work and Pensions

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Abbreviations and acronyms

CTB	Council Tax Benefit
DLA	Disability Living Allowance
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
HB	Housing Benefit
IB	Incapacity Benefit
IS	Income Support
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
ND25+	New Deal for 25+
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
NDYP	New Deal for Young People
NVQs	National Vocational Qualifications
WFI	Work Focused Interview
WTC	Working Tax Credit

Summary

Mandatory lone parent Work Focused Interviews (WFI) were introduced in 2001 for all lone parent customers making a new or repeat claim for Income Support (IS). Initially it included those whose youngest child was aged at least five years and three months, but by April 2003 it had been extended to include lone parent claimants with a youngest child aged between birth and three years. Since April 2001, lone parents already in receipt of IS ('stock' cases) have been invited to attend a mandatory WFI on a phased basis, according to the age of the youngest child and length of IS claim. In April 2004, WFIs were extended to all stock claimants with children aged between birth and five years. The lone parent WFIs aim to encourage lone parents to join New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP), although participation in the programme itself remains voluntary.

BMRB Social Research was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to carry out research which explored the impact of the sanctioning regime on lone parent customers¹. Specifically, the study explored: awareness and understanding of the sanctions regime; experiences of the sanctioning process; views of the sanctioning process and regime; and the impact of sanctions on those who receive them and their families. In total 30 depth interviews were carried out with lone parents. The interviews were carried out in four locations in England and Wales. Quotas were set to include respondents who had complied and those who were living with a sanction, and the sample also included a mix of demographic variables.

¹ In its broadest form this qualitative evaluation aimed to explore the impact of the sanctions regime on Jobcentre Plus customers, including mainstream Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers, those on New Deal for 25+ (ND25+) and New Deal for Young People (NDYP), as well as on lone parent customers. This summary report is part of this larger study.

Background to the respondents

Few customers who took part in this study had performed well academically at school and they had often left full-time education with few or no qualifications. Notwithstanding this, some had gone on to achieve in later life through further study or adult education. Generally, respondents had broken career trajectories and work experience tended to be in manual or retail trades. Furthermore, previous employment tended to be low paid and on a short-term basis. However, a desire to improve their situation and 'better themselves' was noted. Lone parents cited a number of barriers to full- or part-time employment. The chief reason amongst these was the lack of suitable childcare facilities.

Awareness and understanding of the sanctions regime

Lone parent advisers included in this study generally suggested they were aware of all aspects of the sanctioning regime as it applied to lone parent. However, they acknowledged that it would be difficult for anyone to have a full and complete knowledge of the sanctioning regime as a result of the complexity of the system. Primarily advisers suggested they developed their knowledge through direct experience of carrying out their role, but more specifically by liaising and discussing issues with colleagues. Accessing guidance via the intranet tended to be used as a last resort.

Although lone parents appeared to understand the principle of sanctioning *per se*, there seemed to be a lack of understanding regarding specific details, such as how much the reduction would be. In some exceptional cases, the lone parent viewed the possibility of sanctioning as an empty threat and tended not to believe that the Jobcentre or Benefits Agency would actually follow through and reduce the benefit of claimants with children.

Experience of sanctioning

Lone parent customers generally received their invitation to the lone parent WFI via a letter from the Jobcentre. Problems were noted with receiving and in some instances understanding the WFI invitation, particularly for those with literacy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) needs.

Generally customers exhibited a negative response to the WFI invitation, with some reporting feeling 'pressurised' to attend the interview. The invitation was also deemed inappropriate as a result of the personal circumstances of the respondent, for example having young child/ren or health problems; and due to issues relating to childcare. However, certain customers viewed it as an opportunity to have a Working Tax Credit (WTC) calculation carried out and others relished the chance to talk through future employment possibilities.

A range of reasons were highlighted by customers for non-attendance at the WFI, these usually fell into the following categories: having no knowledge of the invitation; making a conscious decision not to attend; and being willing but not attending for some reason.

Prior to customers being informed of the sanction referral, there was an intermediary stage during which advisers attempted to contact the lone parent either by letter or via the 'phone, and there was evidence of multiple follow-up contacts being made. These contacts were especially important for customers who had no prior knowledge of the WFI invitation and were invaluable for respondents with basic skills and ESOL needs. It appeared that advisers were able to use a certain degree of flexibility and discretion before referring people for a sanction and sanctions were very much seen as the 'last resort'.

A range of outcomes ultimately followed this process, that is: the lone parent attended the interview; they were sanctioned²; or no outcome was noted – with customers stating they did not attend but were not sanctioned. Advisers concurred with this view and suggested that not all sanctions were being followed through by advisers or by the Benefits Agency or the team responsible for implementing the sanction.

Customers usually first heard about the sanction via a letter sent out to them. However, others had no recall of being informed about the sanction and only became aware when they received a reduction in their benefit.

Customers' experience of attending the WFI varied: Some were positive having appreciated the information and help they received, such as job search advice or the WTC calculation. In contrast, others expressed more negative views, mentioning lack of childcare facilities and the attitude of the adviser as their primary reason.

Impacts

Few impacts were noted, due to lack of awareness of sanctions on the part of the lone parents in this study. However, some financial, emotional and physical impacts were highlighted: Sanctioned lone parents highlighted the difficulties they faced managing on a reduced income, especially paying utility bills and rent. Customers only had money for essentials and missed out on extras, such as socialising. Lone parents also reported being unable to buy treats for their children, provide pocket money or pay for school trips.

The financial pressures imposed by the sanction appeared to increase the stress levels of those affected and this was specifically thought to be a result of coping with

² Lone parents did not generally believe they had been sanctioned, short-term reductions were not identified as a sanction and nor were longer-term reductions, rather they were perceived as re-assessments of benefit.

a sanction alongside caring for a child/ren. The stress and anxiety reported seemed to have a knock-on effect on health issues; primarily it was thought to compound existing ones, such as panic attacks or depression.

A number of coping mechanisms were identified for dealing with a sanction. These included: borrowing money or receiving support from friends or family members; and applying for and receiving a crisis loan from the Jobcentre as well as bank loans. The impacts were said to have been reduced by the help received.

1 Introduction

This summary report documents the findings from the lone parent component of the sanctions qualitative research carried out by BMRB Social Research. As with the main stage, this research was carried out between April and May 2005.

1.1 Background

Mandatory lone parent Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) were introduced in 2001 for all lone parent customers making a new or repeat claim for Income Support (IS) and whose youngest child was aged at least five years and three months. The WFIs take place at several points during the claim, both prior to a claim being processed as well as mandatory review meetings after six months, after 12 months and annually thereafter.

Since April 2001, lone parents already in receipt of IS ('stock' cases) have been invited to attend a mandatory WFI on a phased basis, according to the age of the youngest child and length of IS claim. The first mandatory WFIs were introduced for stock clients with a youngest child aged between 13 and 15 years. On the same basis mandatory WFIs have gradually been extended year by year, until in April 2004 WFIs were extended to all stock claimants with children aged from birth to five years.

From April 2002, mandatory WFIs for new and repeat claimants were extended to include new lone parent claimants with a youngest child aged between three years and five years three months. From April 2003, new and repeat claimants with a youngest child aged between birth and three years have also been required to attend.

The lone parent WFIs aim to encourage lone parents to join the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP), though participation in the programme itself remains voluntary. Where lone parents are not able, or are unwilling, to take part in NDLP at the point of the WFI, the adviser might encourage them to consider their long-term aims and goals, prepare them for the labour market in the longer term, and make them aware of the services available to them in the future.

From October 2003, the sanctioning process relating to the lone parent WFI regime changed. The main change concerned those who fail to attend a WFI and how sanctions are operated. The regime was tightened, with lone parents getting just one opportunity to attend their interview. Furthermore, the responsibility to contact the Jobcentre following a fail to attend was placed on the lone parent. Since the introduction of lone parent WFIs in April 2001, to the latest data in March 2004, there have been 12,500 sanctions applied to lone parent IS claims, in non-integrated Jobcentres.

1.2 Research and policy background

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is committed to conducting a full review of the sanctions regime as it currently stands. The sanctions system is complex; it contributes to both protecting taxpayers' money, and to jobseekers' understanding of and compliance with their labour market obligations. The DWP has already compiled a Qualitative Evidence Base, drawn largely from Employment Service (as was), Department of Social Security (as was) and DWP research and evaluation reports. The evidence base has produced detail of various aspects of the sanctions regime, including communication and understanding, the views of staff and the wider impact of sanctions.

1.3 Research aims

In its broadest form this qualitative evaluation aimed to explore the impact of the sanctions regime on Jobcentre Plus customers, including mainstream JSA customers, those on the New Deal for 25+ (ND25+) and the New Deal for Young People (NDYP), as well as on lone parent customers. However, this report focuses exclusively on the impacts of the sanctioning regime on lone parent customers.

Specifically, the study explored:

- overall awareness and understanding of the sanctions regime as it applies to lone parents;
- experiences of the sanctioning process and understanding of this;
- views of the sanctioning process and regime;
- the social and economic impact of sanctions on those who receive them and their families.

1.4 Research design

In total 30 depth interviews were carried out with lone parents in order to explore the range and diversity of views and experiences. The interviews were carried out in four locations in England and Wales, ie North, Midlands, London and South Wales.

Quotas were also set to include respondents who had complied and those who were living with a sanction, although as this information was not provided on the database supplied by DWP, it was necessary to rely on the customers' own assessment of this. However, as will be seen in the report, customers often lacked understanding of the sanction they received, particularly whether they had complied or not and few customers identified themselves as 'living with a sanction'. As a consequence, the sample is weighted towards those who complied, with a total of 21 respondents identifying themselves as complied and nine as living with a sanction.

Additionally, the respondents were sampled to include a mix of demographic variables, such as:

- age;
- age of youngest child;
- gender;
- ethnicity – mix of white, Asian and black customers;
- health problems; and
- new and repeat claimants.

A precise breakdown of the sample characteristics can be found in Appendix A.

In addition to the interviews carried out with customers, we also carried out one focus group with advisers in South London.

1.5 Conduct of the research

Respondents were purposively selected by our in-house team of specialist field recruiters, using the sample criteria outlined above and agreed with the DWP.

Depth interviews and the group discussion were undertaken by experienced qualitative researchers, using non-directive interviewing techniques. They were exploratory and interactive in form so that questioning could be responsive to the views, experiences and circumstances of the individuals involved. Interviews for each stage were guided by a topic guide developed by BMRB, in close liaison with the DWP. Although topic guides ensure systematic coverage of key points across interviews, they were used flexibly to allow issues of relevance to respondents to be covered.

All the depth interviews and group discussions were digitally recorded in stereo. The verbatim transcripts produced from the digital recordings were subject to a rigorous content analysis, which involved systematically sifting, summarising and sorting the verbatim material according to key issues and themes, within a thematic matrix. Further classificatory and interpretative analyses were then derived from the analytic charts and these formed the basis of the findings reported in subsequent chapters.

The findings reported have been illustrated with the use of verbatim quotations and examples. Where necessary the details of the contributors or their subjects have been moderately changed to protect anonymity.

Adopting a qualitative approach has made it possible to report on the range of views, experiences and suggestions reported by customers and staff. The purposive nature of the sample design as well as the sample size, however, means that the study cannot provide any statistical data relating to the prevalence of these views, experiences or suggestions. Further details about our analytical procedures can be found in the appendices.

1.6 Report outline

This summary report is divided into six sections: Chapter 1 provided background to the research and outlined the design and methodological approach adopted; Chapter 2 focuses on the background to respondents, looking at customers' educational and employment histories, as well as experiences of the Jobcentre. Awareness and knowledge of the sanctions regime is explored in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 considers the sanctions process, including respondents' experiences of this; and Chapter 5 looks at the impacts of the sanctions regime on customers and their family and friends. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a summary of the key research findings and makes recommendations for change as suggested by respondents.

2 Background to respondents

This chapter briefly outlines the background to the respondents in the customer sample, reporting on their personal background; education and employment history and past experiences of the Jobcentre. This chapter aims to add context rather than provide substantive findings.

2.1 Education and employment

Of the customers interviewed in this study few had performed well academically at school and they had often left full-time education with few if any qualifications. However, some had gone on to achieve in later life through further study or adult education. Those who had undertaken further education had achieved National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and diplomas following college courses in retail, childcare and customer service management, to name but a few.

Generally respondents had broken career trajectories and work experience tended to be in manual or retail trades. In most cases, previous employment had been low paid and on a short-term basis. However, a desire to improve their situation and 'better themselves' was noted and customers often expressed a desire to undertake further or higher education or training. In some instances, lone parents expressed a desire to take up work when their children were older, although few felt they wanted to work while their children were young. Some also had a specific idea of the type of job they wanted to take on, and this tended to be roles in caring professions, retail work or in the leisure industry.

Lone parents cited a number of barriers to full- or part-time employment. The chief reason amongst these was the lack of suitable childcare facilities, which they suggested they found difficult to organise even for short periods, such as when attending the Jobcentre. Furthermore, the cost of childcare was said to be prohibitive.

Another barrier came in the form of health problems or some type of disability which was said to prevent them from working. Those health problems mentioned included both physical and psychological problems including, respiratory difficulties, panic attacks, depression and agoraphobia. Literacy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) issues were cited as a further barrier to full-time employment. Customers with these types of problems had difficulties reading and writing which limited the type of work they could undertake.

In addition to personal barriers, it was also felt that a lack of suitable jobs in their preferred occupations meant it was difficult to find work. In some cases this was said to be exacerbated as a result of the Jobcentre not carrying advertisements for the type of jobs some customers were interested in. For example, some customers were keen to work in the fitness industry but found that the Jobcentre had few if any jobs in this area. The best the Jobcentre could offer these customers was a health and fitness course.

2.2 Experience of claiming benefit and visiting the Jobcentre

The types of benefit lone parents had claimed in the past were wide ranging. They included Income Support (IS), Disability Living Allowance (DLA), Housing Benefit (HB), Incapacity Benefit (IB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB).

A number of reasons for attending the Jobcentre were raised: In some instances, customers only attended the Jobcentre for compulsory appointments or at the request of their personal adviser. Others had used the Jobcentre sporadically for job searches or to browse for job vacancies on an *ad hoc* basis. Finally, there were also those who had arranged their own appointments with their personal adviser or another member of Jobcentre staff, in order to gain employment advice and this was often said to be motivated by a desire to find work.

The customers interviewed revealed a range of views about the Jobcentre itself. Lone parents were generally found to be positive about how user friendly the Jobcentre was. They appreciated that their records were now computerised meaning information about their claim could be easily recorded and retrieved at the click of a button. They also liked the fact that the office was open-plan as it was felt it created a more relaxed and friendly environment which was less intimidating for some.

However, there were some negative experiences regarding the Jobcentre and these tended to relate to either the level of privacy; other types of customers frequenting the Jobcentre; or due to a perceived lack of childcare facilities. The lack of privacy experienced in the Jobcentre was often deemed to be a problem and made some lone parents feel uncomfortable when discussing issues with their advisers. This lack of privacy was generally thought to be a consequence of the open plan office, which customers felt, in contrast to those who liked it, resulted in other attendees being able to overhear conversations they had with their advisers.

Lone parents suggested they felt intimidated by some of the other customers who attended the Jobcentre, particularly as they did not believe they came into contact with this type of person in other contexts. Some lone parents perceived other Jobcentre users to be aggressive and rude, and on some occasions it was said they were inebriated, which was said to be frightening at times. Another issue raised was the lack of childcare or crèche facilities in some Jobcentres. Generally lone parents felt uncomfortable bringing their young children into the Jobcentre in case they caused a disturbance to other customers and also because of the reaction they might get from the advisers, whom it was said had reacted negatively in the past.

Lone parents also revealed a range of views about Jobcentre staff and their personal advisers. Some were positive and suggested that in their experience advisers had been professional as well as being supportive and willing to help. In contrast, there were cases where the lone parent perceived the adviser to be 'uninterested' and one respondent suggested their adviser made them feel 'incapable' of ever gaining employment. This was said to have been conveyed through the tone of voice used, as well as their general disinterest in what the respondent was saying.

'I felt I was being caught, questioned, why do I claim income support when I should be working...it made me feel incapable of doing anything in life, just get back home and shut the door...I really didn't feel happy at all. I thought...you are supposed to help me...but it didn't feel as though she did. She seemed very uninterested...to be honest, it felt like, well, you're just another one coming in.'

(Female, living with a sanction, aged 25-34, London)

Notwithstanding this, there was some recognition that the level of help and advice received by lone parents varied according to which adviser they had contact with and the personalities of the individuals involved.

3 Awareness and understanding of the sanctioning regime

3.1 Awareness and knowledge of advisers

Lone parent advisers included in this study generally suggested they were aware of all aspects of the sanctioning regime as it applied to lone parents, such as the percentage of benefit affected and the duration of the sanction. However, they did take the view that it would be difficult for anyone to have a full and complete knowledge of the sanctioning regime as a result of the complexity of the system.

In terms of training received, lone parent advisers reported that training mainly occurred 'on the job' rather than through any official training programme, although formal training sessions were received usually when the sanctioning regime was first introduced. The training received by lone parent advisers tended to take the form of a step by step 'walk through' of the overall procedures involved, and was not said to have been detailed in form.

Primarily advisers suggested they developed their knowledge through direct experience of carrying out their role, but more specifically by liaising and discussing issues with colleagues, as well as by using the guidance provided when the programme was introduced, or information they collected during training sessions. Advisers explained how they tended to pool their knowledge of sanctions with colleagues and felt this system meant that collectively they had a full understanding and were able to answer questions and solve any problems posed.

It appeared that accessing guidance via the intranet tended to be used as a last resort and some did not bother seeking out the guidance documents in this way, preferring instead to ask colleagues. Some advisers found the guidance to be complicated and overly detailed. However, others insisted that once they had used and understood the guidance document, the actual process of sanctioning was easy to follow.

3.2 Awareness and understanding of lone parents

Generally customers were aware and had a reasonable understanding of the principle behind the sanctioning regime. However, there is evidence to suggest that some were unfamiliar with the actual term 'sanction' referring instead to a reduction in benefit. Although lone parents appeared to understand the principle of sanctioning *per se*, and understood that they could possibly receive a sanction for non-attendance of the lone parent work focused interview (WFI), there seemed to be a lack of understanding regarding specific details, such as how much the reduction would be and how long the sanction would be imposed for.

In some exceptional cases, the lone parent viewed the possibility of sanctioning as an empty threat. In these circumstances they tended not to believe that the Jobcentre or Benefits Agency would actually follow through and reduce the benefit of claimants with children.

There was some confusion exhibited surrounding the source and detail of information received regarding sanctioning. Some received information via letters from the Jobcentre. These letters were thought to be overly complicated and difficult to understand. Some customers even reported that when they had presented the letter to their advisers they too found the letters hard to decipher.

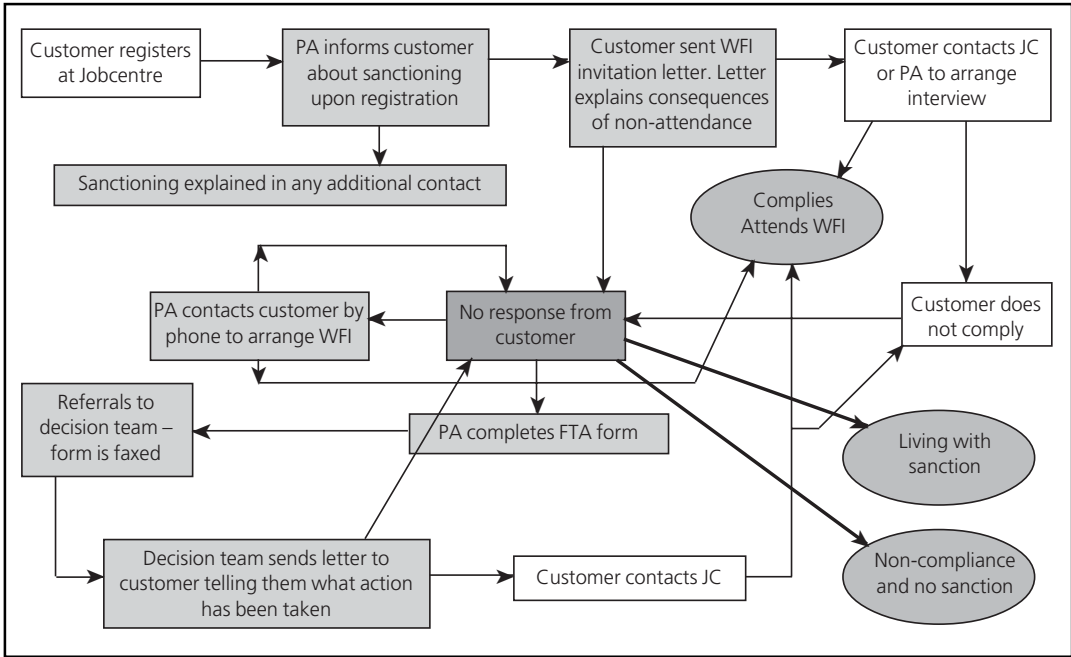
Others gained their understanding of sanctions through verbal communication with their adviser either in face-to-face meetings or over the telephone. Lastly, there were some who had gained their knowledge through word of mouth from friends and other claimants.

4 Experience of sanctioning

4.1 The sanction process

The diagram below outlines the sanctioning process as described by advisers and customers who took part in this study. From the description outlined there appeared to be a number of different trajectories followed by customers engaged in this process and specifically three different final outcomes: attending the lone parent work focused interviews (WFI); not attending the lone parent WFI and living with a sanction: not attending the lone parent WFI yet not receiving a sanction. This section of the report outlines the details of these processes.

Figure 4.1 Outline of the sanctioning process



It is important to note that throughout the process there are a number of junctures where advisers and also the team dealing with the referral (in Jobcentre Plus or Benefits Agency³) are able and, importantly, appear to employ discretion and flexibility. For example, the number of times they contact a customer to remind or encourage them to attend the lone parent WFI, or the decision they take regarding whether to refer a customer or not. This flexibility was thought in part to contribute to the range of different trajectories occurring and the differing experiences highlighted by respondents.

4.2 Receiving the invitation

Generally it appeared that lone parent customers received their invitation to the lone parent WFI via a letter from the Jobcentre. There is some evidence to suggest that follow-up telephone calls were made by the advisers to encourage customers' attendance at the WFI. However, some customers were adamant they had not received a written invitation or a follow-up 'phone call and therefore were not aware they had been invited to attend an interview.

Of those who remembered receiving an invitation, the ability of the customer to understand the letter varied. The letter was perceived to be unclear by some, particularly those who had basic skills or ESOL needs. For example, one respondent with literacy problems explained how they were unable to read letters they received without the help of their niece who lived close by. Similarly, customers with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) needs suggested they were also unable to read and understand the content of letters easily without support, and these issues were also noted by researchers during the course of the fieldwork.

In contrast, there were those who exhibited a greater understanding of the lone parent WFI invitation they received and understood they were being invited to attend an interview. These customers said the letter had outlined the reason for their attendance but they did not always believe it had not gone into detail about what was to be discussed during the interview. In some cases, respondents also remembered the letter warning them that non-attendance would result in a reduction of their benefit. As would be expected, repeat customers often demonstrated a better understanding of the letter and the interview than new claimants. When researchers explained the purpose of the WFI, respondents often suggested that the invitation had not clearly explained the purpose.

4.2.1 Views on receiving a lone parent WFI

Generally customers exhibited a negative response to the WFI invitation. Some reported feeling 'pressurised' to attend the interview and in some instances perceived the WFI invitation to be coercive in nature, an approach they did not like.

³ Depending on whether it was a rolled-out Jobcentre Plus office or not.

It was also apparent that some lone parents believed they would be forced into employment on attending the interview, rather than it being an opportunity to discuss their career options, and they were concerned about this prospect.

In addition, the invitation was viewed negatively as it was felt to be inappropriate for two main reasons: as a result of personal circumstances of the respondent, such as health problems or because they had young child/ren; and due to issues relating to childcare. Both of these issues are also given as reasons for deciding not to attend the lone parent WFI and are discussed in more detail in Section 4.2.2.

However, there were some positive responses to the WFI invitation. Certain customers viewed it as an opportunity to have a Working Tax Credit (WTC) calculation carried out for them. Other customers relished the opportunity to talk through future employment possibilities with a trained adviser. This was particularly valuable for those who did not know how their skills would transfer to the employment market and to give confidence to those who had been out of work since their children were born.

4.2.2 Reasons for non-attendance at the lone parent WFI

A range of reasons were highlighted by customers for non-attendance at the WFI; these usually fell into the following categories: having no knowledge of the invitation; making a conscious decision not to attend; and being willing but not attending for some reason. These points are discussed below:

- **Having no knowledge of the invitation** – This appeared to be a result of several possible situations, the first being that the customer had not actually received the WFI letter due to a possible administration error made at the Jobcentre; or due to a change in address which respondents had not informed the Jobcentre of. The second being that some customers did not understand the letter or what was required of them due to literacy or ESOL issues.
- **Making a conscious decision not to attend** – It appeared that certain respondents made a conscious decision not to attend the meeting and a range of reason were given for this:
 - In some cases, it appeared that respondents were simply against the principle of lone parents attending a WFI, as they felt it was too much to expect of those caring for children and was said to place unnecessary pressure on them.
 - Lone parents' personal circumstances were also highlighted as barriers to attending an interview or gaining employment. For instance, it was felt unfair to expect lone parents with young children (usually under school age), those with a number of children, or respondents with health problems to attend an interview or consider the idea of employment. In some cases, respondents felt they had explained to advisers on a number of occasions their views on this and were therefore unhappy at being invited to the interview.

- Concerns about childcare were also cited as reasons for choosing not to attend the WFI. In particular, difficulties finding suitable and affordable childcare for the occasion were noted, as were problems and the effort associated with taking children to the Jobcentre (particularly young children), primarily the effort involved in getting child/ren ready; transporting them to the Jobcentre – often on public transport; and looking after them once they were there. Certainly they often thought it was inappropriate to take young children to the Jobcentre, and suggested that it was not conducive to conducting a useful interview.
- **Willing to attend in principle** but forgetting or experiencing problems that prevented them from doing so. Lastly it was noted that some respondents simply forgot to attend the WFI and missed the appointment. These customers seemed to suggest that reminders about the interview should be provided in the few weeks or days before the interview clearly stating the time and place it was to be held. This group usually contacted the Jobcentre once they remembered, made a subsequent appointment and attended the interview.

Furthermore, lone parent customers suggested they did not attend their appointment as they had alternative commitments but often did not inform the Jobcentre of this. In most cases these were hospital appointments or emergency dental appointments, either for the customer themselves or for one of their children. Customers also cited health problems and psychological conditions as reasons for their non-attendance. For example, one customer had agoraphobia which they suggested prevented them from attending the WFI.

4.3 Being informed of sanction referral

Generally it seemed that prior to customers being informed of the sanction referral, there was an intermediary stage where advisers attempted to contact lone parents either by letter or via the 'phone. It seemed that these calls were usually made in cases where there was no response to the original written invitation, where customers had not turned up for their interviews and had not contacted the Jobcentre of their own accord.

This subsequent contact was not regarded by advisers as being an opportunity to inform customers that they had been sanctioned; rather it appeared that this contact acted more as a verbal reminder by the adviser to organise or reorganise an appointment, and was seen as a chance to ensure the customer attended the interview before their case was referred. It appeared that the possibility of sanctioning was generally mentioned in these conversations, but with a light touch. This follow-up contact seemed to be especially important for those customers who claimed to have no prior knowledge of the WFI invitation and was therefore invaluable for respondents with basic skills and ESOL needs with no prior knowledge of the invitation.

In some instances, there was evidence of multiple follow-up contacts being made by the advisers prior to the final outcome, with customers being given a number of chances to attend the interview. It appeared that advisers were able to use a certain degree of flexibility and discretion before referring people for a sanction. Advisers revealed that the sanction often came into force upon their recommendation. They often seemed to give customers the 'benefit of the doubt' and rearranged the WFI for another time. Importantly, from the perspective of advisers, sanctioning lone parent was very much seen as the 'last resort'.

As mentioned previously, the customer research suggested that a range of outcomes ultimately followed this process, that is: the lone parent attended the interview; they were sanctioned; or no outcome noted – with some customers suggesting they did not attend but were also not sanctioned.

4.4 Experience following the sanction

Interestingly, a number of lone parents in this study suggested they were not aware they had received a sanction (despite being on the database as a sanctioned customer). This includes both customers who had subsequently complied and attended the WFI interview; as well as those who had not attended.

It was evident that short reductions to benefit for those who eventually complied and longer-term reductions for those who were living with a sanction, were not always perceived as being a sanction nor were they linked to the lone parent's non-attendance at the WFI, and this might in part account for the lack of awareness of sanctions. In some of these cases, customers thought their benefit had simply been reduced as a result of a re-assessment as opposed to a sanction, and it was evident from the interviews that customers with literacy and ESOL needs were often confused about their situation. For example, one lone parent with ESOL needs interviewed in South Wales stated they had not been invited to an interview and nor had they received a sanction. When probed about any possible reductions received to their benefit, they explained that due to a re-assessment they had received a cut in their money. They assumed this was a permanent decision and therefore did not contact the Jobcentre to discuss it. It was not thought to be linked to any issues of non-compliance.

In addition, there were also those customers who were adamant that they had not been sanctioned and also appeared not to have received a reduction in benefit. When this was explored, customers suggested they were completely aware of how much money they received and felt confident that they would notice if they received a reduction of any kind. One male lone parent explained how he had ignored his initial WFI invitation and did not contact the Jobcentre to explain. Following this he received a number of follow-up contacts from the Jobcentre, at which point he explained he would not attend an interview as he deemed it to be inappropriate at this stage. However, despite non-attendance, he did not believe a sanction had been applied and was quite sure he had not lost any benefit.

It is possible that in some of these cases the WFI was waived due to personal circumstances, such as death of a spouse, but clearly lone parents did not understand the reasons behind this.

Advisers concurred with this view and suggested that customers were not always being referred for a sanction by advisers following non-attendance at the WFI. In addition, they suspected the Benefits Agency of not following through on all cases referred to them. Advisers were unclear about the reasons behind this, but suspected claims became lost in the system. In one case, the adviser explained how they noticed this after monitoring the case of a particularly aggressive customer. They said they contacted the Benefits Agency to follow this up, but still the sanction had not been imposed.

'I didn't, not because...then what happened was that IS never even applied the sanction...claim it got lost in their system and twice I, you know, prompted them on it and no action was taken and then it went over to [name of officer] so I said to the adviser that she had been extremely rude to me and that she hadn't attended the meeting there either and I said to the girl you know sanctions should be applied you know.'

(Adviser group)

4.4.1 Receiving the sanction

Customers usually first heard about the sanction via a letter sent out to them. However, others had no recall of being informed about the sanction and suggested they only became aware of the sanction when they received a reduction in their benefit.

Customers' first point of contact following the receipt of the sanction tended to be the Jobcentre followed by the Benefits Agency. Those who contacted the Benefits Agency were generally redirected to their lone parent adviser. It appeared that customers received an explanation as to why they had been sanctioned over the 'phone when speaking to their lone parent adviser or face-to-face when they went into the Jobcentre. The reason for the sanction was fully explained and few reported difficulties in understanding that the non-attendance at the WFI had resulted in a sanction.

Lone parent advisers commented that communications between the Jobcentre and Benefits Agency regarding sanctions were often difficult, with there being a general lack of feedback on sanction decisions or progress. Some advisers commented that they only found out that a particular customer had been sanctioned when they presented themselves at the Jobcentre enquiring why their benefit had been reduced.

4.5 Attending the WFI

There were also some interesting findings revealed by those who attended the WFI. These findings provide an insight into what customers thought and felt about the interview and could provide clues as to why some lone parents fail to attend the interview in the first place. Certainly, it was suggested that experiences of attending the WFI would impact on willingness to attend in the future.

A range of topics were covered during the interview including: exploring current circumstances, employment and training options, as well as benefit entitlements and WTC calculations. In addition, the advisers provided lone parents with job-search information including advice about attending job interviews and completing applications. Details of the sanctioning regime were also given during this meeting.

Customers' experience of attending the WFI varied. Some were positive, having appreciated the information and help they had received including the WTC calculation they had been given. Others liked the job-search advice as well as the discussion of future employment possibilities. In contrast, some customers expressed more negative views of the WFI. Primarily, they mentioned lack of childcare facilities at the Jobcentre and also found some advisers to be generally impatient and unhelpful, which they believed was a result of the children attending the interview. In addition there were also those who believed that the WFI had no impact upon them and viewed it as a waste of time.

5 Impact of being sanctioned

This chapter reflects on the impact of receiving a sanction. In general, lone parents rarely mentioned impacts arising from the sanction, primarily as a result of their lack of awareness of being sanctioned. As a result of the lack of awareness, in some cases it was difficult to undertake a thorough discussion of the impacts. However, to ensure impacts were explored as fully as possible, both factual and hypothetical impacts were discussed. Where there is a clear distinction between the factual and hypothetical responses it has been highlighted in the ensuing discussion.

When discussing the impact of the sanction regime three distinct areas were identified: practical impacts, emotional impact, and physical impacts. This chapter also examines the impact of sanctioning on lone parents views of and behaviour towards the Jobcentre as well as the impact on their employment prospects.

5.1 Practical impacts

In terms of practical impacts it was primarily the financial implications of being sanctioned that were reported by lone parents. Sanctioned lone parents highlighted the difficulties they faced having to manage on a reduced amount of money to pay their utility bills and rent. Some revealed that they had been 'struggling' to manage their finances anyway on the full benefit they received, let alone when facing a sanction. Another of the practical impacts mentioned was that customers only had money for essentials. As a result they often missed out on extras such as socialising and the pursuit of hobbies, which they could no longer afford. Some lone parents also reported that they could no longer buy treats for their children, give them pocket money or pay for them to attend school trips.

Others described how they had become indebted to friends and family members for the duration of their sanction and beyond in order to cope with the reduction in their benefit. Customers also commented that this debt, albeit with family and friends, had to eventually be repaid which meant the financial implications of the sanction could be ongoing.

5.2 Emotional impacts

Few emotional impacts were mentioned by lone parent customers. However, the financial pressures imposed by the sanctioning regime did appear to increase the stress levels of those affected and this was specifically thought to be a result of coping with a sanction alongside the responsibility of caring for a child/ren. In addition to this, respondents simply felt being unable to engage in social activities made them feel more stressed.

5.3 Physical impacts

The physical impacts mentioned by lone parent customers appeared to be related to the emotional impacts cited. The stress and anxiety reported by customers seemed to have a knock-on effect on the health issues experienced by some customers – primarily it was thought to compound existing ones, such as panic attacks or depression. Customers also reported experiencing disturbed sleep patterns brought on by worry.

5.4 Coping mechanisms

A number of coping mechanisms were identified for dealing with a sanction. These included: borrowing money or receiving support from friends or family members; and applying for and receiving crisis loans from the Jobcentre as well as bank loans.

Not surprisingly, the support customers received during the length of their sanction appeared to impact on the experience of being sanctioned. For those who had family members or friends to support them emotionally and financially, the sanction appeared to have a more limited impact. However, the impact was often far greater for those who lacked support. In these cases it was often said to propel them into financial difficulties, including falling into rent arrears, missing loan repayments and incurring additional charges upon failure to pay. Notwithstanding this, there were also those who had no identifiable support network but who also seemed unperturbed by the impact of sanctions. In these cases, it is possible that these customers had other sources of income either because they were working, or due to savings or loans they had taken out.

5.5 Impact on lone parents' view of the Jobcentre

The impact of the sanction regime on lone parents' views and behaviour towards the Jobcentre could be put into two distinct groups: The first group consisted of those for whom the experience did not appear to have any discernable impact on their views nor behaviour towards the Jobcentre; and the second group who did note a change in views and behaviour. These changes were found to be both positive and negative in form.

Positively the experience was said to have made respondents more aware of the Jobcentre and the services it provided and had in some instances motivated them to engage with the Jobcentre on a regular basis. In one exceptional case, a female customer described how she believed the process had been 'strict but fair' and that she thought she should have been sanctioned years before in order to get her to engage with the Jobcentre and find work.

'I've been on the social for ten years, they should have done it to me a long time ago. Yes because it is only laziness really that I've not been working. If they've take the money off me I would have gone. I might have found a job.'

(Female, complied, aged 25-34, South Wales)

Conversely, the imposition of a sanction had also resulted in some negative views and behaviour and these were said to be a consequence of customers' perception of the process, which they deemed to be unfair. For example, some customers were annoyed when they found out they had been sanctioned and viewed the process as being unnecessarily strict, suggesting that advisers should be more understanding of customers' individual circumstances. This was particularly the case when the non-attendance at the interview had been a direct result of the failure of the Jobcentre to update their records when a customer had informed them of a change in details.

Unusually, there were also those for whom the experience of receiving a sanction resulted in them expressing threatening and abusive thoughts regarding their behaviour towards Jobcentre staff.

'I won't tell you what I would have done but they wouldn't have had an office. And I keep telling them that...they mess about...if it was me by myself I wouldn't care.'

(Male, living with a sanction, aged 25-34, North of England)

5.6 Hypothetical impacts

It is interesting to note that the hypothetical impacts of the sanction regime mentioned tended to converge with the factual impacts reported. The hypothetical impacts primarily focused on the financial implications of having benefit reduced as well as the difficulties of managing on a reduce amount of benefit and the aggravation of existing health and emotional problems.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Key findings

- Problems were noted with receiving and, in some instances, understanding the work focused interview (WFI) invitation, particularly for those with literacy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) needs.
- Lone parents were generally reminded about WFI prior to a sanction being imposed on one and sometimes multiple occasions.
- The sanctions programme was approached flexibly by advisers and discretion was employed.
- Lone parents did not generally believe they had been sanctioned; short-term reductions were not identified as a sanction nor were longer-term reductions – rather they were perceived as re-assessments of benefit.
- In some cases, lone parent customers appeared not to have received a sanction despite non-compliance.
- There was a sense that not all sanctions were being followed through by advisers or the Benefits Agency or team responsible for implementing the sanction.
- A lack of communication between the Benefits Agency and the Jobcentre was noted by advisers.
- The appropriateness of the WFI invite was questioned in some instances by customers, especially lone parents with young children (pre-school) or those with more than one child, as they were thought unlikely to find work in the near future due to their circumstances and it was thought they might also experience practical difficulties attending.
- Few impacts were noted, due to the lack of awareness of the sanction on the part of the lone parents in this study. However, some financial, emotional and physical impacts were highlighted.
- The impacts, where present, were said to have been reduced by help received from family and friends.

6.2 Principle of sanctioning

There appeared to be mixed views amongst both lone parent advisers and lone parent customers regarding the principle of sanctioning. For some, sanctioning was seen as unreasonable whereas others believed in the principle, viewing it as a reasonable course of action for the Jobcentre to take.

A number of reasons were cited by those who considered the sanctioning regime to be unreasonable. It was argued that lone parent customers already had to manage on a small amount of money and that sanctioning them was unfair, particularly as they had the financial responsibility of looking after their children.

In addition it was also felt the sanctioning regime did not differentiate between different customer groups with varying needs and they believed the Jobcentre should do more to consider people's individual circumstances before imposing a sanction. This point was reiterated by some advisers who suggested that more flexibility should be used with vulnerable groups, such as customers with literacy and ESOL needs; those with young children; and those who acted as carers.

Advisers and lone parent customers who supported the principle of sanctions, generally did so because they believed it effectively worked to motivate, or perhaps 'coerce' customers to attend the Jobcentre for their WFI, which they considered might be potentially beneficial to their future prospects. Furthermore, attendance at the WFI was seen by some to be a very small price to pay for the financial support they were receiving in the form of benefit and, as a result, the principle of imposing a sanction for non-attendance seemed a fair and reasonable one.

6.3 Suggestions for change

Lone parent customers and advisers all made suggestions for how to change or improve the sanctioning regime. Suggestions for changes to both the sanctioning policy and the sanctioning process were mentioned:

In terms of changes suggested to the sanctioning policy – Lone parent customers felt that people should be given a second chance before they were sanctioned. Some thought that sanctioning should be seen as a last resort and the individual circumstances of the claimant involved should be thoroughly assessed before referring them for a sanction. It was also thought that advisers should make every attempt to contact the customer and reschedule the missed appointment (which did seem to be occurring).

Another suggestion for change made by customers was a reduction in the amount of the sanction from 20 per cent to a smaller percentage, as they felt this would be fairer and would alleviate some of the financial pressures felt by sanctioned customers. However, they did not comment on how this would impact on sanctions as a way of encouraging attendance at the WFI. Others believed that the sanctioning regime should be abandoned in favour of offering lone parents an incentive to attend the WFI. Suggested incentives tended to be monetary.

The suggestions made for changes to the overall process included providing more information upfront to lone parent customers about the purpose of the WFI. It was believed that this would alleviate some of the disconcertion felt at the point of receiving the WFI invitation and would encourage more lone parents to attend. Others believed that the Jobcentre should send out letters prior to the interview or contact them via the 'phone in order to remind them of the time and date of the appointment.

In addition, some believed that the Jobcentre should be marketed differently. It should be marketed as a place to get help and advice about employment issues as well as a place to undertake a job search. As mentioned in the earlier discussion, one of the reasons given for non-attendance of the WFI was the perception that the Jobcentre and the advisers would force customers into work. It was believed that if the Jobcentre was advertised as a place to receive help then perhaps more customers would attend the WFI. Another suggestion linked to branding and marketing was to rename the WFI. It was felt by some that the name 'work focused interview' had employment overtones which led some lone parents to think that they would be 'forced' to take a job if they attended the interview. There were no suggestions as to what name should replace WFI.

Customers and advisers also suggested making improvements to the Jobcentre facilities and general environment. Customers suggested measures to increase the level of privacy as well as improving the childcare facilities provided at the Jobcentre. It was felt that these suggestions would go some way to making lone parents feel comfortable attending the Jobcentre and make them more likely to attend the WFI.

Appendix A

Sample profile

Table A.1 Sample profile

Variable	Number of respondents
Gender:	
Male	5
Female	25
Client status:	
Complied	21
Living with sanction	9
Area:	
London	9
Midlands	8
South Wales	6
North	7
Health problems:	
Yes	15
No	15
New/repeat claimant:	
New	14
Repeat	16
Age:	
18-24	8
25-34	7
35-44	11
45+	4

Continued

Table A.1 Continued

Variable	Number of respondents
Ethnicity:	
White	20
Black	5
Asian	4
Other	1

Appendix B

Analysis

BMRB Social Research are always committed to producing a thorough analysis of the data and set procedures are in place to ensure analysis is undertaken in a systematic and comprehensive manner and that the findings are based on the raw data rather than on a researcher's impressions. The interviews are all transcribed verbatim and then analysed by experienced members of the BMRB team.

Material collected through qualitative methods is invariably unstructured and unwieldy. Much of it is text based, consisting of verbatim transcriptions of interviews and discussions. Moreover, the internal content of the material is usually in detailed and micro form (for example, accounts of experiences, inarticulate explanations, etc.). The primary aim of any analytical method is to provide a means of exploring coherence and structure within a cumbersome data set whilst retaining a hold on the original accounts and observations from which it is derived.

Our method involves a systematic process of sifting, summarising and sorting the material according to key issues and themes. We use a set of content analysis techniques, known as 'Matrix Mapping', to ensure an optimum synthesis of findings from the verbatim data.

The first stage of Matrix-Mapping involves familiarisation with the data (in the form of the audio tapes or verbatim transcripts) and identification of emerging issues. Based on this preliminary review of the data as well as the coverage of the topic guide and the researchers' experiences of conducting the fieldwork, a thematic framework is constructed.

The analysis then proceeds by summarising and synthesising the data according to this thematic framework using a range of techniques such as cognitive mapping and data matrices. The thematic matrix comprises a series of subject charts displayed either in Word, Excel or Insight qualitative software. In this case Excel software was utilised.

The subject headings included in the charts used on this project were as follows:

- 1 Background.
- 2 Awareness and knowledge of the regime.
- 3 Sanctioning process.
- 4 Experience and views of sanctioning.
- 5 Impact of sanctions.
- 6 Principle of sanctions and suggestions for change.

Data from each interview transcript was summarised and transposed under the appropriate subject heading of the thematic matrix. The context of the information is retained and the page of the transcript from which it comes noted, so that it is possible to return to a transcript to explore a point in more detail or to extract text for verbatim quotation. When all the data have been sifted according to the core themes the analyst begins to map the data and identify features within the data: defining concepts, mapping the range and nature of phenomenon, creating typologies, finding associations, and providing explanations.

The mapping process is similar whichever of the above features are being considered. The analyst reviews the summarised data; compares and contrasts the perceptions, accounts, or experiences; searches for patterns or connections within the data and seeks explanations internally within the data set. Piecing together the overall picture is not simply aggregating patterns, but of weighing up the salience and dynamics of issues, and searching for structures within the data that have explanatory power, rather than simply seeking a multiplicity of evidence.

The key issues, and the features that underpin them, are then used as the basis for constructing in this instance the oral presentation and the written report. Verbatim quotes are also used throughout in order to illustrate and illuminate the findings.

We have used, and refined, our analytical procedures over many years. They are highly respected by our clients and are noted for their ability to extract the maximum information from qualitative data. Our methods are very robust and demonstrably able to stand up to public scrutiny. They have been used, for example, in the analysis of difficult and sensitive topics and have provided the analytical structure for many high profile pieces of work.