Lone Parents and Personal Advisers: Roles and Relationships

A follow-up study of the New Deal for Lone Parents Phase One prototype

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A report of research carried out by the National Centre for Social Research on behalf of the Department of Social Security
7 Experiences of work and in-work support 83
7.1 Patterns of employment 83
7.2 Experiences of work 84
7.3 Factors supporting and undermining work 85
  7.3.1 The financial transition to work 85
  7.3.2 Employers’ attitudes 86
  7.3.3 Childcare 87
  7.3.4 Suitability of chosen job 88
  7.3.5 Impact of adviser role 88
  7.3.6 Impact of a failed job 89
7.4 The provision of in-work support 89
  7.4.1 Advisers’ approaches 89
  7.4.2 Lone parents’ experiences 90

8 Supporting the adviser role 93
8.1 Management and team structures 93
  8.1.1 Team working 93
  8.1.2 Autonomy and discretion 94
  8.1.3 Support from manager 94
  8.1.4 Dedicated staff 95
  8.1.5 Direct link to policy through manager 95
  8.1.6 Management structures and organisation in phase three 95
8.2 Targets 96
  8.2.1 Targets in Phase One 96
  8.2.2 Targets in Phase Three 98
8.3 Caseloads and Caseload Management 98
  8.3.1 Initial contact and allocation 98
  8.3.2 Caseloads and caselading 99
  8.3.3 Case management: appointment setting 99
  8.3.4 Case management: prioritising cases 100
8.4 Marketing the New Deal for Lone Parents 101
8.5 Locations 102
8.6 Changes in the delivery of the New Deal for Lone Parents 103

9 Discussion 105

Appendix A: Design and conduct of the study 109

Appendix B: Fieldwork documents 113

Other research reports available 127

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1 Profile of lone parent sample 10
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The Unit specialises in qualitative research studies in a wide range of social policy areas. It has been particularly active in national evaluations of the various New Deal programmes, carrying out research on the New Deal for Young People, the New Deal for the Long Term Unemployed and the New Deal for Disabled People as well as the New Deal for Lone Parents.
1 Introduction

The New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) is a voluntary programme which aims to help lone parents on Income Support to move into and towards work. The programme is designed to deliver an integrated package of support including advice and help, job search, help finding childcare, advice about in-work benefits and ‘better off calculations’, access to training and education and in-work support. The Phase One prototype operated in eight areas, four delivered by the Employment Service and four by the Benefits Agency. Phase Three – national roll-out of the NDLP programme – began in October 1998.¹

The research study involved 40 in-depth interviews with lone parents who were participants in Phase One (some of whom also participated in Phase Three), and eight group discussions with personal advisers (again, all were involved in Phase One and some also in Phase Three). Three groups of lone parents were included in the sample; past-participants whose last contact with the programme was before November 1998, past-participants whose last contact was during or after November 1998 and lone parents who are still in contact with the programme. The study is part of a series of studies undertaken by the National Centre to evaluate Phase One of the programme and was intended to take issues arising in early qualitative and quantitative work further. As such the objectives of this study were to:

• investigate how the delivery of the New Deal for Lone Parents has evolved since its inception;
• explore lone parents’ experiences of the programme, and particularly their views about its effectiveness;
• examine the longer-term impact of participation, and particularly the role of the programme in helping lone parents to move into sustainable employment.

As previous research on New Deal for Lone Parents² had pointed to importance of the personal adviser role in the effective delivery of the

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¹ Phase Two consisted of the national rollout for lone parents making new and repeat IS claims and ran from April to October 1998. This part of the programme was not subject to formal evaluation.

² See for example Finch H. & O’Connor W. et al. (1999) New Deal for Lone Parents: learning from the prototype areas. DSS Research Report No.92, CDS: Leeds
2 Lone parenthood in context (orientation & barriers to work)

Interest in work was very varied within the sample. All could see some benefits to working, although these were sometimes felt to be outweighed by disadvantages. Work was valued as a way of improving financial circumstances; gaining financial independence; alleviating the frustration of a life revolving around children and gaining self esteem and confidence.

But lone parents also clearly faced barriers to work, most fundamentally their caring responsibilities. Other barriers were their concerns about the financial transition to work; lack of skills, qualifications and work experience; and limited job opportunities. For some lone parents, there were also dominant personal issues which, if unresolved, made it difficult for them to progress, such as ill-health or disability of the parent or a child, debt or low self-confidence. Across the sample of lone parents five groups could be identified, based on their orientation to work when they made contact with the programme:

- those for whom work was not currently an option;
- lone parents who were beginning to think about work;
- those who were motivated but faced personal circumstantial barriers to work;
- another group who were motivated but faced labour market barriers;
- a final group who were close to work – actively job seeking and sometimes already in work.

Lone parents found out about the programme in four ways: receiving an invitation letter; seeing broader publicity; being told about it by a friend, or being referred by an adviser at a Jobcentre. They generally knew little in detail about the scope of the programme. Their expectations and motivations were varied, and four groups emerged. Some approached the service out of curiosity, wanting to see what was on offer. A second group expected general guidance about whether work was right for them and how to move forward. Another group had more clearly defined expectations, wanting help with specific issues such as job search, childcare, the financial transition and access to training. A final group participated because they thought their benefits might otherwise be jeopardised, but were largely reassured about this when they first met an adviser.

Identifying clients’ needs of the programme proved to be an important first stage. It involved both asking lone parents about their needs and describing the scope of the service. Advisers’ approaches varied, some opting for a more structured and focused approach and others taking a more exploratory and broader tack. The latter proved particularly important for lone parents who were further from work.
4 Experiences of the service: types of support provided

Vocational guidance was important particularly for clients who had not worked for some time. Advisers addressed this through discussion of interests and motivations for work, working histories and possible jobs; referral to programme centres or vocational guidance services were also considered. Where clients received the help they needed it enabled them to move on to next steps, but where they did not it was difficult for them to move forward effectively. Clients who undertook training through the programme were almost always positive about their experiences, but training was not always identified as an option and this too sometimes held people back.

Advisers addressed childcare issues by giving general advice about finding and using childcare and describing the financial support available. Access to information about provision was organised in different ways and affected what advisers were able to provide to lone parents. Some lone parents would have welcomed more discussion about their concerns about using childcare.

Better off calculations were routinely done by advisers, usually at a first interview but sometimes deliberately left until later. As well as determining whether work was to the financial advantage of the lone parent, advisers used them to boost or find out more about a lone parent’s motivation, to identify the appropriate structure of work, and to encourage the use of formal childcare. Clients saw them as a key aspect of the service. Negative calculations were obviously received with disappointment, although the advisers’ approach could mitigate this.

A key expectation among clients was that the New Deal for Lone Parents would help them access job vacancies. In Employment Service areas, advisers carried out job matching using LMS (Labour Market System), but access to it was problematic elsewhere. Job matching was well received by clients, but there was some frustration where more general advice about job search was not felt to have added to what the lone parent already knew.

5 Adviser styles and adviser-client relationships

A number of areas of difference in advisers’ styles and approaches emerged from the accounts of lone parents and of personal advisers themselves, principally:

- the intensity of clients’ contact with the service (the number of contacts and duration of their involvement);
- the breadth and depth of issues covered;
- whether responsibility for action rested with the adviser or client;
- the pace and goal of work;
- the degree of emphasis on personal support and on underlying issues which might be barriers to work.
Overall, three approaches emerged from clients’ accounts: intensive work focused activity; limited work focused activity and intensive holistic activity – the latter addressing both practical and personal circumstantial barriers to work. The research suggests that no one approach is necessarily more effective than another. A focus on immediate barriers to work – even with limited coverage - could be very helpful to clients who were close to work: but it could miss important barriers for others.

The role of advisers in the programme is clearly central and lone parents were largely very positive about the qualities of their adviser. They described a range of different types of relationships with them: some tangential or functional and not moving beyond a fairly formal level; others warmer or very close relationships. They valued a range of qualities in advisers, particularly: accessibility and friendliness; clarity in communication; understanding; dealing with lone parents as individuals; providing guidance whilst not being directive; trustworthiness and efficiency, and being supportive and motivating.

What happened to lone parents following their participation in the programme was very varied. Some did not move closer to work; others moved off Income Support and into work, or made moves in that direction such as into training, beginning to look for work or taking a part-time job within the Income Support earnings disregard. Where they moved into or towards work, this was generally as a result of a combination of factors relating to their own personal circumstances and their participation on the programme, but some moved forward with no discernible impact of the programme.

Within their personal circumstances, factors supporting moves into work were the lone parent’s own motivation to work and the availability of appropriate childcare if needed. The critical aspect of their engagement with the programme was how well what was provided matched their circumstances and needs. Some felt they would not have been able to move forward without the help of the programme; others felt the advisers support had been influential in helping them to move more quickly or more smoothly than they would otherwise have done.

Lone parents who moved into work talked about how they had gained from this through for example, improved self-esteem, a sense of financial independence and an opportunity to develop or use skills. However, in some cases work was unsustained or was increasingly threatened.
A number of factors which supported or inhibited the transition to work were described. The role of advisers in assisting with benefits transitions was an important one and help with the financial transition seemed to equip lone parents better for staying in work. However, for some lone parents, moving off Income Support had been problematic – they found themselves worse off than they expected, sometimes struggling and in debt. Problems had arisen where employers had tried to change agreed hours or been inflexible about lone parents’ need for time off for family or health reasons. Some found work an unfriendly or hostile environment. Childcare arrangements had not always worked out successfully. Some lone parents were delighted with their job, but for others it proved unsuitable, for example because of health issues or because the hours intruded too much on time with children. The degree of thoroughness in the service received from the adviser was also influential on the sustainability of work, and all the clients who moved into work with no discernible help from the service subsequently returned to Income Support.

Advisers stressed the importance of in-work support and particularly provided help with financial transactions. Some said they usually contact clients once they are in work; others wrote and invited the client to get in touch if they had problems, or relied on the client to make contact. In fact, however, none of the lone parents in the study sample who experienced problems in work got in touch with their adviser – even when the relationship had been a close and effective one – feeling that the situation was outside the remit or control of the adviser.

8 Supporting the adviser role

A number of aspects of the way in which the Phase One prototype was organised supported the adviser role. Advisers welcomed working in a small and close team, with a dedicated manager and staff but a high level of autonomy. Management structures had changed somewhat in Phase Three, and the integration of the programme into wider Jobcentre business with formal targets caused concern in some areas.

Advisers did not operate formal systems of case management or prioritising, but various strategies for managing caseloads were described such as relying on clients to take responsibility for action or for initiating contact, and regular ‘housekeeping’ (when clients from whom they had not heard for some time were taken off the caseload.)

Advisers also described ways in which the delivery of the programme had changed as a result of the new organisational context of Phase Three; highlighting the maturity of the programme from a prototype to a national service and advisers’ own growing experience of the role.

9 Discussion

The final chapter highlights some of the implications of the study findings for the development of the New Deal for Lone Parents and the role of personal advisers within it.
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Objectives of the study

The National Centre for Social Research was commissioned by the Department of Social Security to carry out a study exploring the delivery of the New Deal for Lone Parents through the perspectives of both personal advisers and lone parents. The study is part of a series of studies undertaken by the National Centre to evaluate Phase One of the programme and was intended to take issues arising in early qualitative and quantitative work further. As such the objectives of this study were to:

- investigate how the delivery of the New Deal for Lone Parents has evolved since its inception
- explore lone parents’ experiences of the programme, and particularly their views about its effectiveness
- examine the longer-term impact of participation, and particularly the role of the programme in helping lone parents to move into sustainable employment.

As previous research on New Deal for Lone Parents had pointed to the importance of the personal adviser role in the effective delivery of the programme this study also sought to:

- develop an understanding of the personal adviser role, and the aspects of the organisation that support that role;
- explore the diversity in the nature of adviser practice and in relationships between advisers and clients.

1.2 About the New Deal for Lone Parents

The New Deal for Lone Parents was the first of the New Deal programmes. Phase One saw the launch of the programme in eight prototype areas in July and August 1997. The aim of the programme is to help lone parents on Income Support to move into work and towards work. All lone parents on Income Support are eligible to participate. Lone parents whose youngest child is five years or older are sent a letter inviting them to participate, but the programme is open to other lone parents who can volunteer to take part. The programme aims to deliver an integrated service, tailored to the needs of individual clients, including as appropriate: advice and support, job search, help finding childcare, advice about in-work benefits and ‘better off calculations’ using IBIS software, access to education and training, and in-work support.

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4 See for example Finch H. & O’Connor W. et al. (1999) New Deal for Lone Parents: learning from the prototype areas. DSS Research Report No.92, CDS: Leeds
In Phase One the programme was delivered in four areas by the Benefits Agency, with teams located in Benefits Offices (Cambridgeshire, North Worcestershire, Sheffield and North Cheshire); in four areas by the Employment Service with teams located in Jobcentres (North Surrey, Cardiff and Vale, Clyde Valley and Warwickshire). Phase two ran from April to October 1997 and was an interim stage in which delivery was undertaken by the Employment Service and the programme was open to lone parents making new or repeat claims anywhere in Britain. Phase Three, the full national implementation, began in October 1998, with all lone parents on Income Support eligible to participate. Invitation letters continue to be sent to lone parents whose youngest child is over five, but from May 2000 were issued additionally to lone parents whose youngest child is aged three or four years.

Many features of the service remained consistent between Phase One and Phase Three, although there were some important changes such as enhanced provision for education and training and the introduction of placement targets. The delivery of the programme by the Employment Service also had implications for access to services such as LMS for job searching and to Employment Service training provision. A number of relevant changes in benefits delivery have also been introduced since the inception of the programme, the Income Support run on and most recently the Working Families’ Tax Credit (which includes the Childcare Tax Credit).  

The research involved 40 in-depth interviews with lone parents who had experience of Phase One of the programme, and eight group discussions with personal advisers involved in its delivery. The lone parents were selected from a sub-sample of those who had participated in the survey which formed part of the evaluation of Phase One. The sample of advisers included those who were still active in delivering the New Deal for Lone Parents and those who had moved on, either at the end of Phase One or more recently.

The study was intended to focus on Phase One of the programme which had finished just over a year before the point when the research was commissioned. This meant that it was not possible to explore adviser-client relationships through, for example, interviews in which lone parents and their adviser were matched. Many lone parents involved in Phase One were no longer participants on the programme and those who were may have had a change of adviser; case recording was generally not sufficiently detailed to allow advisers to review their conduct of cases with which they were no longer involved, and many Benefits Agency advisers involved in Phase One had since left.

The Working Families’ Tax Credit replaced Family Credit from October 1999. WFTC is available to any lone parent working 16 or more hours a week. It is also available to any couple where either partner works 16 or more hours a week. The Childcare Tax Credit within WFTC is worth 70% of eligible childcare costs, subject to certain overall limits. The Childcare Tax Credit is only available for registered childcare and in the case of couple families both parents have to be working for 16 hours or more to be eligible to receive it.

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1.3.2 Sample composition

It was therefore decided that group discussions should be conducted with advisers exploring their practices generally, rather than focusing on specific clients. Group discussions provide a forum in which the views and practices of different advisers can be discussed and compared. In-depth interviews were the chosen research method with lone parents to ensure that the full history of their involvement with the programme could be explored.

The sample of lone parents was purposively selected from the Phase One survey. Four areas were selected, to reflect different labour markets and delivery of the prototype by both the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service. An initial sub-sample was drawn and a series of quotas set to ensure that the final sample included all key groups (see table below). A short screening questionnaire was administered by National Centre survey interviewers to collect information about experiences since the survey interview, to confirm eligibility and assignment to quotas, and to fix an appointment for an interview with those selected.

The key selection criteria were:

- period of participation: to include those participating in Phase One only and in both Phases One and Three, and both current and past participants;
- experiences since participation: to include lone parents who were currently in work, currently in education or training, who had experiences of training or work at some point during or since their participation, and those who had not been in work or training since their participation;
- entry status: to include both targeted and volunteer participants, and lone parents who responded to the invitation letter after different intervals;
- family circumstances: including those with different numbers of children and with children of different ages;
- demographic characteristics: the lone parents’ age, sex and ethnicity.

The table below shows the composition of the sample. Further information is given in the Appendix.
Table 1.1 Profile of lone parent sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of lone parent</th>
<th>No. of lone parents</th>
<th>Involvement in programme</th>
<th>No. of lone parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- 25 and under</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>- Phase One only</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 26-35</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>- Phases One and Three</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 36-45</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Entry route</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 46+</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>- targeted</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex of lone parent</td>
<td></td>
<td>- volunteer</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Status 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>- in work on IS</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of youngest child</td>
<td></td>
<td>- in work on FC</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- under 5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>- not currently in work, but has been since NDLP</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 5-10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>- in education/training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 11-15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>- not currently in education/training but has been since NDLP</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 16+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td>- no experience of work or training</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- White</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Black - Caribbean</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- African</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sample included only ‘full participants’: those who had more than one contact with an adviser, or whose initial interview included discussion or the provision of help with any of the issues the programme is intended to address.

The group discussions with advisers were conducted in all eight prototype areas. All personal advisers active in Phase One who still worked for the Employment Service or the Benefits Agency (in whatever capacity) were invited to take part in the group discussions, and a total of 29 were able to do so. This included 15 who had been in Benefits Agency prototype areas in Phase One and 14 from Employment Service areas, and 19 who were still practising as lone parent advisers and 10 who had moved to other roles.

\[6\] At time of research interview.

\[7\] In period before and up to the research interview. Sums to more than 40 as categories overlap. Note that some clients were already working part-time on entry to the programme.

\[8\] At time of research interview.
Interviews and group discussions were conducted by members of the research team, using topic guides which listed issues for discussion (shown in the Appendix). The in-depth interviews took place in August 1999 and the focus groups in November 1999. Interviews were conducted in lone parents’ homes and lasted for up to an hour and a half. They covered:

- lone parents’ current circumstances;
- their work histories and orientation to work at the point when they joined the programme;
- their reasons for becoming involved;
- their experiences of the programme, covering the range of types of help the programme can include and particularly exploring their relationship with their adviser;
- their experiences since participating, and the role of the programme within them;
- experiences of work since participation, and factors supporting or hindering sustainability of jobs.

Group discussions were held in hotels local to advisers’ offices and lasted for around two hours. Since advisers are likely to have experiences of very different types of cases, three vignettes or illustration cases were drawn up, based on case types emerging from the lone parent interviews, to provide focus to advisers’ discussions. The vignettes were designed to reflect the diversity emerging from the lone parent interviews in terms of orientation to work, work experience, motivations and barriers to work at the point of contact with the programme. The three vignettes were created to represent firstly, a lone parent who was close to work, one who was just beginning to think about work and thirdly a lone parent who was very motivated to work, but faced significant personal or circumstantial barriers to doing so. Copies of the vignettes used are included in Chapter 4. The vignettes were used in two main ways during the group discussion, firstly to facilitate discussion on the diversity of lone parents needs and secondly to explore the range and nature of personal advisers approaches’ towards lone parents with varying needs. The group discussions also covered:

- the range of clients encountered and how their needs are explored;
- other aspects of their practice in relation to the types of help the programme can provide;
- diversity in adviser practice;
- understanding of the objectives of the programme;
- views about the way in which different aspects of the organisation of the programme and its operating environment influence practice;
- approaches to case management.

All interviews and group discussions were tape-recorded, with respondents’ consent, and transcribed verbatim.
1.3.4 Analysis

The data from in-depth interviews and group discussions were analysed using Framework, a qualitative analytic method developed at the National Centre which involves the systematic mapping of data in a thematic matrix. The key themes and sub-themes emerging from the data sets were identified, and a series of matrices or ‘charts’ drawn up in Excel. Columns represent key sub-themes and rows individual respondents. Data from each transcript were then summarised within the appropriate cell, retaining the context of the comment and noting the relevant page of transcript. This summarising and ordering of data allows both the range of responses relevant to each sub-theme, and the account of each individual respondent, to be explored in full. These charts formed the basis of the interpretative analysis.

1.4 Coverage of the report

1.4.1 The report structure

The report is divided into eight further chapters, each drawing on data from the lone parent interviews and the adviser group discussions as appropriate. The following chapter describes the diversity within the lone parent sample in terms of work histories, skills and qualifications, and motivations and barriers to work, and presents a typology of lone parents based on their orientation to work at the point when they made contact with the programme. Chapter 3 explores how they came to participate in the programme, and the process by which their needs of the service are identified. Chapter 4 looks at advisers’ approaches to, and lone parents’ experiences of, the different types of support the programme is designed to provide. The following chapter looks more broadly at diversity in advisers’ approaches and lone parents’ experiences and draws out different styles of adviser practice.

Chapter 6 looks at whether and how lone parents’ work status changed following their participation, and the role of the programme within this. The next chapter explores lone parents’ experiences of work after the programme, and advisers’ approaches to providing in-work support. Chapter 8 looks at how different aspects of the organisation and delivery of the programme support the adviser role. The final chapter discusses the findings and their implications for both the New Deal for Lone Parents and the role of personal advisers more generally.

1.4.2 Reporting qualitative research

The evidence presented in this report provides an in-depth analysis of experiences of participating in and delivering the New Deal for Lone Parents, and the factors that are influential on both. Every attempt has been made to convey the full range and diversity of views, experiences, explanations and outcomes. Qualitative research cannot be used to measure the extent to which experiences occur or attitudes are held. Qualitative research samples are small and not designed to be statistically representative of the research population, and this prohibits statements about levels of incidence or prevalence. Similar, statistically discriminatory variables cannot be derived from qualitative data.
Throughout the report, verbatim passages from transcripts and summarised case illustrations are presented. In all cases, attempts have been made to preserve the anonymity of the contributor. This sometimes made it necessary to change details which could potentially identify respondents. All names cited are fictitious. Quotations and case illustrations relating to lone parents are described by reference to a typology of lone parents which is outlined in section 2.6.

The study design has implications for interpretation and reporting of the data. In some cases it was over two years since lone parents had first met their adviser. Although most were able to give clear and detailed accounts of much of their experiences, the passage of time inevitably has implications for recall. Dates and the precise sequence of events were sometimes unclear, and some lack of completeness might be expected in their reports of the content of interaction with advisers.

The fact that advisers were involved through group discussions meant that apparent differences within a group could be aired and discussed: but the presence of current or former colleagues is likely to have had some impact on the contribution of advisers. Participants in group discussions are also not always explicit about whether they agree or disagree with what others say, and the fact that one adviser did not describe a particular practice or view described by others does not mean that they did not share it. There may also be differences between the reality of advisers’ practices and how they choose to describe them. These issues have been considered in the interpretation and reporting of the data, and findings are sometimes accordingly presented as tentative or suggestive only. In spite of this however, the study design has generated rich and detailed data about lone parents’ experiences and advisers’ practices in relation to the New Deal for Lone Parents.

Nevertheless, further research – and particularly observation of client-adviser interactions – is likely to be helpful in taking further the exploration of adviser practice and relationships between lone parents and advisers.
2 LONE PARENTHOOD IN CONTEXT

Lone parents are clearly not a homogenous group. This chapter describes the diversity amongst the lone parents in the study sample, in terms of their employment histories, skills and qualifications, and their motivations and barriers to work. The chapter also explores whether there are differences between male and female clients, drawing on advisers’ views and on evidence from the interviews with lone parents. The chapter concludes by describing a typology of lone parents based on their position in relation to the labour market. This helps to describe the sample of lone parents and to explain their different needs of the service. Later chapters draw on the typology to help explain differences in lone parents’ experiences and outcomes.

2.1 Clients’ employment history at point of contact

There was considerable difference in the employment histories of the lone parents in the study sample. There were some female lone parents who had became pregnant on leaving school and had no work or job-search experience. More commonly, female lone parents worked until getting married or having children and had not worked since. Others had more recent work experience, either having worked until they became a lone parent, or having worked at some point since becoming a lone parent.

There were thus marked differences in the amount of time since the lone parents had last worked. At the extremes was a woman who had just lost her job the week before contact with New Deal for Lone Parents, and another who had not worked for 30 years. The men in the sample had generally been the main breadwinner in the family but had stopped work when they became lone parents, and had no experience of combining work with being the sole carer. The longest period of continuous unemployment amongst this group was nine years. This is a different pattern from the women who became lone parents: although becoming a lone parent had also caused women to stop working, some had found ways of balancing work and caring for the children.

Where lone parents had worked, a recurrent pattern was of clients having a great mixture of different types of work, on a sporadic basis. One woman described her work history by saying ‘what haven’t I done’, having worked in shops, an insurance company, as a dental receptionist and as an administration assistant in a government department. There were a few exceptions, however, where clients had developed what they saw as a career, for example as a teacher or as a doctor, or had worked for longer periods with one employer.
Some clients were already working part-time or had accepted a job when they came into contact with the personal adviser service and were therefore much closer to work. Those that had been out of the job market longest generally saw this as a real disadvantage and had a sense of more barriers to work than those with recent work experience.

Across the group of lone parents there was a wide range of educational and work-related qualifications, and vocational skills. Some had left school without qualifications, whereas others had continued education to degree level as mature students. After leaving school, some had taken vocational qualifications such as City & Guilds and BTECs or done apprenticeships, while others had entered work and not acquired further qualifications. Educational and work-related skills were generally seen by lone parents as an advantage, although some believed that because so much time had passed their skills were no longer valid or marketable:

‘[It] is increasingly more competitive to get your foot in the door. Lack of qualifications is the main thing stopping me getting any other work than factory work’

(Lone parent: close to work)

There were also those who did not think qualifications were important, and placed more value on work experience. This was the view particularly of people who had longer work histories.

All the lone parents in the sample could see benefits to working, although these were sometimes felt to be outweighed by disadvantages or barriers. Some had a burning desire to work at the point of contact with New Deal for Lone Parents; others had only just begun to think about moving towards work. Work was valued as a way:

• **to improve financial circumstances.** This was sometimes expressed as a matter of necessity where surviving on benefits was a real struggle, and sometimes as a matter of being able to afford extra things such as things for the children or holidays. There was also a sense of wanting ‘what everybody else has… an average lifestyle’;

• **to be independent of benefit.** Again, this arose in two ways. Lone parents emphasised the financial struggle of living on Income Support, and the stigma of being on benefit. Some spoke about finding it degrading to tell people they were 'on the Social', and there was a strong perception of social disapproval of lone parents living on benefit;

‘I hate telling people I’m on the social, I hate it. I mean it doesn’t bother me being one parent, I’d tell anybody that, but telling people I’m on social I think is degrading, really degrading. “Oh, you don’t want to bother to look for work”. It’s not that you don’t want to bother, it’s the fact that you’ve not got the opportunity or the childcare facilities that I would want. […] My dad wouldn’t have signed on if someone had said to him “Your life depends on it” and that’s how he brought me up.’

(Lone parent: beginning to think about work)
• to alleviate the frustration or boredom of staying at home. Lone parents talked about wanting to get away from the ‘difficulties’ of family life, and to find some space for themselves as adults. Where lone parents were bored of life revolving around their children, they saw work as a potential source of new social contacts and a way of adding another dimension to their lives. Work was seen as a positive or normal aspect of other people’s lives;

• to gain self-esteem and confidence. By contrast to the perceived stigma of being an unemployed lone parent and frustration with a life revolving around children, work was seen as an opportunity to gain self-esteem and confidence. There was a general sense among lone parents that it would make them feel better about themselves;

‘I would love to go back to work, to be able to do something for myself and to feel I’m contributing to society and just to free my mind. I’d be opening up new horizons, […] Because at the moment I feel I don’t amount to anything.’

(Lone parent: motivated to work but personal circumstantial barriers)

• to be a role model for their children. Here, lone parents emphasised the importance of ‘the work ethic’ and, again responding to perceived social disapproval, wanted to work to set a good example to their children.

There seemed to be a strong emotional element to some lone parents’ motivations to work, particularly for women who had not worked for some time. They seemed sometimes to have idealised the experience of working – they did not talk about negative expectations of work and seemed to feel that a wide range of aspects of their lives currently seen as problematic would be resolved, or at least be more manageable, once they started working. They had high expectations of finding in the working environment an adult space, interest, confidence and self-esteem – expectations that, as Chapter 7 explores, were often not borne out by their experiences. Here, too, their strong motivation to work did not necessarily imply clarity about a vocational direction nor that lone parents were actively job searching – they seemed focused on the idea of work in general, rather than on a particular type of work or job direction.

2.4 Barriers to working

Given their different experiences of and thoughts about work, it is perhaps not surprising that lone parents also had different senses of barriers to work. Some described actual, experienced barriers; others anticipated barriers but had not really begun looking for work. Where lone parents had more recent work experience, they sometimes saw these issues not as barriers but as steps to take in moving to work.

2.4.1 Childcare responsibilities

A fundamental barrier to work for lone parents was caring responsibilities. There were different attitudes to caring responsibilities and about the use of childcare.

9 These issues form the focus of Finch et al (2000) A Further Look at the Evaluation of NDLP Phase One Data: Focus on Childcare. DSS In house Report No 68
One group of lone parents wanted to be the main carer and were not comfortable with the idea of childcare. Those who had not worked as a lone parent talked about feeling they would be letting their children down by working, because they had always ‘been there for them’. There was concern about the quality of care someone else would give, about how using childcare might impact on their relationship with their children, and about how children would react to being cared for by someone else. Reluctance to contemplate childcare was sometimes compounded by a child’s disability or by a sense of their emotional needs. Here, children were described as ‘clingy’ or ‘needy’ and the separation from their other parent or the circumstances leading up to it were felt to have contributed to this vulnerability. Some parents’ concern about their child’s reaction to childcare was based on experience, or was borne out by what happened when they did subsequently return to work. If their children were of school age, lone parents who did not want to use childcare were restricted to working within school hours, and had anxieties about how they would cope with children’s holidays and illness. Those with children under five were constrained from working at all.

A second group were willing to use informal childcare, but not formal childcare. They saw care given by a relative – particularly their own mother – or by a friend as an acceptable substitute for their own care. For some, plans for informal childcare were fairly well formulated, where a relative or friend had given a commitment to provide childcare, although these hours sometimes constrained the type of work lone parents could seek. Other lone parents had a particular person in mind who they felt would be willing to provide care. But there were some in this group who had either not begun to discuss childcare with family and friends, or felt they had no-one suitable to whom they could turn.

A third group of lone parents were comfortable with, or reconciled to, the idea of formal childcare. However, they anticipated problems in finding affordable childcare or were concerned about how to find childcare with which they were happy. Lone parents with older or disabled children particularly anticipated difficulties with childcare provision.

2.4.2 Financial implications of working

Another recurrent barrier was the lone parents’ concern about the financial impact of work, particularly if they anticipated childcare costs. Their sense of an earning threshold varied: some were adamant that there was ‘no point working if you’re just getting by’, whilst others felt that they would work even if they were only breaking even because it was a way out of the house.
Even where lone parents expected little or no financial improvement, they were still worried about moving off benefit. There was a recurrent feeling among lone parents that the benefit system is inflexible and that ‘switching messes up your money’. This was sometimes underpinned by limited awareness, or misunderstanding, of in-work benefits. Lone parents with mortgages had a strong sense of the difficulties this raised in making work pay.

The lone parents in the sample felt that low qualifications, along with limited and perhaps outdated work experience and workplace skills, made it difficult to access jobs. Lone parents noting the requirements specified in job advertisements felt disadvantaged when competing with others. There was frustration about how to get experience if an individual had not worked for a long time. There were recurrent expressions of feeling underqualified or of having limited options about the type of work that they could get. Some lone parents also had limited literacy and numeracy skills.

As noted earlier, even lone parents who were highly motivated to work sometimes had little clear vocational direction, particularly if they had not worked for some time and had limited skills. Lack of recent work experience also meant that lone parents did not know how to go about getting work, and felt intimidated by the thought of beginning to look for work and to approach employers.

Lone parents who were closer to work and who knew more about the local labour market sometimes talked about a lack of suitable jobs and felt there was heavy competition, especially in areas of high unemployment. For some, this was compounded by being able, or wanting, to work only restricted hours, by perceptions of low wage levels, and in rural areas by restricted public transport. There was also a perception that employers might be reluctant to take on someone with caring responsibilities, and some lone parents had encountered this in their prior job search.

‘I was full-time looking after my son because it was very difficult for me to leave him and whenever you go to ask for a job they are so worried about the time and I couldn’t start early in the morning and I couldn’t do in the evening.’

(Lone parent: beginning to think about work)

Age discrimination was mentioned by some lone parents as a barrier to work (particularly those over forty years old), and for some lone parents from minority ethnic groups there was a sense of overlapping discrimination based on colour, sex and lone parenthood.
2.4.5 Other dominant personal issues

A range of other dominant personal issues also arose in the in-depth interviews with lone parents. These were sometimes described explicitly by lone parents as barriers to work. In other cases they were not seen by the lone parent as a key impediment to their move into work, but their subsequent experiences suggested that they were issues which, if unresolved, made it difficult for them to progress.

Lack of confidence and low self-esteem was a recurrent theme among the lone parents, though with some exceptions and ranging in severity. Some described themselves as ‘a nervous wreck’, ‘feeling useless’ or ‘not having the guts’ to go into a work environment. These feelings were underpinned by experiences of having been out of the job market for a long time, staying at home with the children, being socially isolated, and, in some cases, trauma from the end of a relationship.

Lone parents also described their own or their children’s health problems. A recurrent issue was depression, which was sometimes said to have been triggered by factors such as bereavement, the break-up of the relationship, custody battles, debt, health problems or a combination of these. Other health problems included sensory or speech impairments, muscular-skeletal problems, learning disabilities, skin conditions, respiratory and heart conditions. The nature of the health issues varied in permanency and severity, and this affected not only lone parents’ confidence about working, but also whether they were able to consider it at all. Children’s health problems included learning and behavioural difficulties, physical disabilities and conditions such as severe asthma and epilepsy.

Finally, other difficult aspects of lone parents’ situations included problems with reading and writing, homelessness, debt, experiences of harassment from the ex-partner or their family, children’s truancy or offending and problems with neighbours or with housing.

2.5 Are male clients different?

There was some discussion in the adviser groups of whether and how lone mothers and lone fathers differ in terms of their needs, circumstances and attitudes. There were very mixed views among advisers, and they emphasised that male clients were very diverse so that crude generalisations could not be made. However, some areas of difference were described by advisers, and there was some evidence to support these in the interviews with lone parents. The differences personal advisers highlight seem to stem from male perceptions of their role in society. Three areas of difference arose: attitudes to being a lone parent; attitudes to work, and attitudes to participating in the programme.
There was a recurrent view among advisers that men find it more difficult to adjust to being lone parents than women do, and accordingly find it more difficult to contemplate combining caring with work. Although views were mixed, some advisers felt that lone fathers are particularly protective of their children and reluctant to contemplate using childcare, or to leave older children to care for themselves. This was also reflected in the lone parent data where men described finding it difficult to adjust to being the sole carer when they became a lone parent, although some who had played a more active role in bringing up the children while they were still with their partner felt the transition had not been difficult for them.

‘They’re more used to seeing women in the playground or whatever, whereas a man doesn’t really make that sort of communication. Certainly they can be more isolated.’

(personal adviser)

Advisers also felt that lone fathers can be more isolated than lone mothers, less supported by friends and families and more unconfident, although again there were others who disagreed. Again, there was some support for this where lone fathers described people not understanding the domestic demands on them, and losing touch with friends because of the constraints lone parenthood put on them – but women, too, were sometimes also very isolated.

There was a view among personal advisers that men are more concerned than lone mothers with financial barriers to work, and particularly want to be significantly better off before they were willing to take a job. It was said that men’s work experience had generally been as the main earner in the family, working full-time and often in traditionally ‘male’ industries. This was not seen as the type of work men could realistically expect to find as lone fathers, and advisers sometimes described lone fathers as being inflexible and unrealistic about their job direction. They also felt that men can be more pessimistic than women about their chances of finding suitable work, and described them as more negative in their attitudes.

‘Traditionally men are usually the ones that work full-time in a family situation. And the type of jobs that men want to do are probably not part-time work. They’re always worked in the steel works full-time, never done anything else, that’s all they know. It’s hard really to change the way of thinking. I do think it is harder.’

(personal adviser)
Again, there was some support for this in the interviews with lone fathers. They seemed to place particular emphasis on financial improvement as a motivation for work and less emphasis on personal or social reasons for work. They were very concerned about the difficulty of making work pay and seemed less willing than women to work for little financial improvement. Although they had a mixture of work backgrounds, those with experience of traditional industries were sometimes aware that there are limited opportunities to work part-time but seemed reluctant to consider a change of direction. Lone fathers in the sample generally had more work and job search experience than women, and this seemed to underpin some pessimism about their chances of finding suitable work.

2.5.3 Attitudes to participating in the programme

Some personal advisers also felt that men tend to be less open in the interviews than women, and said that they find out much more about the backgrounds of their female clients. They felt that it was more difficult to ‘get to the bottom’ of men’s situations and the difficulties they faced in moving into work, and that emotional issues were much less in the foreground than they were for lone mothers. They described sometimes having a lingering sense of issues which men were not willing to disclose or discuss but which remained barriers to work. The lone fathers’ nervousness and low self-confidence was said sometimes to manifest itself as aggression, and this made uncomfortable interviewing. There was concern among female advisers who felt they might appear patronising or condescending to the older male clients.

‘I didn’t relish the fact I’d got a lone parent coming in who was 40-ish and there’s me sitting there trying to help him to progress his life. For me that felt uncomfortable.’

(personal adviser)

Some personal advisers said that male clients could be more reluctant to accept help, feeling that they ought to be able to find work without the support of the programme and that it belittles them to ask for help. Advisers felt that this sometimes led lone fathers to minimise the difficulties or barriers they face, and contributed to unrealistic and inflexible attitudes.

Again, there were some echoes of this in the interviews. Lone fathers sometimes emphasised their experience of job search and knowledge of the local labour market, and felt that the adviser had little practical advice or help which added to what they were already doing. From their descriptions of their interaction with advisers, it sometimes seemed that lone fathers had not engaged as openly with the adviser as lone mothers had.
Within the diversity of employment histories, skills and qualifications, motivations and barriers, a typology of five distinct groups of lone parents can be described, based on where people were in relation to the labour market at the point of contact with New Deal for Lone Parents. The main dimensions of the typology are motivations to work and the nature of the barriers lone parents face. The typologies are also a reflection of the intensity with which barriers to work were experienced. The five groups are:

- lone parents for whom work is not currently an option;
- lone parents who are beginning to think about work;
- lone parents who are motivated to work but for whom personal issues or aspects of their circumstances are significant barriers to work;
- lone parents who are motivated to work but who face labour market related barriers;
- lone parents who are close to work.

The typologies presented here differ from those described in the previous report in that they describe the position of lone parents pre-participation rather than after contact with the programme.

**Typology 1 – Work not currently an option**

Lone parents in this group either had not considered work, or had decided that work was not now an option for them, either because they wanted or needed to be full-time carers, or because of their own or a child’s ill-health. All of these lone parents had limited qualifications, no higher than GCSEs, and limited work experience. None had worked in the last seven years before contact with New Deal for Lone Parents, and none had worked as lone parents. All had been targeted by the programme. Those who had not thought about work had little sense of the barriers, and especially the labour market related barriers, that might prevent them from moving towards work. Others saw their own ill-health or a child’s disability as making work impossible, at least for the time being. They all talked about not wanting to use childcare, either because they wanted to be the sole carer or because of concerns about using childcare.

**Case example 2.1:** Penny is 39 and has a son who is 7 years old. She left school at 16 with 5 CSEs and worked solidly from then until her boy was born. She has low blood pressure, sciatica and takes pain-killers because of an injury to her spine. The back pain has restricted the types of jobs she has taken in the past. Her son is hyperactive and she would rather look after him herself than ‘pay a stranger to look after him’. At the moment she wants to concentrate on caring for her son and does not see work as an option until he is significantly older. By that time she worries that ‘they’ll be looking for young people to train rather than older people’ in the type of work she thinks of doing.

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10 Finch et. al (1999) *New Deal for Lone Parents: learning from the prototype areas.* Leeds: CDS
**Typology 2 – Beginning to think about work**

These lone parents were in the early stages of thinking about work. They described themselves as coming round to the idea or being ready to start thinking about work now that their situation had changed, but there remained some ambivalence about whether work was the right direction for them now. Some had begun very early exploration of possibilities – looking casually in the newspapers, in shop windows or in the Jobcentre, and asking friends about vacancies. They generally had little or no idea of what type of work they wanted, with no specific vocational direction, but felt that ‘if something came along and I fancied doing it, I would go after it’. These lone parents had limited or no academic qualifications although some had taken vocational courses.

Lone parents in this group tended not to have worked for four years or more and had work experience in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. Some had worked as lone parents, but these jobs had been temporary or short-lived. Almost all had been targeted by New Deal for Lone Parents. They anticipated a range of barriers, including issues relating to their personal circumstances as well as labour market issues such as making work pay and finding suitable childcare. However, their limited work and job search experience meant that they did not have firsthand experience of trying to address these problems.

**Case example 2.2:** Kath is in her late thirties and has two teenaged children. She left school at 17 and wanted to go to college to study childcare, but fell pregnant. She did not work until after she became a lone parent eight years ago, and has had two part-time cleaning jobs, neither lasting for more than two months. When the children were younger she had not wanted to work because she felt they needed her there. When the youngest became a teenager she began to think about work again, but she was concerned about care outside school hours and during holidays especially as he insists he doesn’t want anyone looking after him. Before she was invited to participate in the New Deal for Lone Parents, she had been looking in shop windows and in the paper, and had asked a friend whether there were any vacancies where she worked. She was thinking about a cleaning job or shop work but was not sure either was right for her. She felt very unconfident about looking for work and anxious about starting a job, particularly about the financial transition and having to make new relationships.
Typology 3 – Motivated to work but personal circumstances are significant barriers

In this group, lone parents were clear that they wanted to work but they had difficult personal circumstances which they saw as, or which proved to be, significant barriers to work. These included their own or a child’s ill-health or disability, children’s behavioural problems, depression, lack of confidence, isolation, stress, homelessness and debt. Levels of motivation varied – some were very keen to work and had taken steps in that direction, others were less advanced in their plans, some were uncertain about whether they would be able to manage a job. They saw life as a struggle and thought work could be a way of dealing with or getting away from their difficult circumstances. But there was also much anxiety at the thought of beginning job search and moving into work, particularly for lone parents who were isolated and had little self-confidence.

Some had volunteered for the New Deal for Lone Parents. Like those in typology 2, they were generally unclear about a vocational direction, and they had not generally been job searching either because they were uncertain about how to go about it or were unsure whether work would be viable. All had left school by 16, often with no qualifications. There was varied work experience, and some had never worked.

Case example 2.3: Karen is in her forties and has two children. Her daughter who is 15 has behavioural and learning difficulties, and attends a special school. Karen left school at 16 and started a hairdressing course but had to leave because she could not afford to buy the equipment required. She has had a variety of jobs, almost all before her first child was born. Her husband was an alcoholic, and she subsequently had another relationship with a man who she says shattered her self-confidence and left owing her money. She finds looking after her daughter a constant struggle. She says she has no friends and gets little support from her wider family, who do not understand her situation. She has for some time been very keen to work. ‘I would love to go back to work, to be able to do something for myself and to feel I’m contributing to society. It would be lovely to go to work and be able to meet people, adults and just feel like I’m another adult’. She did a course in maths when her child went to school, began a course for women returners, and has done voluntary work in a shop. She took a job four years ago at a local pharmacist, but could not manage caring for her daughter and working and had to leave. She sees finding suitable childcare as the main barrier to work.
Typology 4 – Motivated to work, but face labour market related barriers

These lone parents were also clear that they wanted to work but primarily faced practical labour market related barriers. They were keen to move into work, with varying levels of motivation, but saw barriers primarily in finding and paying for suitable childcare, finding the type of work they wanted with the right pay and hours, and successfully competing with other job applicants. Some had a clear vocational direction, and all had been actively job seeking, but those who had not worked for some time had anxieties about starting work. Some had volunteered for the programme, others had responded to an invitation letter.

There was much variety in their qualifications, some having none, others having A levels and degrees. There was also a diverse range of work experience, with some having had only short term jobs and others having more consistent, and more senior, work experience.

Case example 2.4: John is 36 and has a 12 year old daughter. He left school with 2 O levels and did factory work on and off but has not worked as a lone parent. Now that his daughter is older he has been looking for work, but ‘when she was younger there was no way I could have done it because I just didn’t really have anybody to watch her’. Prior to contact with New Deal for Lone Parents he had been job searching, looking in the Jobcentres, but ‘you look at the money … and it was like £2.50 an hour, and I’m saying I’m not going to be better off here, what’s the point in taking that’. He felt that he lacked any specific skills, and this coupled with general high unemployment and lack of work during school hours had prevented him finding work over the last three years.

Typology 5 – Close to work

In this group, lone parents were much closer to the labour market. They had a clear motivation to work and were actively job seeking, often using several avenues to find work. Some were already working part-time; others had been offered jobs or had had interviews. Almost all had either academic or vocational qualifications, and many had both, occasionally to degree level and beyond. They tended to have longer work histories than lone parents in the other typologies and had stayed for longer periods of time within jobs, and most had recent work experience.

Although they talked about steps they would need to take to move into work, they did not describe these as barriers or obstacles and felt they were perfectly achievable. They talked of needing to find childcare and a suitable job that would be financially worthwhile, but were not discouraged by these issues.
Case example 2.5: Julie is in her twenties and has a four year old daughter. She left school at 16 and went on a hairdressing course that lasted three years. She has worked almost constantly; first as a hairdresser, then doing waitressing and shop work. She has never been on Income Support for more than four months at a time. ‘I used to sit with the phone book, that’s how much I love work and I used to phone them and ask if they were looking for anyone.’ She says she has always been lucky with jobs, and that even when she has left work without another job to go to, she has usually found one straightaway. When she approached the New Deal for Lone Parents she was doing a part-time waitressing job, but wanted to work full-time. Her parents look after her daughter when she works and are very flexible so that she can take on extra shifts when they are available.

Having described the circumstances of lone parents, we now turn to how lone parents became involved with the New Deal for Lone Parents and their needs of the programme.
This chapter looks at how lone parents first became aware of the programme, their expectations of it and why they decided to take part. It also looks at the process by which lone parents’ needs of the service are identified – an important aspect of any programme that aims to offer an individually tailored service and one which had important implications for whether and how clients’ needs were met.

Clients found out about the programme in four ways: receipt of an initial letter inviting attendance; seeing broader publicity television advertising, posters or more rarely local publicity events; being told about it by a friend, or being referred by another adviser at a Jobcentre.

They generally knew little in detail about the scope of the programme prior to participation, particularly if the initial letter served as their sole source of information. Here there was a general understanding that help was being provided to ‘get people into work’, but a limited knowledge of the exact nature of that help.

There was also sometimes confusion over the voluntary nature of the programme. Some lone parents understood the letter to mean that participation was compulsory and described being particularly anxious about the implications of this. Of chief concern here was the belief that failure to participate would result in loss of benefit. The ‘officialness’ of the letter led some to this conclusion, but it was also felt that the letter gave little indication that the programme was a voluntary one. Whilst these lone parents did receive reassurance from personal advisers that participation was entirely voluntary on contacting the programme, there sometimes remained a lingering suspicion about the objectives of the programme, and a latent fear that the programme might become compulsory at some point in the future.

By comparison, lone parents who first heard about the programme from other sources such as television advertising, posters, local publicity events or word of mouth seemed to have a clearer idea of the scope of the programme prior to participation and were more immediately aware that assistance could be provided, for example with childcare and training. There was sometimes a view however, that expectations raised by publicity had not been met, particularly if access to training was more constrained than had been assumed. This generated a sense of disappointment amongst lone parents who were specifically attracted by this aspect of the programme.
3.2 The ‘right time’ to become involved

There was considerable variation in the speed with which lone parents responded to the letter. Across the group there were two patterns of response. While some lone parents said they had contacted the programme very soon after receiving the letter, others said it took one or more reminder letters to convince them to make that decision. Explanations for both prompt and delayed participation point clearly to the importance of timing.

Where the letter was positively received and contact was initiated promptly, the invitation was described as coming at the ‘right time’, but exactly what this meant varied. For lone parents at the very earliest stages it meant coinciding with a set of circumstances that meant they could begin to think about work – such as a child starting school or nursery or changing school, no longer needing to care for a parent or a partner, a health condition easing, feeling increasingly frustrated by a life revolving around the home, or simply feeling that time was moving on. For others it meant that the letter arrived when they were already ‘in two minds’ about whether to work or not – sometimes because of the events or circumstances described above. Here, the letter seems to have prompted the lone parents to take action or begin to explore the possibility of working.

‘I’d been thinking about it, but I think when I got the letter that gave me the thing to do it… I needed that push.’

(Lone parent: beginning to think about work)

For lone parents who were more advanced in moving towards work, the ‘right time’ meant a point when they were already trying to find work, perhaps encountering problems, and open to the idea of additional help and advice.

In contrast, when lone parents decided to delay responding to the initial letter it had arrived at the wrong time for lone parents to consider work seriously, resulting in the decision to delay participation – for example because children were not yet at an age or stage in schooling when work was seen as desirable, because of the lone parent’s or a child’s health status, or because other personal problems seemed still to be barriers to work. Initial scepticism and doubt about the objectives of the programme or about whether the programme could actually do anything to help was also cited as reason for delaying participation. In these cases, the decision to participate was sometimes prompted by telephone calls or reminder letters from personal advisers which helped to provide extra clarification about the scope of the programme, or sometimes by fear of compulsion.
3.3 Reasons for participation and initial expectations

In view of the diversity of lone parents’ circumstances and backgrounds, it is perhaps unsurprising that a wide range of initial expectations and motivations for participation were described. This variability was largely a reflection of the stage individuals were at in terms of their own thinking about work, but prior knowledge and understanding of the programme also had an influence on the nature of their expectations. Across the study sample as a whole, lone parents fell into four groups in terms of their initial expectations and motivations for participation.

First, some people described approaching the programme purely ‘out of curiosity’ and with little in the way of clear expectations at the point of initial contact. These tended to be people who were in the very early stages of considering work, and did not have clear intentions of moving into work in the very immediate future. Clients in this group commonly described having ‘nothing to lose’ by attending the initial interview, and simply had the general aim of ‘finding out what was on offer’. In one or two cases they also talked about feeling lonely and welcoming the opportunity for some adult interaction, or hoped the programme might offer more general support in a situation they were finding difficult, such as caring for a disabled child or having only recently become a lone parent.

‘I weren’t really expecting anything. I were undecided (about work)… I were just really enquiring what it were about…you don’t know until you look into things do you?’

(Lone parent: beginning to think about work)

A second set of people seemed to have slightly clearer expectations of the programme at the point of contact. While there was a similar lack of clarity about the scope of the programme, lone parents in this group expected to be offered some form of ‘general guidance’, for example about their own potential for work, about suitable vocational directions, about how to structure work, or about whether to undertake training before looking for work. In comparison to the first group, these lone parents had started to think more seriously about working but commonly described being ‘in two minds’ about whether work was the right step to take. They expected the programme to help them make that decision. Similarly, those lone parents who felt that aspects of their current personal circumstances were preventing them from moving into work hoped that the programme would be able to provide them with ‘some answers’ or guidance on how to overcome these difficulties.

‘When I went to the New Deal for Lone Parents, I hadn’t decided what would be best, you know to do training or if I’d be better with a job. I wanted to speak to them to see what my options were.’

(Lone parent: beginning to think about work)
'I actually expected for them as to try and work out, well, this is better for you, that's better for you, because right away I told them I had asthma and that… I wanted to know what my potential was for working, to be guided along.'

(Lone parent: motivated to work but circumstantial barriers)

Reasons for participation and initial expectations of the programme were more clearly defined amongst a third set of people. These tended to be people who had a clearer idea of the type of work they wanted to do and the specific steps they personally needed to take to move into work. Although they were unsure what might be available, they wanted help with specific issues such as:

- **job-search.** There was a recurrent expectation that participation would provide access to vacancies that were not advertised elsewhere. This was particularly true of those who had so far been unsuccessful in their own job-searching and here it served as one of the main motivations for participation. Others came to the programme with the explicit expectation that a job would be found for them by the personal adviser and were under the impression that advisers would contact employers on their behalf. There were also expectations of more general help in identifying vacancies, and of help and advice with writing CVs and application forms;

- **childcare.** There was also an expectation that participation on the programme would provide access to financial assistance with childcare and help with arranging it. Again, this served as a key motivation for participation in cases where organising childcare had so far proved to be a problematic;

- **financial assistance.** For lone parents who had some prior understanding of the existence of in-work benefits or back to work incentives, there was an assumption that the programme would give help in accessing these. Others hoped there might be help with the costs of job-search such as clothes for interviews. Although the availability of better off calculations was not generally known, some lone parents had hoped for general advice about whether they would be better off in work;

- **access to training.** There was also an expectation that participation on the programme would provide access to different sorts of training – academic (such as an access course), vocational and more general help such as an assertiveness course.
As indicated above, a final set of lone parents were under the impression that participation was compulsory and approached the programme with the explicit expectation that they were at risk of losing their benefit or that they would be 'pushed into work'. Some lone parents described initially feeling particularly anxious prior to the initial interview. However, these initial fears were usually dissolved on speaking to a personal adviser although, as noted, some suspicion sometimes remained.

‘Well, at first, I thought it was I had to work…that’s what it felt like, you know, oh, I suppose if I don’t go they’ll stop my benefits or whatever. I felt as though they were pressurising me to work, to get out and find a job or else. But when I spoke to her, it weren’t so much that.’

(Lone parent: work not currently an option)

As noted above, a crucial aspect of the success of a programme which aims to offer a needs-orientated service must be the extent to which clients’ needs are identified. The interviews with lone parents raised questions about how well the service had catered to individual needs, and how effectively advisers had understood clients’ needs. The process of identifying needs and negotiating clients’ access to different sorts of support was therefore discussed in the focus groups with advisers. This section outlines the approaches advisers take to identifying needs early on in the process and draws out the implications these different approaches have for the types of needs advisers engage with or identify as important.

Advisers tended to develop their own methods of identifying a client’s needs of the service rather than following a formal procedure, and described a range of different approaches. It seemed from their accounts that the process of identifying needs is a dynamic one. There are two key aspects to the process: eliciting a clients’ needs through asking directly about needs or circumstances, and describing the scope of the programme to lone parents. Some advisers said they begin the first interview by describing the programme, others by asking the client about themselves. The identification of needs emerges from these two processes, and may happen over the course of several interviews. Personal advisers described different practices in relation to both parts of this process, in both cases describing broader and narrower approaches.
3.4.1 Asking about clients’ needs

One approach here was to encourage lone parents to talk widely about the whole range of their circumstances and their reasons for wanting to see an adviser, covering education and employment histories but also broader issues such as the children and the lone parent’s personal circumstances. Advisers emphasised the importance of an informal and open approach, trying to build up trust and rapport and to gain the lone parent’s confidence. This was seen as important to help the adviser gain a comprehensive picture of their background and identify a wider set of needs, including those which lone parents may not automatically identify as important or may not believe that the programme could address.

‘It is important to get them talking to you and open up as well because there are things that come out in the conversation that could be barriers towards going back to work that they may not have thought of or they might think there is no way round it. …they might tell you about their children’s situations and their problems with their ex-partner, and all these things they think are barriers but can probably be by-passed.’

(personal adviser)

Other advisers seemed to approach the elicitation of needs in a slightly more focused and structured way. Whilst emphasis was still placed on encouraging clients to talk about their needs, there seemed to be more focus on orientating the initial discussion more immediately around the practical barriers to work or training needs.

‘I ask them what they want… but I sort of try and separate it into two things like work or training.’

(personal adviser)

3.4.2 Explaining the scope of the programme

Again, advisers described two different approaches to outlining the scope of the programme.

One approach was to provide clients with an outline of whole range of help New Deal for Lone Parents could provide in order to give clients a ‘better idea of how we might be able to help’. Advisers felt it was important to ensure that clients knew from the start about the full scope of the programme to encourage them to discuss their needs and concerns freely, rather than withholding mention of something because of uncertainty about whether the programme could address it. They also saw this as an important element of establishing an open and trusting relationship with the client.

‘What I do first of all is to explain all about New Deal for Lone Parents, what its all about, what’s on offer for the client. You have to tell them about the programme and then you can find out about a bit what they want… Once you’ve told them what’s on offer, they open up to you. You have to structure it that way first.’

(personal adviser)
‘I try and let them know everything that’s available to them . . so I have no secrets because I would hate them to come in after and say ‘Oh you never told me about that.’

(personal adviser)

However, there was some concern that describing the whole scope of the programme ran the risk of overloading clients with information, not all of which was relevant or useful to them, and that this could result in confusion and lack of clarity. This led some advisers to adopt a more selective approach, tailoring what they said about the service to their early understanding of the client’s particular needs. In addition, it was said that, since there are some constraints on what is available (for example in terms of training), it was unhelpful to raise expectations about possible types of help which might not, in fact, be given.

‘I would prefer to give them a full a picture as possible, but that can be a bit too much for the lone parent. You could often see that lone parents were struggling with an overload of information, so I didn’t give them a big spiel, it just depended on what the person was looking for.’

(personal adviser)

‘I didn’t say too much about the programme because I didn’t want to give them too much information early on. I wanted to gauge what they were wanting from the interview first.’

(personal adviser)

3.4.3 The importance of the diagnostic role

As well as different approaches, there were different views among advisers about the ease with which lone parents’ needs can be identified. These had implications for the time personal advisers took and the emphasis they placed on the process. Some advisers for example, saw the process as a relatively easy and straightforward one. This seemed to be based on the assumption that lone parents generally have a clear idea of what they want of the adviser and that there is thus not usually a need for in-depth exploration.

Other advisers were of a different opinion however and felt that the process of identifying needs was not always so straightforward. They said that there certainly were clients who approached the service with a clear and specific idea of what they needed and ‘simply required pointing in the right direction’. But others, particularly those who had not worked for some time or who had doubts about the appropriateness of work for them, found it more difficult to articulate their needs. Here, it was said that more time is needed to build up confidence and trust before clients talk openly about their concerns and needs. There was also a view that some clients may articulate very specific requirements, but that more in-depth exploration of their situations identifies other issues which need to be dealt with before the client is likely to be able to move into work. Issues such as ill-health, debt, disability, depression or problems with children’s behaviour were said sometimes to emerge only later in the course of a client’s involvement with the adviser.
These considerations led some advisers to encourage clients to think about how they would like to proceed after the first interview, or carry out a second initial interview, before making judgements about clients’ needs or firm plans for action.

The different approaches to determining the package of support that is provided to individual clients have important implications for the range and breadth of issues with which advisers engage. Where the adviser had asked more expansive questions about the client’s circumstances, the full set of issues that emerged in the research interviews with lone parents seemed generally to have been known to the adviser.

Where lone parents described a narrower approach to identifying issues—more limited questioning and shorter interviews—this had also sometimes successfully identified the full range of issues to be addressed, particularly where the clients’ focus was on more practical steps in the move to work. But in other cases this approach seemed not to have elicited the full set of issues that subsequently emerged in the research interview, particularly missing issues such as low self-confidence, ambivalence about work, dyslexia or a learning difficulty or health problems such as depression. In addition, some formed the view from their initial interview that the service was ‘about jobs’. They were not aware that it also addresses intermediate goals such as training nor that the service could provide help with vocational guidance or childcare, if these issues had not been discussed. This sometimes inhibited the lone parent from making the best use of the programme and contributed to them not moving forward towards work.

The importance of these issues is reinforced by the following two chapters which explore the different types of support lone parents received from the programme and differences in personal advisers’ approaches to their role.
This chapter explores lone parents’ experiences of the various types of support or interventions provided by the New Deal for Lone Parents, and personal advisers’ experiences of delivering them. It describes the experiences of lone parents in different circumstances and with different needs, and the factors that shape the different ways in which advisers organise and deliver support. The qualitative data generated by the study cannot support conclusions about the prevalence of cases where needs are, or are not, met, and instead the chapter draws out the implications of different circumstances and approaches for the effectiveness of support interventions. The focus instead is on identifying how lone parents’ needs are met by the service, and understanding why shortfalls may occur.

The chapter explores five key areas of support: vocational guidance; training and education; childcare; financial information, and job-search. In-work support is explored in detail in Chapter 7. Throughout this chapter reference is made to the three vignettes (reproduced below) discussed during group discussions with advisers.

**VIGNETTE 1: ‘CLOSE TO WORK’**

- Sally is 27 years old and has one child aged 5 years;
- She has been a lone parent for 4 years;
- Sally left school at 16 with 5 GCSEs including Maths and English. Two years ago she took an NVQ in Business Administration and Information Technology;
- She worked for 6 years for a building society immediately after leaving school, but left after she had her child;
- For the last year she has worked part-time (4 hours a week) as a book-keeper, but would prefer a job where she can make use of her computing skills;
- Sally does not want to work more than 20 hours a week, so that she can still spend time with her child. Recently she has been looking for jobs at the Jobcentre, but has not found anything suitable;
- A neighbour has offered to look after her child for a few hours after school. She would like to be able to pay them, but is not sure if she would be able to afford it.
VIGNETTE 2: ‘BEGINNING TO THINK ABOUT WORK’

- Robert is 38 years old and has two children, aged 11 and 14 years;
- He has been a lone parent for 5 years and does not receive any support from his ex-partner;
- Robert left school at 16 with 1 GCSE (Art);
- He had worked in various factory jobs but has not worked since becoming a lone parent;
- Now that his youngest child has started secondary school he has begun to think about working again, although he does not have a clear idea about what he would like to do or whether getting a job would be the best thing for him;
- A family member who used to help with looking after the children has recently left the area. He does not feel very comfortable about using formal childcare and is worried about the costs involved.

VIGNETTE 3: ‘PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANTIAL BARRIERS TO WORK’

- Sarah is 30 years old and has three children, aged 10, 5 and 4 years;
- She has been a lone parent for 2 years and has very little contact with her ex-partner. Since the break up she has been suffering with depression and is currently on medication from the doctor;
- Sarah left school at 16 without any qualifications and has dyslexia;
- She worked in a factory for one year after school. Whilst she was with her partner she returned to factory work for 1 year on a part-time basis, but left as soon as the relationship broke down two years ago;
- Sarah is keen to work as she feels it is time to do something for herself. She was left with a significant amount of debt after the break up so is very concerned about making work pay;
- Sarah feels very unconfident about applying for jobs, so hasn’t been looking for work herself as yet. She is unsure about what she would like to do, or if any suitable jobs exist;
- Sarah is concerned about asking someone to look after her children, especially as her youngest has behavioural difficulties.
4.1 Vocational guidance  Lone parents’ needs for vocational guidance are varied, as Chapter 2 described. Some were unclear when they approached the service about whether work would be the right direction for them. Where they had decided they wanted to work, there were different levels of clarity about vocational direction. Some were clear about the sort of work they wanted to do but needed help with identifying how to go about preparing for it. Others had little sense of the right vocational direction for them and either wanted help clarifying it or were more focused on the idea of ‘a job’ than a specific work direction.

4.1.1 Advisers’ approaches  Personal advisers described the different approaches they take in addressing these varied needs. The second vignette (Robert, who was beginning to think about work) particularly prompted discussion of helping clients who are unsure about whether work is the right direction. Advisers used two broad approaches here. They described exploring in detail the client’s motivations and concerns, trying to understand why they are thinking about work and what underpins their ambivalence. Alternatively, some said they would refer clients to the Careers Service, a vocational guidance project or a programme centre. However, other advisers saw these resources as appropriate only where clients already had some idea of their preferred direction.

It was also said, in response to the second vignette, that it would be important to point out to Robert that his choices were ultimately limited, in that he would need to transfer to Jobseeker’s Allowance when his child was 16.

Similarly, there were different strategies for helping clients who want to work but who are unsure about an appropriate job direction. Again, some advisers would discuss this in detail with the client, asking about the work they had done in the past, their ideal job, the types of work they had considered, and suggesting possible job directions to see how the client reacted. One adviser gave clients photocopies of a book which described different occupations; others showed clients current vacancies to stimulate their thoughts. Some advisers placed much emphasis on the importance of this sort of work:

- ‘I often ask my clients ‘what do you actually want to do?’ so that they’re going to be pleased with the result at the end of the day.’ ….  
- ‘I say ‘in a perfect world, what job would you really like?’ because that’s a good starting point’ ….  
- ‘Sometimes they think it’s impossible … but if you could provide a bit of training you can sometimes bring people up to where they want to be.’

(Discussion between advisers)
An alternative strategy was to refer clients to the Careers Service or programme centre but again, some advisers used the latter only where clients were clear about their career direction to support job search. It was also said that programme centres are largely used by unemployed men, and that this meant the environment and services were not always well-matched to lone mothers’ needs. In one area, an external careers adviser was based in the Jobcentre and this was seen as a helpful arrangement.

Clients reported a range of experiences here. Those who were uncertain about whether work was the right direction valued discussion of this with their adviser, particularly where they felt the adviser had not put them under any pressure, and this had been very helpful in their decision-making.

‘(She) said ‘I’m not pressing you into anything, it’s up to you at the end of the day because it’s you that has got to come home and look after your child’.’

(Lone parent: motivated to work but labour market barriers)

In other cases, though, clients who had expressed their ambivalence about work were disappointed that this was not approached by the adviser, or was discussed only briefly, and felt the adviser had been too quick to move on to discussing vacancies and other practical issues. It may be that these advisers were using discussion of vacancies as a device to find out more about the clients’ motivations and concerns, but this is not how clients had understood their actions.

Lone parents also reported help with identifying the right job direction through discussion of their interests and skills, being shown possible vacancies and, in two cases, being invited to attend an ‘employment fair’ which provided an opportunity to access information about jobs and to talk to advisers about different directions. This sort of help could be very useful, for example where lone parents described discussion resulting in them narrowing the focus of their job search, or broadening the focus to include jobs they had not considered. One lone parent, for example, wanted to train as a nurse but was put off by the training required: her adviser suggested other caring work and at the time of the research interview she was undertaking an NVQ in caring, gaining work experience, and planning to move into permanent work in that area. Another who had considered shop work or cleaning was encouraged by her adviser to think about working in a large department store with a good reputation for staff training, and valued the advice to ‘aim higher’.

Others had been able to undertake more effective job search, or had been encouraged to think about training, to identify appropriate training once they were clearer about a work direction. In some cases, lone parents had discussed different vacancies with their advisers and had found this helpful in identifying suitable jobs.

4.1.2 Lone parents’ experiences

A new tailored provision for lone parents is to be introduced in programme centres from Spring 2000.
However, others who needed vocational guidance sometimes reported little or no discussion, felt that their tentative suggestions were treated as fixed by their adviser, or felt their adviser was presenting them with limited options and choice. This seemed to be an area of difficulty especially for lone parents who were further from work. Lack of recent work experience and low self-confidence seemed to make it difficult for some to think about possible job directions, and some said they had not told their adviser about their real aspirations because they thought they would be considered unrealistic. These lone parents seemed to need more active help from their adviser with thinking laterally about their skills and interests and possible job directions.

‘(I needed) More time to just sit, not look through jobs, just talk about what I could do, what would suit me, really suit me, what I’d really like to do … what interests I liked.’

(Lone parent: beginning to think about work)

As noted above, where clients did receive the help they needed in clarifying a job direction this had helped them to identify the next steps they had to take, and to begin job search or do so more effectively. Where they did not, however, it sometimes meant that they were unable to move forward, either not beginning job search or doing so in a very tentative or not effective way. In other cases, lone parents were led down a job route which proved inappropriate for them. Again, those with little work experience and low self-confidence seemed to be particularly vulnerable to an over-directive approach and described feeling they were presented with few or no options or being unable to say to the adviser that what was suggested was not right for them. In some cases, insufficient help with vocational guidance meant clients had lost confidence in the service, feeling its purpose was to push people into work.

‘(They’ve) got a different agenda to the individuals. I mean all they want to do is to get somebody into work, they don’t care what job they do or anything. They just want them to get into work …. I want a reasonable job, I want career prospects, you know.’

(Lone parent: motivated to work but labour market barriers)

4.2 Training and education
4.2.1 Lone parents’ experiences

Training was clearly not of relevance to all clients. Some had not enjoyed learning at school and found the thought of returning to training unappealing or ‘nerve-racking’, or were ready to move into work. For others, the aspirations that led them to want to work would not have been satisfied by study – for example where lone parents wanted to improve their financial circumstances or to be independent of the benefit system. But there were other clients who sought help with accessing training, or who took up training at the suggestion of their adviser.
Where clients had undertaken training, their experiences were almost without exception positive. The types of courses undertaken ranged from pre-vocational, work preparation and personal development courses, to NVQs and City and Guilds qualifications in computing, IT, care or other similar vocational subjects. Courses were usually short – a few weeks or months – although one lone parent had undertaken a year’s course in teaching. Where courses had been successful, they were highly valued by lone parents for providing them with qualifications, work experience and confidence, and in some cases were seen as highly influential on the client’s ability to secure and retain a job. Courses had sometimes covered issues such as vocational guidance, interview skills and job search, or had provided lone parents with an opportunity to meet others in the same position and to build relationships which had helped to combat isolation and depression.

There were some less positive experiences. One lone parent had been placed on a course which was well below her ability level and this had impacted on her confidence and contributed to a period of depression. Another felt that that the small sums she received towards travel expenses and childcare while on a work placement were far too low and, particularly when it transpired that the employer had no intention of retaining participants after the work placement ended, felt she had been exploited. She nevertheless found that the work experience had impressed people she had approached about jobs and felt it had been central to her finding work.

As noted above, training was often not relevant or attractive to lone parents. There were other cases, though, where lone parents expressed a latent interest in training which had not been followed up by their adviser. Some described no discussion of training, sometimes assuming from this that it was not part of the New Deal for Lone Parents or was for some reason unavailable to them. In two cases, lone parents said they had told their adviser they had difficulties with reading or writing, but neither had been offered basic skills training. Others felt they had been invited to consider only specific types of training, and similarly assumed other more attractive options were unavailable. As with cases where vocational direction was not considered fully, low self-confidence and lack of clarity about job direction seemed sometimes to have contributed to lone parents not raising the issue of training. This perhaps points to a need for more explicit coverage of training by advisers rather than reliance on clients to initiate discussion. Again, these experiences sometimes led to an assumption that the service’s interest is in getting people into work as quickly as possible.

There was also frustration where requests for information about courses were not followed up by advisers, where advisers were unable to identify a course that the lone parent thought would be suitable for them, or where lone parents were told the training they were interested in could not be funded.
4.2.2 Advisers’ approaches

Advisers’ discussions about training suggested that they see it as having a number of different roles:

- **helping a lone parent who has not worked for some time to become accustomed to the idea of work** – particularly pre-vocational and personal development courses;

- **helping a lone parent to begin to take steps towards work**, even if work is for the time being not an option. Some advisers suggested using training in this way in response to the second and third vignettes (Robert who was beginning to think about work, and Sarah who faced personal barriers to work);

  ‘If Robert’s) not comfortable about leaving (the children) with formal childcare and he’s got nobody to have them on an informal basis then you have got to start wondering whether or not it is suitable for him to look for work. So you might start considering training …. And then when he feels the children are of an age when he is able to step into work, he’s got the right qualifications and skills.’

  (personal adviser)

- **providing a lone parent with the skills they need to find work;**

- **enhancing their skills**, so they can find work that fits their aspirations – for example to support a desired change in job direction. Here there were differences in opinion. Some advisers were happy to try to access training for a client who was sufficiently skilled for one job direction, but not for the direction they wanted to take. Others seemed to see training more as an option to be held in reserve, available only to those who were not work ready or whose need for training had been proved by unsuccessful job search. There seemed to be some tension here between advisers’ own approaches and the perceived priorities of managers;

  ‘One of our advisers had this lady who’s been doing a cleaning job … and she applied to do an NVQ level 3 in admin …. This woman’s got three children, it’s going to better her to have an office job. It was turned down on the basis that she’s got adequate experience as a cleaner to carry on doing the cleaning job.’

  (personal adviser)
4.3 Childcare

From the accounts of advisers, it seemed also that the quality of provision influences their approaches to training. Training available through the Employment Service had not always been fully used – either because advisers were not fully aware of what was available or had difficulties accessing it (in Benefits Agency prototype areas), or because they did not feel it met their clients’ needs. For example, Work Based Training for Adults was seen as unsuitable if hours were not sufficiently flexible, if childcare was not provided or was expensive compared to other providers, and because of the requirement for lone parents to come off Income Support. Community-based training was sometimes preferred for these reasons, and some advisers described having spent time working with the local council, TEC and other providers to stimulate the development of courses designed with lone parents in mind. Employment Service training was seen as more geared towards the needs of unemployed men and thus not always suitable for lone mothers, but equally there was sometimes said to be little pre-vocational or personal development training that was appropriate for lone fathers.

Finally, the diversity of training courses and of clients’ potential needs meant that advisers did not expect to have exhaustive, up-to-date information available in the office and generally researched availability outside their sessions with clients. This had sometimes been frustrating for lone parents who had expected advisers to have immediate access to information.

4.3 Childcare

The lone parents interviewed had different needs in respect of childcare. Where informal childcare was available for little or no cost from family or friends, there was little need for advice from the service. In other cases, though, lone parents sought advice about the use of childcare, its availability, and how to finance it. Advisers described a range of different sorts of help provided to lone parents in this area.

4.3.1 General advice about childcare

First, they emphasised the importance of providing general advice and reassurance to lone parents about the use of childcare. The types of approaches described by advisers included:

- advising lone parents about the range of types of care and discussing the advantages and disadvantages of each;
- encouraging clients to discuss childcare options with their children, to approach several potential carers and to visit them before making a choice;
- providing copies of a booklet from social services about how to choose childcare;
- talking through clients’ concerns about childcare, and reassuring parents about its impact on their relationship with their child;
- encouraging lone parents to think ahead about difficulties that might arise and how they would deal with them (such as school holidays or a childminder’s illness), and to discuss very carefully the commitment that informal carers could make.
Lone parents who had been able to talk through their concerns about using childcare with their adviser found this helpful, particularly where their concerns had largely been assuaged by the adviser’s reassurance. In other cases, though, they felt there had not been enough discussion of their concerns. For some this meant practical issues, such as how to choose a childcare provider, how to introduce children to childcare, how to meet the needs of older children, and cover during school holidays. However, the accounts of lone parents also suggested that advisers had not given sufficient attention to less practical barriers to using childcare, such as concerns about the quality of care and its impact on their relationship with their children. These gaps sometimes meant that anxieties about childcare remained a barrier to the lone parent moving forward towards work.

4.3.2 Financial support

The second type of help advisers described providing was explanations of the financial support available for formal childcare, and encouragement of the use of formal childcare. Financial support for childcare was seen as an important element of helping to make work pay for lone parents. Indeed, in response to the first vignette where the lone parent’s neighbour had offered to look after her child, advisers in some groups said they would encourage an informal carer to register with social services to help Sally be better off.

‘The first two questions that leap out to me there are about the neighbour and whether the neighbour’s registered as a childminder, and if she isn’t to get her registered as a childminder if she wants to pay her.’

(personal adviser)

For some lone parents, financial support for childcare was highly influential in enabling them to begin to look for work or to do so more earnestly, and to move into work. However, for others there was frustration with the level of payment, and with the ineligibility of informal childcare for financial support.

‘You want to leave your kids with someone you know you can trust. I don’t think nowadays you’ll find many parents who will leave their kids with people they don’t know …. So why can’t they … say ’you go to work, we’ll give you £60 to help pay a friend to do it.’

(Lone parent: beginning to think about work)

There also seemed to be some confusion about the details of financial support, and in some cases lone parents’ misunderstanding of what was available contributed to a view that work would not pay for them.
The third type of help advisers described providing was information about childcare provision. This was addressed in different ways depending on advisers’ access to information resources. In some areas, advisers were able to give lone parents information about providers directly from a database of childcare provision. However, other advisers found the database deficient - difficult to use and quickly out-of-date. They either supplemented it with information from telephone directories or by telephoning social services or providers for more details, or referred clients to other information sources, such as social services, a freephone line or other services. Lone parents reported all these approaches, but being referred elsewhere met with least favour particularly where lone parents had expected more support.

There were mixed views among advisers about the adequacy of local childcare provision. It was generally reported that clients were able to find childcare parents felt comfortable with without difficulty, but the high cost of childcare in London was identified as an obstacle. Gaps were also identified in relation to after school care, cover during school holidays, and at the beginning and end of the day. A particular difficulty was options for older children who were too old for childminders or after school clubs but too young to be left alone. In some areas there was a view that provision had expanded, thought to be the result of the National Childcare Strategy, and in one area advisers described working with the council and other organisations in the early stages of the prototype to encourage expansion in provision.

Finally, advisers noted the importance of arrangements for childcare being advanced before clients began job searching:

‘I always try to make the point that they’ve got to be ready with the childcare semi sorted out before they really start looking for jobs …. There’s no point in going out, finding a job and then finding out a day or two before they’re due to start they can’t do it. There’s nothing I would think that would destroy a person more than that.’

(personal adviser)
However, providing information about childcare at the right point in the lone parent’s engagement with the service seems also to be problematic. Some lone parents were not given detailed information about childcare when they first met the adviser, and felt this was right since they were still some way from work. But if they were no longer in contact with their adviser at the point when they began to look for work, this could mean that they did not have access to information – about childcare provision or financial support – at the point when they needed it. One lone parent whose initial interview did not include discussion of childcare described how her concerns about it subsequently prevented her from moving on to think about work. Because the adviser had not raised it, she assumed that childcare was not an issue addressed by the service. There were other cases, however, where lone parents felt that discussion of childcare at the first interview had been pre-emptive because they were still not certain that work was right for them. These conflicting experiences highlight the difficulty of providing the right sort of information at the right time, an issue explored in more detail in the following chapter.

Personal advisers generally saw giving information about in-work benefits and providing better off calculations as one of the key aspects of their role. There were different views about when it should be done. Some said they invariably provide a better off calculation at the first interview: for clients who were close to work, it was thought likely to be a key issue; for those further from work, it was thought helpful to provide ‘something concrete’ and a source of motivation. Others would do so at the first interview only if clients seemed to be close to work, or if they thought the calculation was likely to be positive. Providing calculations later was seen as important by some advisers, to avoid giving the impression of pressurising a lone parent into work. It was also said that a better off calculation is time consuming to do and can take the focus of the interview away from other aspects of the client’s situation.

4.4 Financial advice
4.4.1 The role of the better off calculation

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12 Family Credit was subsequently replaced (from October 1999) with Working Families’ Tax Credit. WFTC is available to any lone parent working 16 or more hours a week or any couple where either partner works more than 16 hours or more a week. The Childcare Tax Credit within WFTC is worth 70% of eligible childcare costs, subject to certain overall limits. The Childcare Tax Credit is only available for registered childcare and in the case of couple families both parents have to be working for 16 hours or more to be eligible to receive it.
Their discussions suggested that advisers use better off calculations for a variety of purposes:

- **to determine whether work will be to the financial advantage of the lone parent** – ensuring their hopes are not raised unduly and that their and the adviser’s time is not wasted if the client will not be better off in work, or providing immediate reassurance if they will be;
- **to find out more about the lone parent** – for example, seeing their reaction to calculations based on full and part-time work, or using it to gauge their commitment to working;
- **to shape vocational direction** – if the adviser is concerned that the client’s chosen direction will not pay, to underpin advice that another direction should be considered;
- **to provide added motivation to a client** – for example, encouraging a client who is considering work, or showing a client who is far from work that there is ‘light at the end of the tunnel’;
- **to help to identify the appropriate structure of work** for a lone parent – maximising earnings through finding the right balance between hours, wages, childcare costs and in-work benefits. Advisers described carrying out two or three calculations based on hypothetical jobs to help a lone parent to understand the implications of working full or part-time, during the school day or in the evening;
- **to encourage the use of formal childcare** by showing the impact of financial support, compared with having to fund informal care without it;
- **to ensure the client understands the financial implications of moving into work and has a very clear idea of what their income will be** – some advisers described taking clients very carefully through the calculation and pointing out items which are not taken into account such as travel costs and school meals.

The accounts of clients endorsed the view of advisers that the better off calculation can be a central part of the service. The reassurance provided by a positive calculation was seen as extremely important by lone parents in their decision to look for work or to take a particular job. There were a number of cases where the better off calculation, coupled with information about Family Credit and reassurance that the lone parent could return to Income Support if need be, played a critical role in the lone parent’s decision to take a job. They particularly valued a full explanation of the better off calculation and of their financial situation in work, and this was vital preparation for work for some.

‘He noted it all down on the computer and gave me print outs of, like, if I took a job for a certain number of hours a week at a certain wage, gave me the information of how much better off I’d be. He added everything up and took everything away and worked out incomings and outgoings and printed it all up for me.’

(Lone parent: motivated to work but labour market barriers)
4.4.2 Responses to a negative better off calculation

However, there were cases where the client found the calculation difficult to understand, or where their discussion of it in the research interview suggested some confusion. Not all seemed to have had a detailed explanation of the calculation, and for some the focus appeared to have been only on the outcome of the calculation. There was also sometimes some scepticism about the calculation, particularly where the client’s relationship with the adviser was not very positive and where there were concerns about being pressured into work. Some lone parents, for example, felt the calculation had been done with an unrealistic hypothetical wage level or omitted key factors such as travel costs, or were more swayed by the experiences of acquaintances who had moved into work and apparently not been better off. Misunderstandings seemed also to arise where the calculation had been posted to the client, as Chapter 7 explores.

A negative calculation generally provoked great frustration and disappointment among lone parents. A calculation that showed the client would only be slightly better off – for example by around £10 – was also a serious disincentive for some, although others were willing to consider working for very small financial betterment.

Lone parents, and personal advisers themselves, described different reactions on the part of advisers to a negative calculation. Some advisers felt they had little option but to sympathise and to give a clear warning about the financial disadvantage of taking work, or a particular job. Lone parents who received this advice were relieved that a disadvantageous step had been avoided. However, there was some frustration that the adviser had not been able to suggest an alternative option – for example discussing ways in which the lone parent could move towards work, or structure work differently. This was generally the end of their involvement with the New Deal for Lone Parents, and contributed to disillusionment both with the programme and with the benefits system more generally.

‘To be honest I don’t understand how the social system works any more …. They’re very confusing because they’re trying to get you back into work and yet when you’re trying to go to work there’s just so many things that stop you.’

(Lone parent: work not currently an option)

This was reflected in the views of advisers who noted the importance of suggesting other options, such as training, working up to the income disregard on Income Support, or delaying the return to work until all or some of the children were at school. Where this approach was experienced, it seemed to be better received by lone parents.
Some advisers described an alternative approach of encouraging a lone parent to consider other, non-financial motivations for working, especially if the financial disadvantage was very small. They said that they would remind clients they would be able to meet other people, get out of the house and develop skills. They might also point out that the client’s financial circumstances might improve (for example through building up a Back to Work Bonus or getting a pay rise) or encourage the lone parent to think about how their career might have moved on in two years time. In the small number of cases where this approach was experienced by lone parents it was not well received, particularly in one case where the client was unimpressed by her adviser and felt it demonstrated the adviser’s lack of understanding of her life and of the realities of lone parenthood.

‘What she was saying was “well, you’ve got to look at it from other angles then. If you’re not going to be better off financially then you’ve got to look at other reasons for going back to work. Yours would be social reasons for meeting other people or keeping your brain active” …. As I say, I just felt she had no concept of the situation at all …. She was quite brisk, she was very businesslike and everything was black and white.’

(Lone parent: motivated to work but labour market barriers)

Finally, advisers described giving, and lone parents described receiving, other financial advice, particularly assistance with Family Credit applications and with problems relating to Housing Benefit. Again, this was generally very positively received by lone parents, and could play a central role in helping them return to and sustain work. In fact, assistance with benefit applications was in some cases the main source of help lone parents sought from New Deal for Lone Parents, particularly where lone parents were already very close to work. Advisers also reported providing access to Back to Work Bonuses and Jobfinders’ Grants, but from the accounts of both lone parents and advisers these seemed not to be routinely addressed by advisers in Phase One. Other lone parents described their adviser helping them to access or increase child support through the Child Support Agency, and one described her adviser checking her eligibility to disability benefits. Again, however, these issues appeared not to have been addressed systematically.

A small number of lone parents in the sample were interested in self employment, and received help with accessing funding for set-up costs and advice about tax and National Insurance. There was some dissatisfaction where lone parents felt the support they received had been too limited.

Finally, the role of advisers in supporting, guiding and carrying out job search was clearly an important one. Two types of assistance were discussed: identifying vacancies, and developing skills in applying for work.
4.5.1 Identifying vacancies

As Chapter 3 described, a key expectation among lone parents was that the New Deal for Lone Parents would help them to access jobs – including, for some clients, jobs which were otherwise inaccessible.

Where lone parents’ advisers had carried out job matching either using the LMS with the client or sending paper copies of vacancies) this was seen as very helpful, by both lone parents who were unconfident and inexperienced in job searching and by those who were more experienced.

‘You got to see the jobs before anybody else did so you could get your phone call in …. And just generally being able to show you what is on offer so then you can apply for the jobs you think are more suitable for you … rather than having to stand in the Jobcentre and look through every single job. Yes, I think that is the best thing about it.’

(Lone parent: close to work)

Not all clients received this service, for reasons discussed below. In other cases, clients were advised to use the Jobcentre, were shown or encouraged to look at vacancies in newspapers, or were advised to look in shop windows, to ask around, to contact employment agencies and to make speculative applications. This had been useful to lone parents who had not yet started looking for work or who had been doing so only tentatively, and led to them beginning or focusing job search. However, it seemed less successful where lone parents were unconfident or inexperienced at job search, where they had expected more direct access to jobs, and where they felt they were already doing everything the adviser had suggested. Although some did use the Jobcentre successfully, others did not feel able to visit it or did so unsuccessfully with, apparently, little or no support.

There were also a number of cases where clients were told the adviser would contact them with information about vacancies but heard nothing further, or were contacted after six months, asked whether they were still interested in work and told they would remain on the adviser’s list. This was clearly a dispiriting experience.

‘As time went on I was thinking there must be nothing out there for me …. It put me back a bit, you know. Well, if they can’t find me something, how am I going to find myself something when they’re right at the centre of it? So I just gave up after a while and thought ‘what's the point?’

(Lone parent: motivated to work but labour market barriers)

Advisers’ approaches to supporting job search in these ways appeared to be shaped by two key influences: varied access to LMS, and views about the value of encouraging clients to job search for themselves.
Teams which had not had electronic access to LMS in Phase One saw this as a key disadvantage, and advisers who had continued into Phase Three saw this as an important area where support for their role had improved. Although they had had access to vacancies through other mechanisms, this seemed not to have worked smoothly. Paper copies of vacancies had not been sent daily as expected; information was not updated so that advisers had to telephone to check whether a vacancy had already been filled; only a selection of vacancies had been sent; and paper copies had been difficult to order, match against clients and use effectively. These factors had led to advisers encouraging clients to job search for themselves. However, this did not necessarily mean that clients did so without support: some advisers described accompanying clients to the Jobcentre or holding a roadshow there to help clients to job search there effectively, and going through newspaper vacancies with clients. In some areas, advisers had had electronic access to newspaper vacancies and had been able to do job matching with these.

There was also a view among advisers, irrespective of their access to LMS, that there was an advantage to encouraging clients to job search for themselves. This was felt to be a demonstration of the client’s commitment and motivation to finding work, and appropriate preparation for the independence they would need in the working world. Some also found this necessary as a strategy for managing rising caseloads. This meant that, although some advisers were able to do more job matching in Phase Three because of their access to LMS, others were using it less because of limited time.

'It was okay in the beginning because we didn't have a large number of people that we were dealing with, but of course as the caseload gets bigger you haven't got as much time to do it. So then I suppose a lot of the time it's getting (clients) to do it.'

(personal adviser)

4.5.2 Support in applying for jobs

Lone parents and advisers also discussed the role of support in applying for jobs. Advisers described commenting on or drawing up CVs, helping clients complete application forms and advising on interview techniques. Some also said they would make the initial telephone contact with employers if clients were particularly nervous, although they saw this as necessary only in rare cases. They also talked about referring clients to programme centres and other providers for help with CVs and job applications. There was some concern that programme centres are not always well suited to the needs of lone mothers and that there is limited flexibility and scope for clients to access only the specific types of help they need.
Lone parents generally welcomed this support from their adviser who they felt would have a better idea of the skills and aptitudes employers seek. Referrals to job clubs or programme centres, or to pre-vocational courses, had been successful. However, interviews raised particular fears for lone parents who had been out of the labour market for some time. Some would have valued more discussion of interview techniques, a trial interview, and more reassurance. One woman reported her adviser’s support being limited to a comment that everyone feels nervous before interviews; another who was given a booklet to read would have preferred discussion and more preparation.

4.6 Summary Overall, then, advisers use a range of interventions to meet clients’ needs, influenced not only by an assessment of clients’ needs but also by differing access to resources. Although for every type of support there were examples of clients who received help well matched to their needs and which they felt was central to their being able to find work, there were also examples of cases where needs were not fully met. The following chapter begins to explore this in more detail by discussing the differing approaches of advisers and the relationships that developed between advisers and clients. Chapter 6 discusses outcomes, and the influences that shape them, in more detail.
The previous chapter highlighted differences among clients in the types of support they experienced in their participation in the New Deal for Lone Parents, and different ways in which advisers approach the organisation and delivery of those interventions. This chapter takes forward the discussion of diversity in clients’ and advisers’ experiences, by exploring apparent differences in the approaches of advisers. These different approaches appear to reflect not only the circumstances and needs of individual cases, but also broader preferences and working styles among advisers. The chapter also describes the different types of relationships that develop between clients and advisers, and highlights clients’ views about what makes a good adviser.

A number of key areas of difference in approaches and styles of advising can be identified in the accounts of advisers and lone parents.

5.1 Dimensions of adviser practice

5.1.1 Intensity of contact

The accounts of lone parents describe differences in the intensity of contact with advisers, and the duration of their involvement with the programme. Those lone parents who were most involved in the service described up to five or more face-to-face meetings with their adviser as well as telephone contact. At the opposite end of the spectrum, lone parents described having just one meeting, and receiving no further contact at all, or an occasional telephone call or letter. In between were clients who had one or two meetings with their adviser, with further contact by telephone or letter. There were also differences in the duration of the lone parents’ involvement with the service: some could recall no involvement beyond the initial meeting, for example where this resulted in a decision not to pursue work at the moment or where the lone parent was just seeking information on in-work benefits before moving into work. Others were involved for a much longer period of time – over a year in some cases – although there might be periods within this when there was little or no contact, for example if a lone parent was in work or training.

Clients who had more intensive contact with the service were generally very happy with this. There was nothing to suggest that they felt their contact was more intensive than they would have wanted, and they generally felt the level of contact had been necessary and sufficient to provide the support they needed. Some were very satisfied with more limited contact, for example where they had sought specific types of help such as a better off calculation prior to taking up a job offer, or where one interview had been sufficient to help them to decide that work was not an option.
However, limited contact was sometimes seen by clients as incomplete contact. This arose in two key circumstances: where clients had expected or been promised some follow-up by the adviser, for example with details of job vacancies or training courses; and where there were no immediate plans for action on the part of the advisers, but where clients would have liked the adviser to contact them later to see whether their thoughts or circumstances had changed. The following case examples illustrate different levels of contact and their sufficiency. The first shows a client who was close to work and for whom limited contact was sufficient; the second shows a client facing predominantly labour market barriers to work where limited contact was not sufficient; and the third shows a client, again facing labour market barriers, who had more extensive contact.

**Case example 5.1**: Michael is a lone father with children aged 11 and 12. He was already looking for work in newspapers and the Jobcentre when he received an invitation letter. He had one short interview with an adviser, which resulted in a referral to a Job Club, and saw the adviser again briefly at the Job Club for help with a better off calculation and applying for Family Credit. With the support of the Job Club he identified and successfully applied for a part-time job. He was very pleased with the level of support he had been given.

**Case example 5.2**: Susan has two children aged 7 and 10. She was interested in caring work when she responded to the invitation letter, and had been looking for work in this area and more widely. She had a very short interview with an adviser, who said she would look for relevant courses and jobs for Susan and did a better off calculation. However, Susan never heard anything further and was angry and frustrated about this. ‘If somebody says something I expect them to follow it up…when nothing came through that was really annoying…(I was) fed up.’ She arranged an access course for herself which she had completed at the time of the research interview, and was again job searching.

**Case example 5.3**: Jan has a son of 7. She had a clear idea of the sort of work she wanted and was looking for work but was unconfident and unsure about how to proceed when she received a letter about the New Deal for Lone Parents. An adviser visited her at home, and suggested a pre-vocational course including work experience, which Jan did and found very helpful. The adviser telephoned and visited her during the course, and again when it had finished, and they also had several telephone conversations. These contacts covered discussion of job vacancies and childcare, and the adviser did several better off calculations for different jobs. When Jan began looking for work she was quickly offered three jobs, and felt the level of contact she had received had been very helpful in getting her to this position.
Responses to the vignettes (see pages 50-51) suggest that there are different expectations about the amount of contact with different clients. Some advisers said, in response to Vignette 1 (a client who was close to work), that they would contact Sally every couple of days, or weekly; others that they would leave it to her to get in touch when she needed help. The expected duration of her contact with the service varied, from a week to a couple of months. In response to the other two vignettes, some advisers said they would want to contact, and preferably meet with, Sarah (Vignette 3: personal circumstantial barriers) and Robert (Vignette 2: beginning to think about work) every week or so. Others said they would make contact again after a longer period – four to six weeks was suggested by one group – or would leave it to the client to get back in touch when they had thought about how they would like to proceed. Chapter 8 looks in more detail at different approaches to case management and how these relate to intensity of contact with clients, and also explores why clients who are dissatisfied with the level of contact they are receiving might nevertheless not initiate more.

Chapter 3 explored advisers’ different approaches to identifying the needs of individual clients. There were also considerable differences in the breadth and depth of advisers’ apparent engagement with the issues and barriers presented by different clients, and in how work-focused their interventions were.

As noted in the previous chapter, some lone parents described their interaction with advisers focusing from the start on practical barriers to work, with exploration of childcare, job opportunities and job search, and the financial implications of moving into work. Others described more coverage of issues such as whether work was the right choice for the lone parent, vocational direction and training and education. Some lone parents also described their adviser providing personal and emotional support, and engaging with underlying issues in their lives which might be seen as more indirect barriers to work, such as debt, depression or low self-confidence, or helping lone parents with access to other benefits (such as Housing Benefit or disability benefits) or to child support.

This diversity in the approach of the adviser seemed not to be explained solely by the circumstances of the client. There were examples of clients in similar situations and with similar needs, but who described their advisers providing quite different ranges of support and help. Lone parents with experience of more than one adviser sometimes described them taking quite different approaches:
Case example 5.4: Ann has a son aged 4 and had very recently become a lone parent when she contacted the service. She was keen to work and had quite extensive work experience, but was unsure about whether she could make work pay and about balancing her desire to work with her son’s needs. She had one interview with her first adviser, who did not ask about her work interests and goals but moved quickly to doing a hypothetical better off calculation. This showed that Ann would be £10 a week better off in part-time work – partly because she has a mortgage and only wants to work part-time. Ann described the adviser saying that childcare provision and funding would not be a problem and felt that the adviser did not understand her ambivalence about her son’s childcare needs. She asked the adviser about training opportunities and was told that there were no courses suitable to her relatively high level of education. Ann felt that her needs had not been understood by the adviser, and decided not to return to work.

Eighteen months later she was invited to a New Deal for Lone Parents open day where she met another adviser. At their subsequent meetings, the adviser explored her work experience and interests in some detail, helped her decide on a career direction and identified a relevant part-time course with work experience which Ann completed.

She returned to the service and now has a third adviser, who Ann feels understands her ambivalence about full time work and has suggested different ways in which Ann could combine work and in-work benefits to maximise her earnings. She has also helped Ann update her CV, and both Ann and her adviser are looking for part-time jobs. Although finding a way of making work pay remains a significant difficulty, Ann feels she has been well supported by the second and third advisers.

Advisers emphasised that the precise combination of support provided would vary depending on individual case circumstances. However, differences in the approaches of individual advisers were particularly apparent from their approaches to the vignettes. For example, in response to Vignette 1, some advisers discussed whether Sally (close to work) might need training to enhance her IT skills or help with clarifying her vocational direction – interventions not mentioned by other advisers. In response to Vignette 2 (Robert – beginning to think about work) some said they would provide a better off calculation and advice about job search strategies, which others felt would not be appropriate until Robert’s ambivalence about work and lack of clear vocational direction had been addressed. There were also differences in how the personal circumstantial barriers faced by Sarah, in Vignette 3, were approached,
with some advisers suggesting interventions that seemed more directly focused on work than others:

- **in relation to vocational guidance**: some proposed discussing why Sarah wants to work and helping her decide whether this is the right approach; other said they would refer her to a careers advisory service or suggest voluntary work, a work trial or part-time work;

- **in relation to debt**: some discussed referring Sarah to debt counselling or providing support themselves by discussing money management; other advisers said they would do a better off calculation to demonstrate how the debt could be paid off through wages or by building up a Back to Work Bonus;

- **in relation to the child’s behaviour**: some said they would explore whether Sarah might be entitled to more support from social services; others talked about encouraging her to use childcare on a trial basis before making a commitment to training or work.

Although the needs and circumstances of clients clearly vary considerably, then, it seems that there are also differences among advisers in the breadth and depth of their engagement with issues presented by clients.

5.1.3 Allocation of responsibility for action

Lone parents reported differences in the extent to which advisers encouraged them to take whatever action was agreed themselves – for example looking for work, finding a suitable training course, finding childcare or applying for benefits. The general approach experienced seemed to be to encourage lone parents themselves to be responsible for action, although it was not uncommon for advisers to complete benefit application forms on lone parents’ behalf. In some cases the adviser had gone further, completing job application forms, contacting employers, childcare providers and training providers.

Advisers, too, saw differences among themselves and other colleagues in how responsibility for action is allocated between the adviser and client. The previous chapter discussed the way in which access to resources influenced advisers’ practices, but these seemed also to reflect different styles and preferences among advisers. Some said that they would encourage clients to carry out action for themselves as much as possible – either because they thought this was appropriate preparation for the independence they would need in paid work, or because they saw value in clients ‘taking ownership’ of activity, or as a means of managing their time and caseloads. Here, advisers sometimes talked about ‘setting tests’ for lone parents, looking to them to demonstrate their commitment to the intention of moving towards or into work.

‘It’s no good being too helpful, because they’ll never get out there. Once they’re in a job with a company it’s sort of dog eat dog, isn’t it …. You’ve got to almost prepare them for that … you find yourself almost giving them a test, you know, to see whether they actually really want to go back to work.’

(personal adviser)
Other advisers, however, described greater willingness to undertake action on behalf of a client if they felt this was necessary to help a lone parent to move forward towards work.

From both the client and the adviser accounts, there seemed to be a difference in the pace of work with clients. The accounts of advisers also suggested that there are differences in their goals.

Some advisers emphasised the importance of encouraging lone parents to move to a quality job and to sustainable work. They saw intermediate goals as being important for some clients. They emphasised the value of supporting lone parents who wanted to change their job direction, and saw a role for training in this. These advisers stressed the importance of a broad-ranging approach which included discussion of lone parents' personal circumstances, and said they were less inclined to carry out better off calculations or job matching at first interviews.

Others, however, seemed to place less emphasis on this. Although there was little evidence that they would encourage clients in an unsuitable direction, their focus seemed to be ‘a job’ rather than ‘the best job’. They saw training as relevant only for clients who were not currently ready for work or whose unsuccessful job search suggested that training would be required. They seemed to focus more on directly work-related issues in first interviews, and said they would almost always carry out better off calculations, discuss job vacancies or do job matching at the first interview.

The accounts of lone parents, too, suggested different experiences. Some lone parents who were at very early stages in thinking about work reported action by the adviser that had, they felt, been too hurried: for example, discussing jobs for which they might apply and providing actual or hypothetical better off calculations without any discussion of whether the lone parent wanted to work or whether this was the right option for them. In other cases, the pace of their involvement seemed much slower, for example where they were invited to take time to think about whether they wanted to work, or where they were encouraged to consider training or a very part-time job before thinking about moving off Income Support.
These different approaches did not always relate to the circumstances of individual cases, as the following case illustrations show.

**Case example 5.5**: Lynn has children aged 17 and 14. She had worked in a series of jobs for most of the last ten years since she became a lone parent, and had left a job in a shop shortly before approaching the New Deal for Lone Parents because she broke her wrist. She saw a lone parent adviser who, at the first meeting, went through vacancy cards with her, did a better off calculation and discussed modifications to her CV. The following day she applied successfully for one of the jobs they had discussed. The adviser provided further support with her application for Family Credit, and she was very happy with the help she received.

**Case example 5.6**: Brenda is 47 and had not worked since she married, apart from helping a friend out in a shop a few hours a week for a very low hourly wage. She has arthritis and asthma, and has had bouts of depression. In their first meeting, her adviser suggested she should apply for full-time work as a packer—the type of work she did before she married—and searched LMS for suitable vacancies. A couple of days later she was telephoned and given information about suitable vacancies. By that time, however, she had visited her doctor who firmly advised against physically demanding or full-time work. Brenda has not had any further contact with the New Deal for Lone Parents but has since been referred to a Job Club and has undertaken Work Based Training for Adults. However, she is still far from certain that she is able or wants to work, and has no clear idea of the sort of work she would like to do. She says of the adviser: ‘He came across as ‘you’re here to look for a job and I’ll get you one’. No matter whether it was one I thought I could do or not, he was getting me one’.

Advisers’ different approaches to the pace of their work with clients seemed to be influenced by how they described the goal of their work with lone parents. Some advisers were clear that the goal was a job, felt they would have this in the forefront of their own minds, and said that they would be clear with clients, from the first interview, that that was the purpose of their involvement with all clients whatever their emotional or personal difficulties. They sometimes talked about having to ‘encourage’ lone parents to move into work, or about having to ‘push them in that direction’, although others distanced themselves from this language. Other advisers placed more emphasis on helping clients to make their own decision about whether work was right for them, and said that moving into a job was not necessarily articulated to the client as a goal. Their approaches also reflect their different interpretations of the objectives of the programme, discussed in section 5.2.2 below.
There were also differences among clients in the extent to which they described advisers providing personal support to them. Here, clients seemed to have quite different needs depending on their proximity to work. Where clients were close to work, they nevertheless valued having an adviser who encouraged them, gave moral support, and reassured them in the steps they were taking.

‘(The most useful aspect of the service was) somebody to talk to. You had that little bit of stimulation to get on with things … you know, it helps with your motivation … when you keep getting frustrated that things are not working out, your motivation goes. For me that was the single most important thing about it, you’re talking to somebody about things, aren’t you.’

(Lone parent: motivated to work but labour market barriers)

‘She gave me confidence to ask about things, look into all the different aspects, all the different avenues, and she really did bring home to me that there was a way round things, that it wasn’t just a tunnel that was going to stay dark for much longer.’

(Lone parent: motivated to work but labour market barriers)

Where clients were further from the labour market this sort of support was particularly important, but they also valued having someone to guide and advise them, and found it reassuring to think their adviser would stop them from making a bad decision.

‘He was the first person to tell me “OK, if you want to do this … we should do it like that” … I’ve missed that for a long time because I didn’t have any person to guide me, to advise me …. He made me strong in whatever I was doing because I knew he was there to advise me …. He’s telling me “oh no, don’t do that, this is the right way”.’

(Lone parent: beginning to think about work)

Other lone parents described this sort of help as something they would have valued.

‘It’s like a child, isn’t it. Until the child is sort of took by the hand and shown, they don’t know what to do, they are confused, they are lost. And I feel a bit like that, you know, sometimes I think I would love to literally have someone take my hand and lead me through the maze of things.’

(Lone parent: beginning to think about work)

A third type of emotional support that lone parents who were further from work sought was help with combating low self-confidence and social isolation. There were cases where this help was provided either directly by the adviser – for example boosting a lone parent’s confidence by highlighting that she had many personal qualities that an employer would value – or by referral to an organisation such as One Plus: One Parent Families which provided support groups and counselling. Again, however, there were also cases where the adviser appeared not to have engaged with a client’s low self-confidence and isolation, and where this contributed to the lone parent losing confidence in the service and not moving forward.
Advisers themselves placed different emphasis on the importance of providing emotional support to lone parents and responding to issues such as low self-confidence, depression and isolation. Some described cases where providing emotional support had been a key part of their role:

‘You almost had to be a social worker to start with because they’d got emotional and other problems’
(personal adviser)

‘… she actually wanted someone to talk to, someone to reassure her and comfort her in a way, so I’ve become a sort of friend to her’
(personal adviser)

They were also willing to be more flexible and informal in their approach, for example doing out-of-hours meetings, and accompanying lone parents to support groups or training providers.

Other advisers, however, distanced themselves from these approaches and said that it was important – both for the client and for the adviser – that the adviser did not get ‘too involved’. There was much discussion about where the line should be drawn, and general agreement among advisers that there are differences among them in this respect. Those who saw themselves as providing less emotional support were concerned about lone parents becoming ‘over-dependent’ on advisers. As with the allocation of responsibility, they saw their approach as being appropriate preparation for the reality of the working environment as well as a way of managing their own time. There was also concern that advisers might not have the necessary competencies or training to provide intensive emotional support counselling.

There were, then, a number of dimensions to diversity of adviser practice. From the descriptions provided by lone parents, three broad groups of experiences emerged:

- **intensive work-focused activity**: an adviser dealing only with more practical and immediate barriers to work, but providing fulsome and extensive support across a range of interventions – for example, giving vocational guidance, discussing training, explaining better off calculations, identifying job vacancies, giving advice on job search strategies, giving information about childcare provision and funding. These cases usually involved several contacts, face-to-face and by telephone, over a relatively short period of time;
• **limited work-focused activity**: an adviser dealing with immediate barriers to work but providing support that was more limited in its breadth and depth – for example focusing on the outcome of a better off calculation rather than explaining it fully, discussing vacancies but not providing vocational guidance or discussing training. These cases generally involved only a few contacts, although in some there was no follow-up after the initial interview;

• **intensive holistic activity**: an adviser engaging with practical barriers to work but also providing support with personal circumstantial barriers (such as a lone parent’s illness or disability, low self-confidence or social isolation, ambivalence about work and the use of childcare). These cases involved more contact over a longer period of time, and particularly more face-to-face contact.

Among the advisers, it was not always possible to identify clear differences in practice which were consistent across the dimensions described in section 5.1. There were individual advisers who seemed to have more holistic and intensive working styles. Equally, there were other advisers who seemed to be much more job-focused in their approach, prioritising immediate barriers to work, placing less emphasis on intermediate outcomes, and generally working to shorter term goals. In between these groups, however, were advisers whose practice did not seem to be clearly aligned with either end of the spectrum, who at times described more holistic or wide-ranging approaches and at times narrower approaches more directly focused on a job. Advisers stressed that they adapt their approaches to meet the needs of different clients, and this may help to explain the lack of clear patterns.\(^\text{13}\)

The experiences of clients do not suggest that any one approach is necessarily more effective than others – perhaps not surprisingly, given the diversity of clients’ experiences and needs. The importance of adapting practice to suit the needs of individual clients was widely emphasised by advisers, who described shaping their approach to client needs and ‘taking the cue from the client’. However, there were differences in the extent to which each approach fitted with different client circumstances, and this seemed to be a critical determinant of effectiveness in individual cases.

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\(^\text{13}\) It is not possible to compare systematically advisers’ descriptions of their approaches and lone parents’ descriptions of the same advisers, nor the descriptions given by lone parents who experienced the same adviser, because the number of instances of such overlap are relatively small. Where overlap occurred, there were instances of both concurrence and dissonance in accounts.
An approach that was focused on immediate barriers to work – and even one which addressed only a limited range of barriers - could be very effective among clients who were close to work. Among clients who were less close to work it could help lone parents to move closer to work, particularly if they were very motivated and had more personal resources such as self-confidence, qualifications or work experience to draw on. However, it could also fail to address significant barriers to work for a lone parent who was further from work, and this sometimes meant that little progression towards work was made. A more intensive and holistic approach, and one that addressed emotional and other underlying needs, was more effective for clients who were further from work. These issues are explored further in Chapter 6.

Equally, however, there were suggestions in some cases that the approach adopted by advisers in individual cases sometimes led to duplication of activity between adviser and client, or to advisers undertaking activity that could have been undertaken by the client. This occurred, for example, where advisers were undertaking job search for clients who were actively looking for work themselves including in Jobcentres, where a client was happy to investigate training courses themselves but the adviser was also doing so, and where an adviser telephoned childcare providers but the client seemed to be able to undertake this sort of activity herself. In one or two cases, the client seemed to have become highly dependent on the adviser for support and advice, and this would seem to support the concerns of some advisers about blurring the boundaries of the adviser role. Although these cases seemed to be the exception rather than the rule, they highlight the potential for inefficient use of adviser time, an issue we return to in Chapter 9.

### 5.2.2 Factors shaping adviser approaches

Four factors appeared to shape advisers’ approaches:

- **the organisational background** of the adviser and the prototype: the Benefits Agency culture was said to lead a more holistic approach with more emphasis on identifying and providing support for underlying issues and sustainable moves into work. It was said to equip advisers with better knowledge of in and out of work benefits but less knowledge and experience of job searching. The Employment Service was thought to lead to an approach that was more clearly focused on work as a goal, with somewhat less emphasis on general or emotional support. (The influence of targets in Phase Three is explored in Chapter 8);

- **advisers’ access to resources** such as LMS (Labour Market System) or information about childcare providers. As discussed in the previous chapter, this had implications for the allocation of responsibility for action between adviser and client;
• the personality of advisers was thought influential – some felt they or their colleagues were personally more comfortable with one approach;

• different understandings of the objectives of the New Deal for Lone Parents. These were described in a range of ways, and individual advisers sometimes identified more than one objective among:
  - getting lone parents into work. To this some added in work and off benefits. Others qualified it as meaning in work and better off than they had been on Income Support or described longer term work goals: ‘A job, a better job, a career’;
  - providing information and support to assist lone parents in deciding whether work was the right option for them;
  - helping lone parents to take steps to move towards work, even if work itself was not yet clearly a realistic goal;
  - others did not describe the objectives in specifically work related terms, but as ‘improving the lives of lone parents’;
  - finally, it was also said that part of the purpose of the pilot had been to change the image of the Employment Service, the Benefits Agency or the government in the eyes of lone parents, stressing its supportive and understanding approach.

These different emphases appeared to link with different adviser approaches, with broader objectives underpinning a wider and more holistic style of work.

Chapter 8 explores how advisers’ practices have changed, both as the prototypes ended and the national programme began, and as advisers became more experienced.

5.3 Adviser-client relationships

In this final section, we explore the different types of relationships that lone parents describe with their advisers and the personal qualities they sought in advisers. The role of advisers in the New Deal for Lone Parents is clearly central: to clients who were not referred to other agencies, contact with the adviser was the sum total of their involvement with the programme. Lone parents were generally positive about the personal qualities of their adviser, and indeed there was only one case where the client was very critical of the manner of an adviser.

5.3.1 Relationships with advisers

A range of different types of relationship with their adviser were described by lone parents:

• tangential relationships: here clients had had little or no contact beyond an initial meeting which either resulted in a decision not to pursue work or was inconclusive. Contact with the service had been tangential to the lone parent’s life, and few details about the adviser could be remembered;
• **Functional relationships**: here clients described relationships which had not moved beyond a fairly formal or ‘official’ level, and where no particular personal bond seemed to have developed. Contact with advisers had been fairly short, and interviews had not involved detailed discussion of the lone parent’s circumstances. Advisers were described as ‘nice enough’, ‘friendly’, ‘very polite’ or ‘fine’ but were not always felt to have understood or shown empathy towards the lone parent’s situation;

• **Warmer relationships**: here clients had built a more personal relationship with their adviser, and as well as dealing with practical issues the relationship with the adviser had provided reassurance and guidance which had played an important role in the client’s progress. Advisers were described as ‘a really nice person’, ‘really lovely’, ‘on the same wave length’ and lone parents said of them ‘you couldn’t meet a nicer person’ and that ‘she must have been a lone parent herself’;

• **Very close relationships**: in a small group of cases, lone parents described very close relationships with their adviser with a strong emotional content. The adviser appeared to have become a key person in the client’s life and was described in quite intimate terms such as ‘like an uncle’ or ‘a friend, really’. In some cases this seemed to reflect paucity of other close relationships in the lone parent’s life and the client appeared to have become very dependent on the adviser, but in others the relationship had remained focused on issues relevant to work. These were cases where the personal support given by the adviser had played a critical role in helping the lone parent to move towards or into work.

There seemed to be differences between male and female clients in the relationships they described with their advisers, which reflect the issues discussed in section 2.3. Although there were lone mothers among those describing all the relationships noted above, no lone fathers in the study sample described very close or particularly warm relationships. Their relationships seemed to involve a much more limited personal bond with the adviser than had been experienced by some lone mothers.

Where lone parents had formed a very good relationship with their adviser, they were sometimes very disappointed if their adviser moved on, and for some this had inhibited them re-contacting the service. Few seemed to have been told in advance that their adviser was moving on.
Finally, we conclude this chapter by describing lone parents’ views about what makes a good adviser. Lone parents valued a range of different qualities and attributes:

- **accessibility and friendliness**: this could mean being relaxed, open and ‘not official’; being down to earth and ‘ordinary’; being chatty and friendly; asking about the lone parent’s children; putting lone parents at their ease; not being intimidating, brisk, cool or too business-like ‘…they should be informal…put people at their ease…not a person who comes over all forceful, like a sergeant major type of person.’

  (Lone parent: motivated to work but labour market barriers)

  ‘(In praise of her own personal adviser) He was a really nice man…he had a really friendly manner, put you right at ease and was very interested in my problems and the problems I was having with my son, he was really helpful like that.’

  (Lone parent: close to work);

- **clarity in communication**: explaining information clearly, particularly important for lone parents with more limited educational achievements;

- **understanding**: being able to relate to the lone parent’s own circumstances, being kind and gentle; listening; sympathising; being sensitive to difficult aspects of the lone parent’s life

  ‘A caring warm person that is maybe quite intuitive, you know they are not going to look at you like you’re some kind of sad git for feeling the way you do, and not to judge you for it…because you feel a failure anyway in the world because you can’t give your children what they want.’

  (Lone parent: motivated to work but personal circumstantial barriers)

  ‘(Talking of her own personal adviser) she was good because she understood it’s hard for a single mum, she was sympathetic that’s the important thing.’

  (Lone parent: beginning to think about work);

- **dealing with lone parents as individuals**: taking time to find out about them; understanding the diversity of lone parents’ circumstances; not making assumptions; being non-judgemental, polite and respectful

  ‘They should listen to what a parent wants…be understanding to their client’s needs as a whole because every lone parent’s situation is different…if they’ve been through a rough so many months or years they need a bit of support, and not you know you should do this, you should get a job.’

  (Lone parent: close to work)

  ‘They should look at people as individuals, they should listen to them…be genuine in what they are doing…to me that’s what’s important.’

  (Lone parent: motivated to work but personal circumstantial barriers)
• being non-directive: guiding and advising without pushing or pressurising
   ‘…being friendly and not pushing everything on you…listening to you and not putting words into your mouth.’
   (Lone parent: beginning to think about work)
   ‘…someone who can talk to you and listens at the same time, because if they are not listening to you they just want to push you into wherever they see you.’
   (Lone parent: close to work)

• trustworthiness and efficiency: being realistic and honest in their advice; providing follow-up and keeping promises; being efficient and well-informed; providing advice that is based on an understanding of the client’s individual circumstances; anticipating difficulties or concerns
   ‘I think the good advisers are ones who tell it like it is and who are very honest and upfront with you and not give you misleading information, things like that, you know.’
   (Lone parent: close to work);

• being supportive and motivating: showing they care by trying to find solutions to problems; being encouraging; reassuring lone parents.

Lone parents who were furthest from work, with least work experience and confidence around moving to work, placed particular emphasis on personal qualities such as being non-directive, understanding and kind. Those who were closest to work valued friendliness and accessibility and other personal qualities, but also placed emphasis on efficiency and other more practical qualities.

Clients’ experiences of advisers are, then, very diverse, and this appears to reflect differences in advisers’ approaches which are themselves underpinned by a range of factors. The following chapter explores the different stages reached by clients following their involvement with the programme, and the complex interplay of personal circumstances, adviser approach and other aspects of the service which help to explain these outcomes.
6 OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS

This chapter explores participants’ movements towards and into work following their participation in the New Deal for Lone Parents, and the role of the programme in contributing to different sorts of outcomes. Lone parents’ experiences of work and the factors influencing the sustainability of work are explored in the following chapter, and this chapter therefore focuses on initial moves into work.

6.1 Patterns in moving towards work

The sample was, as Chapter 1 outlined, purposively selected to include people who had experience of education and training and of work during or following their participation in the programme, both those who were still in work or education and those who were now again on Income Support. Within this, a number of different outcomes could be identified:

- **lone parents who had not moved closer to work**: These lone parents had had no experiences of work or intermediate steps such as training and remained on Income Support. Some were keen to find or move towards work but others had decided that work was not for them, at least for the moment;

- **lone parents who had moved off Income Support and into work at some point**: Some moved into work during their participation in the programme – in one or two cases within days of their initial interview. Others did so only some time later, for example after a period of training. The group included one lone parent who remained in the job she had when she first approached the programme but increased her hours and moved from Income Support to Family Credit. Within this group, some had stayed in the first job they found; others had moved on, sometimes with an intervening period on Income Support, and some had returned to Income Support. Of those who had returned, some were continuing to look for work but others were not. As noted above, patterns of sustainability of work are explored in detail in Chapter 7;

- **lone parents who had made moves towards leaving Income Support for work**: for example taking on a small part-time job which did not take them above the Income Support earnings disregard, undertaking training or beginning to look for work.
Within the latter two groups where movement had occurred, this was generally a result of a combination of factors relating to the lone parent’s own personal circumstances and to their participation in the programme. There were some cases, however, where the lone parent’s account suggested that the service had had no impact on their ability to move forward, and where movement was accounted for by factors relating to them and their personal circumstances alone. The explanations for the different situations of lone parents at the time of the research interviews, and for the different impacts of their participation in the programme, lie in a combination of lone parents’ orientation to work at the point when they first made contact; their personal resources and situations; and their experiences of the service. The following sections explore these varied influences in more detail.

6.2 Lone parents who did not move closer to work

This group consisted of both lone parents who were some distance from work when they first made contact with the service (the typology group for whom work was not an option, who were beginning to think about work or who were motivated to work but faced difficult personal situations) and those who were closer (motivated but facing predominantly labour market barriers to work). The explanations for lack of movement into work are rather different for lone parents within these two broad groups. (In the study sample, all the lone parents in the ‘close to work’ typology moved into work during or after their participation in the programme.)

6.2.1 Personal circumstantial explanations

A range of issues relating to their personal circumstances help to explain why some lone parents did not move into or towards work.

A recurrent theme within this group at the end of their participation in the New Deal for Lone Parents was the absence of a conviction that work was the right direction. This might be manifested in ambivalence about work; a latent interest but no active desire to move into work; or a sense that the disadvantages outweighed the advantages leading to a decision that work was not the right direction. Those who had been unsure or unhappy about the idea of work when they decided to participate in the programme had generally done so out of concern that the programme was compulsory.

For some lone parents, this ambivalence was closely related to views about their role as parents. Here, it arose in three ways: from a decision that, on balance, they wanted to be the main carer for their children; from reluctance to use formal provision combined with the non-availability of informal care; or from inability to find suitable formal childcare. Specific needs of children – illness, disability, challenging behaviour or general neediness – contributed to the view that their place was with their children.
A third issue was that, for some lone parents, other difficult aspects of their personal circumstances which had been obstacles to moving towards work remained dominant in their lives. This included issues such as the lone parent’s own illness or disability, depression, lack of confidence, debt or legal problems.

A final explanation for why lone parents in this group had not moved closer to work related to difficulty in making work pay. This remained a barrier particularly for those with mortgages or significant levels of debt, or for lone parents who would have to make heavier use of formal childcare. In some cases, there was a strong degree of scepticism – sometimes rooted in personal experience – about whether work could be financially advantageous, which underpinned ambivalence about work or a lack of interest in work. However, there were also lone parents who had been very keen to work and who were very frustrated that this barrier could not be overcome.

These issues relating to their personal circumstances were sometimes compounded by lone parents’ experiences of contact with personal advisers.

For some lone parents, a key contributor to the fact that they had not moved forward was that the adviser appeared not to have engaged with aspects of their personal circumstances which made work difficult. These circumstances included factors such as lack of confidence about moving into work; a lone parent’s illness, which might have implications for the type of work they could contemplate; limited basic skills; a child’s disability; or children’s challenging behaviour.

Some personal advisers appeared not to have been aware of these issues in lone parents’ lives, particularly if they had moved quickly in the first interview to addressing practical barriers to work and the lone parent had not felt able to talk about their personal circumstances. Here, the pace of the advisers’ approach had not fitted well with the lone parents’ needs. Lone parents described feeling under pressure to move into work through, for example, discussion of specific job vacancies, when they felt that interim steps towards work might have been more appropriate. In other cases, the lone parent felt their adviser knew of the difficulty but had not been able to provide a solution.

It is important not to understate the scale and significance of some lone parents’ difficulties in these areas, which were considerable.
Case example 6.1: Susan has children of 11 and 13. She became a lone parent 11 years ago and has not worked since. She was recently re-housed by the council to an area where she knows almost no-one, and describes herself as reclusive, unconfident to the point that she sometimes cannot leave the house, depressed and ‘drowning in debt’. She responded to an invitation letter and an adviser visited her at home twice. She says that he did a better off calculation, which she did not understand, but does not recall any discussion of possible work directions nor of training. She told him about her financial difficulties but felt his advice about her financial needs was unrealistic. ‘I found it all confusing. I just didn’t see how it all worked out, he said I’d be better off, but I’d still be skint …after bills, food, uniforms and that …. I thought it was ridiculous.’ She had hoped the programme might provide confidence-building courses and counselling, and might help her to learn to communicate with people, but now feels that it was just about jobs.

However, other lone parents who faced what appeared to be similarly difficult circumstances were sometimes able to move forward with intensive support from or through a personal adviser – as section 6.4 below discusses.

There were also cases where lone parents felt their adviser had not adequately addressed other aspects of their needs such as:

- **childcare**: where lone parents were uncertain about what would be right for the children and wanted advice and guidance;

- **uncertainty about an appropriate vocational direction**: it was particularly difficult for lone parents who had not worked for some time to identify the sort of work they would like to do, and in some cases this seemed not to have been adequately explored by the adviser;

- **the financial implications of work**: as noted in Chapter 5, lone parents for whom a better off calculation showed that work would not result in financial improvement were relieved that a potentially disadvantageous move into work had been avoided but there was also frustration that the adviser had not been able to suggest ways forward;

- **their need for support with job search**: this was particularly important for lone parents who were closer to work. As noted in Chapter 5, lone parents sometimes felt that the adviser had had nothing to add to their own job search. Also in this group were lone parents who had expected to be notified of vacancies following their initial interview, but who had heard nothing further.
The perceived failure of the service to address outstanding needs sometimes reinforced a lone parent’s own belief that their situation was hopeless – for example, where an adviser was unable to identify childcare provision for a disabled child, to suggest a way of making work pay or to identify suitable jobs. However, there were also cases where the adviser had provided more intensive support apparently trying to tackle underlying barriers to work, albeit unsuccessfully. Here, lone parents were sometimes determined to try to move towards work at some point in the future, such as when a child started school, and the programme had sometimes been influential here.

‘I’m glad I went because it has really opened my eyes on how to get a job, what to do …. You hear things like there’s no jobs out there, but they’ve showed me there are things for us (lone parents) …. I’m definitely going back to work when he (her son) starts school’

(Lone parent: beginning to think about work)

Finally, there were suggestions in their accounts that the lone parent’s own ambivalence about work, or lack of interest in it, had inhibited their involvement and engagement with the programme. This did not emerge explicitly in any of the lone parent interviews. However, these lone parents described their adviser asking and making suggestions about a wide range of issues in the interviews, initiating contact several times, and apparently trying to tackle the various barriers to work identified by the client. The lone parent themselves had decided not to continue to participate in the programme, and their own feelings about work seemed to have played a part in this decision.

Case example 6.2: Alan has been a lone parent for 2 years, and has sons of 9 and 10. When he got in touch with the programme he was beginning to think about work but he was very ambivalent. He liked the idea of having more money, but had done manual work in the past but didn’t think he would like to return to that. His adviser showed him different jobs when he said he wasn’t sure what he would like to do, did a better off calculation, discussed different types of childcare and financial support for it, said she could help him prepare for interviews (he felt he had ‘been there, seen it, done it’) and talked about whether he was interested in training. He met her three times, always initiated by her, and felt ‘she more or less covered everything’. He says he would be interested in seeing an adviser again if he was contacted by the service but has no plans to get in touch himself: he seems still to have no clear interest in working and is not taking steps to move towards work himself.

6.3 Movement into or towards work without NDLP role

Here, lone parents had moved into or towards work following participation in the New Deal for Lone Parents, but they felt the programme itself had had no impact on this and none could be discerned in their account.
Within this group, two sets of experiences could be identified. In general, lone parents had been relatively close to work when they made contact, with a clear or developing sense of the sort of work they would like to do, relatively recent work experience, and a high degree of confidence and motivation in moving to work. These lone parents were also distinguished by the fact that childcare was generally not a barrier to work: their children were older or at least at school, and they either had access to informal childcare or were happy to use formal provision.

In the second set of experiences, lone parents had less in the way of personal resources to help them to move towards work, but had found an alternative source of support such as a college or support group which they had accessed directly rather than through the New Deal for Lone Parents. This other source of support had provided the type of help that had proved influential for other lone parents – such as vocational guidance, support with job search, help with low self-confidence and advice about the financial transition to work.

**Case example 6.3:** Moira has been a lone parent for 5 years and has a daughter of 14. She initiated contact with the programme at a point when she was beginning to think about work but was unconfident and unsure how to proceed. She was very anxious about moving off benefits and felt under-qualified for work. She had two meetings with an adviser, but felt the focus was immediately on getting her a job. ‘I felt as if it was all about getting you into a job, but I told him I was in two minds.’ The adviser recommended a job direction, gave her several application forms which she was too worried to complete, and did a better off calculation. Training was not discussed, although she felt her lack of qualifications and recent work experience were significant barriers to work.

She felt pressurised by the adviser and decided not to participate further. She returned to an unemployment resource centre with which she had recently done some IT training and, with their support and that of her family, took a diploma in medical administration. She is now beginning an HNC in administration. Again with the support of the centre, she recently started a part-time job.

Within both sets of experiences, lone parents generally reported poor experiences of the New Deal for Lone Parents. Issues which had not been addressed to their satisfaction include job search, training, childcare and lack of confidence. Some reported advisers not responding to their attempts to make contact, and not providing information they had promised. Their needs and circumstances were not different to those of lone parents who did move into work with the support of the service but they were not addressed fully by their advisers. Although these lone parents were nevertheless able to move into work, none who had moved without alternative support was still in work at the point of the research interview.
Case example 6.4: Megan worked extensively until her daughter, now aged 5, was born, moving from job to job with apparent ease. She was beginning to think about work when she was contacted by the service, but was unsure whether it was fair on her daughter and whether work would pay. She saw three different advisers over the course of a year. The first suggested a work preparation course, but her application went astray between the adviser and the provider, and Megan was anyway unsure it was what she needed. The adviser offered but was unable to do a better off calculation for reasons that were unclear to Megan. She was also disappointed to learn that there was no financial support for informal care, and was opposed to the idea of formal provision. She was unimpressed with the programme and felt she could manage better on her own.

She found a job but left it because it was much more demanding than she had expected and her informal childcare arrangements broke down. She found another but left that when she found herself no better off. When her child started at school she contacted the New Deal for Lone Parents again hoping to be able to do some vocational training. The adviser identified one course, but it was some way away and would not fit with her child’s school hours. She is dissatisfied with her experience with the programme and feels it has been of no use to her: ‘You go to them because, not that you expect them to work miracles, but you expect them to be able to get a bit further than what you can and to have access to things that you can’t get access to, to be able to put you in touch with the right people…but there was just none of that.’

In the third, and largest, group, lone parents had moved into or towards work (for example into training or beginning job search) and felt that the New Deal for Lone Parents had played a role in this. For some this was a central role without which they felt they would not have moved; others saw it as a facilitative and supporting role. Again, the group included lone parents who were more distant from work when they made contact with the programme as well as those who were closer to work, and this had implications for what helped them to move forward. Again, aspects of their personal situations and their contact with the programme are both relevant.

There were two recurrent themes here. First, with one or two exceptions, these lone parents were very motivated to work when they made contact with the service – sometimes despite significant difficult personal issues. Some were clear about the sort of work they wanted to do; others were unsure, but almost all were clear that they wanted to work. Second, again with only one or two exceptions, arranging childcare had been straightforward: these lone parents worked during school hours only, had access to support from family or friends, or were happy to use formal childcare and had found suitable provision.
‘I didn’t have to pay for anyone to baby-sit or anything… I’ve got loads of people I can rely on and things like that, so loads of family and that. I’m one of the lucky ones.’

(Lone parent: close to work)

6.4.2 Explanations relating to the programme

Whilst these factors appeared to play an important role in facilitating their move into work, their involvement with the programme was also clearly influential.

Those who were further from work when they made contact with the service generally described a fulsome and extensive level of support from their adviser. In some cases this had gone beyond practical barriers to work: some lone parents described a high level of contact within which advisers provided much guidance and support, including addressing issues such as low self-confidence.

Case example 6.5: Felicity is 40 and her children are 12 and 13. She had always wanted to work but her son was very unsettled at primary school. When he moved successfully to a new school, she began to think about work again but she had not worked for over 15 years and was very anxious at the thought of working. She saw an adviser several times. He suggested that she think about taking on part-time work within the Income Support earnings disregard or doing some training. She opted for training and he helped her find an NVQ Level 2 course in childcare which she enjoyed enormously. The college provided support with applying for jobs which she found very helpful and the adviser re-initiated contact when the course had ended and also provided support and guidance. After she was offered a job her adviser did a better off calculation and helped her with her Family Credit application, and when a problem arose, with Housing Benefit. She was delighted with her experience of the programme. She said of her personal adviser: ‘He tried very much to help me…explained everything to me. I wish every lone parent could meet such a man.’

This support was not always provided directly by the adviser. The programme had sometimes provided access to another organisation, such as a college or lone parent support group, which had provided intensive support that the lone parent felt had been very helpful. In cases where a somewhat more limited encounter with the service was described by lone parents who were some distance from work when they made contact, this had nevertheless been sufficiently broad to enable a highly motivated lone parent to move into or towards work. For those who were closer to work when they made contact with the service, their encounter had been less extensive in both depth and breadth, and the focus had been on practical issues. However, this was all that seemed to have been required, and even in cases where contact was most limited the adviser had provided the key elements of support the lone parent needed to move forward. Some clients who were closer to work received more intensive support through referral for example to a programme centre.
For both groups, aspects of the service that could be key were:

- a better off calculation and help with in-work benefits: the calculation could, as Chapter 4 noted, play a crucial role in the decision to look for or take work;
- vocational guidance: particularly important for those who had been out of work for some time;
- work preparation: provided through other organisations and sometimes including work placements, again particularly important for those further from work;
- training;
- notification of job vacancies and support and advice with job search, including the opportunity to discuss the suitability of particular vacancies;
- information about childcare provision and financial support;
- moral support and encouragement: this was very important to lone parents who were further from work, but was important too for those who were closer and was welcomed by both groups.

In one case, a man who had been doing undeclared work was prompted to make his work official by being contacted by the New Deal for Lone Parents. Even here, though, advice about in-work benefits encouraged him to extend his hours so that he moved from Income Support to Family Credit.

**Case example 6.6:** Josie has been a lone parent for 2 years and had not worked since she had her children, now aged 7 and 5. She was very motivated to work and was actively applying for jobs, but was very concerned about the financial transition. She had been offered a job when she responded to an invitation to participate in the programme. Reassured by the better off calculation, she took the job. Her adviser, whom she saw twice, helped her with her Family Credit application and talked her through the calculation in some detail. Although she had to leave the job when her shifts were changed, and her subsequent job also fell through because of childcare problems, she says the adviser made her realise that there are lots of opportunities for lone parents and she and her children would be better off in the long run if she did work. She is now about to start a course –prompted in part by discussion with the adviser – and plans to look for work again. She is very pleased with her contact with the programme: ‘I think New Deal is really, really good… he just made me realise that there’s training out there that I can get and I can get further education, get a better job as well for me and the kids and that I’m better off in work, in the long run, you know.’
For lone parents who were further from work, these interventions were generally successful in combination and with more intensive engagement with the lone parents’ individual circumstances. For those who were closer to work, a single type of support could be sufficient to facilitate a move into work, or to stimulate further action taken by lone parents themselves. The key influence appeared to be the extent to which what was provided matched their needs.

Among the lone parents who moved forward with the support of the programme, there were different views about whether the programme had played an essential role. Some, particularly those who were further from work, felt they would not have been able to move forward without the adviser’s support.

‘I wouldn’t have had the get up and go to go and try it, I wouldn’t have somebody there that I knew I could rely on so, aye, I’d say they were a help, aye. So if it wasn’t for them I wouldn’t have thought about trying to go back to work.’

(Lone parent: beginning to think about work)

‘(Without New Deal for Lone Parents) I’d still be on Income Support struggling…I wouldn’t have known how to present myself…I wouldn’t have had the confidence to go into shops and ask about jobs.’

(Lone parent: motivated to work but labour market barriers)

Others felt they would have been able to do so, but nevertheless felt the adviser’s support had been influential in:

• helping them to move more quickly than they would otherwise have done – for example by helping to clarify vocational direction and providing access to more vacancies;
• helping them to move more smoothly and confidently than they would otherwise have done – for example by reassuring them about aspects of the financial transition;
• helping them to move to a better job than they would otherwise have got – for example where advisers encouraged them to think about the sort of work they wanted to do and to take their time to find the right job;
• ensuring they claimed in-work benefits about which they would otherwise not have known.
Case example 6.7: Sam is 23 with a 4 year old child. She says she has always been lucky finding work and has never been out of work for long. She was working part-time but looking for other jobs when she was referred to a lone parent adviser by the Jobcentre. The adviser carried out job matching for her and she successfully applied for one of the posts he identified, although she was also job searching herself. He also asked about training, but she wanted to move straight to work. He did a better off calculation for the job she wanted and went through it with her in detail, helping her to see how she would need to manage her money in work. She had not known of the existence of Family Credit but applied for it on his advice. He telephoned several nurseries for her to find out about cost and availability. She is highly satisfied with the help she received, and feels that, but for the adviser, she would still be in a job she was not enjoying. She said of her personal adviser: ‘I thought it was brilliant…he went thorough things and explained things I never knew about, he sorted out what money I would have …. I wouldn’t be doing the job I’m doing now if I hadn’t been in touch with him, he more or less encouraged me to get the job I wanted to do.’

There is clearly a potential for duplication of effort and inefficient use of advisers’ time where they provide support to clients who are able to move forward alone – an issue discussed further in Chapter 9. However, in these cases the involvement of the programme appeared to have added value to what clients were able to do alone.

To summarise this chapter, then, the patterns of movement towards and into work following participation in the programme are diverse. Personal circumstances clearly play an important role in facilitating or inhibiting movements towards work, and the obstacle of childcare emerges recurrently. But the New Deal for Lone Parents can also play a crucial role. The quality of fit between the lone parent’s needs and the nature and extent of support provided by the adviser appears to be important in explaining its effectiveness.

Lone parents who moved into work, with or without the support of the programme, had very varied experiences of work and again their personal circumstances and their experiences of the programme help to explain these differences. It is to the issue of sustainability of work that we now turn.
The lone parents’ experiences of work before joining the programme identified a range of factors which led to lone parents leaving jobs – some connected to parenting responsibilities (and especially being a lone parent) and others not. This chapter explores lone parents’ experiences in work following participation in the programme. The chapter draws out the factors that emerged from the accounts of lone parents as supporting or undermining sustainable work. It also describes personal advisers’ approaches to in-work support, and lone parents’ experiences of it.

As indicated in the previous chapter, there were a number of lone parents in the study group who moved into paid employment (either part-time or full-time) after participation in the programme. Given that the interviews with lone parents were carried out up to two years after their initial contact with the programme, it is possible to trace some of the more medium term patterns of employment post participation. Lone parents’ experiences, patterns and trajectories of employment varied quite considerably. Whilst there were cases where employment had been sustained for a number of months, there were also cases where the move into work had proved less successful and relatively short-lived. Broadly three different patterns of employment could be identified:

- **employment sustained for at least 5-6 months**: at the time of interview, there were some lone parents who had moved into paid work after participation and had sustained work for at least 6 months. Amongst this group were some who had experienced one or two ‘false starts’, moving into jobs which were not sustained for more than a few weeks before finding another job which had proved to be sustainable for a longer period of time;

- **employment sustained, but increasingly threatened**: there were also instances of lone parents who had sustained employment for a number of months, but felt at the point of interview that their ability to continue working was being increasingly threatened;

- **employment not sustained**: finally, there were some lone parents who, at the point of interview, had so far failed to sustain work for longer than a few weeks or months at a time. Some had had two or three short-term jobs before returning to Income Support.
Experiences of work thus proved very mixed. However, across all three groups, and even where work had been relatively short-lived, lone parents consistently highlighted benefits they had gained from working. Although some, particularly those who had not worked for some time, were very nervous at the prospect of returning to work, they identified a range of positive features of their experience of work. They emphasised:

- **improved self-esteem**: moving from being dependent on benefits into work was seen as a significant personal achievement by many lone parents, particularly those who had faced a number of personal barriers to doing so. They felt their self-esteem had been boosted by being able to prove to themselves and others that they could cope with work; being able to use or develop skills; having opportunities to develop themselves beyond their role as a parent, and having independence and autonomy in work.

  ‘Work has made me confident in myself, that I can do things…It showed me I could work and that I were as good as anybody else.’

  (Lone parent: beginning to think about work);

- **widening scope for social interaction**: being able to meet a wide range of people and to form relationships with colleagues had helped to combat social isolation, and some talked of feeling they had become more out-going and more confident as a result.

  ‘It does help there is no doubt, it gives you a lot more confidence because you meet people and have more people to talk to at work and you are getting out of the house environment, because it can get isolating at home with the kids, when you don’t really meet anybody else.’

  (Lone parent: close to work);

- **improved financial circumstances**: the extent to which lone parents felt they were better off in work varied. Some said they were scarcely or no better off; others felt there had been a significant improvement in their financial circumstances;

- **financial independence**: even in those cases where the financial benefits of working had not been so great, lone parents gained considerable satisfaction from the fact that they were financially independent and ‘catering for their own needs’ rather than having to rely on benefits. This independence was highly valued, particularly by those who had been very conscious of the stigma of being a lone parent on benefits.

  ‘Actually you’re not that much better off on Family Credit but it’s not just the actual money, it’s that you’re working for part of it … you feel as if you’ve got more money when it’s your own. That may sound stupid, but you’re doing it, you’re not sitting there with somebody else keeping you…you’re not totally dependent so you’ve got that self-esteem back.’

  (Lone parent: beginning to think about work)
‘It’s very nice when you’re working and at the end of the week the money is in the bank, you know, you’ve earned it, you know …. When you’ve been on Income Support a long time you don’t feel independent, it’s not your money, and I didn’t like the fact of going to the post office and drawing it every week. They treat people like you’re losers and stuff and I’m not a loser, you know.’

(Lone parent: beginning to think about work)

7.3 Factors supporting and undermining work

However, it is clear that experiences of work after participation in the programme had not always been wholly positive ones. As the varied patterns of employment indicate, a number of people who had moved into work experienced a range of difficulties which, at the point of interview, were either threatening the sustainability of work or had resulted in them leaving work. Similarly, other lone parents identified factors which had supported them in sustaining work. The following issues emerged.

As noted above, lone parents valued work as a way of improving their financial situation and gaining financial independence, and these positive experiences had helped lone parents to sustain work. The role of advisers in providing better off calculations and assisting with benefit transitions had clearly been an important one. However, the financial transition into work had not always been a smooth or uneventful one. Lone parents described administrative difficulties around the continuation of Housing Benefit or the move to Family Credit which were usually short term, but some had also found that their financial situation in work was worse than they had expected. There were cases where lone parents unexpectedly found themselves in debt, ‘struggling’ or in some cases worse off than on benefit. In these cases, lone parents felt, in retrospect, unprepared for the full extent of their financial commitments once in work and had found the transition from Income Support ‘a big financial shock’. In some cases, these financial problems had resulted in, or significantly contributed to, lone parents having to leave work.

Clients whose advisers had talked through with them in detail the full financial situation in work had found this very valuable, and some also described receiving advice about how to manage their money in work. Difficulties sometimes arose because lone parents had not been fully aware at that stage precisely what their childcare, travel or other costs would be. In other cases, however, personal advisers had not explained the calculation in detail to clients or had only presented clients with hypothetical calculations. For example, one client who had received her better-off calculation in the post said that she had not realised that she would not continue to receive Income Support once in work and had to leave her job when she found herself considerably worse off than on benefits. In another case, a lone parent who had been sent a hypothetical calculation said that she had not realised that a calculation could also be done based on her actual salary when she was offered a job. The reality of her financial situation in work contributed to her leaving the job.
Financial difficulties also sometimes arose where lone parents had not been fully aware of their benefit entitlements during the transition into work, and seemed not to have received benefits that others did. For example, one lone parent said she got into ‘a real fix financially’ because her adviser had failed to tell her about extended Housing Benefit payments. When returning to her adviser for an explanation, she was told that it had been assumed that she already knew which benefits to claim. In this case, the experience of getting into debt shortly after starting work created considerable anxiety and resulted in the decision to return to benefits.

7.3.2 Employers’ attitudes

Lone parents who had been able to sustain work sometimes saw flexibility and support from employers as having contributed to this – for example, where they had been able to agree hours that fitted around caring responsibilities, where employers had recognised the need to adhere to agreed hours, and where employers had understood their need for time off if a child was ill or if childcare arrangements broke down. But others described employers putting pressure on them to change agreed hours, to swap shifts, to work overtime or to cut their hours. Some had encountered inflexibility around their needs for time off if a child was ill. Here, lone parents felt that employers had failed to engage with the fact that single parents, particularly those without external networks of support, have ‘no other choice but to put (their) child first’. Where it had been impossible to accommodate an employer’s demands, clients saw no other option but to leave work.

In other cases, lone parents reported that this lack of understanding was resulting in such an unpleasant and hostile working environment that they were having to consider giving up work. One lone parent, for example, felt that her inability to work overtime or during school holidays due to difficulties arranging and affording childcare had been wrongly interpreted by her manager and colleagues as a sign of laziness and lack of commitment. The hostility and ill-feeling this had caused had forced her to think about giving up work, despite being very reluctant to do so.

Difficulties also arose where employers were found to be unsympathetic to health problems or more general circumstances not necessarily connected to lone parenthood. Lone parents had sometimes found it difficult to get on with colleagues, describing feeling they were bullied or picked on, or finding the working environment unfriendly or ‘cliquey’. In other cases lone parents had been made redundant or sacked.
7.3.3 Childcare

Not all lone parents needed childcare: some were able to work during school hours only, or had older children who were able to look after themselves. In other cases, informal or formal childcare arrangements worked well and were felt to be problem-free. But problems with childcare arrangements were also cited as reasons for work not being sustained. This arose:

• with informal childcare arrangements where lone parents were let down by relatives who had promised to look after their children. One woman, for example, said her mother wanted a break from childcare and was not as accommodating as she had hoped about looking after her son when he was ill. Another had understood that it would be illegal to pay a friend to care for her child for more than two hours a day and had agreed to take her out for a meal instead, but both agreed after the first few weeks that this was not fair;

• with formal childcare arrangements where a childminder was no longer able to take the children, or where the location or cost of formal childcare proved problematic;

• where children had not taken to childcare arrangements and had become very unhappy and ‘clingy’ or had developed difficult behaviour such as truancy;

• where lone parents took evening or night work because this was when free childcare was available from a relative, but were unhappy with the limited amount of time they were thus able to spend with their children.

Some lone parents had been able to re-organise childcare – having an extensive network of friends and family in the local area and being willing to use formal childcare had helped here – but others had had to leave work. More generally, lone parents sometimes found combining work and solo parenting very demanding. They described feeling guilty that they were letting their children down, and being close extremely tired and having no time for themselves. This placed pressure on lone parents’ attachment to jobs and sometimes contributed, with other factors, to a decision to leave.

Finally, one lone parent described his ex-wife creating difficulties at his workplace as part of a longstanding dispute about custody arrangements.
Some lone parents were delighted with the job they had taken, feeling it was ‘just right’ or ‘ideal’, and greatly appreciated the role of advisers where they had been encouraged to choose their job carefully. But there were also examples of employment not being sustained as a result of the job proving to be unsuitable. This arose:

- where it was unsuitable because of a longstanding health condition – for example where a lone parent with a heart condition took on physically demanding work;
- where the job was more demanding than had been expected – for example where a lone parent was expected to act up for her manager when he was away.

In some cases lone parents seemed to have been given a lot of support in identifying suitable jobs, but still ended up in ‘the wrong job’. This was particularly true in the case above, where the lone parent took on physically demanding work in spite of their heart condition. Here, the lone parent’s intense desperation to escape the isolation and problems of lone parenthood seemed to have contributed to haste, leading them to take ‘any job’ rather than following advice to wait for a suitable one. In other cases though, this seemed to be a reflection of lone parents not being given as much vocational guidance and support around job choice as they wanted or felt, on reflection, that they had needed.

Finally, there were also lone parents who had had to leave work because of pregnancy or a health condition they had not had during their contact with their adviser, and others who left work to move on to a better job.

Lone parents who left work did so for a variety of reasons, some related to lone parenthood and the barriers they had faced to getting work, others not. The extent of support they had received from their adviser in moving into work had a role to play. Lone parents who were closer to work (with more recent work experience, for example) were able to manage the transition to work with relatively little support from the adviser. But lone parents who moved into work without any discernible support from the programme nor from any other source were, by the time of the research interview, again on Income Support. Where lone parents were further from work, a more fulsome and complete approach by the adviser, and one that addressed personal circumstantial barriers to work, was by no means a guarantee of sustainable work. But thorough preparation for work through, for example, support in choosing the right job and help with the financial transition seemed to equip lone parents better for staying in work.
Chapter 2 described the range of factors which motivated lone parents to think about work and their expectations of work. Whilst for some these expectations were met or even exceeded, for others work did not live up to their expectations.

As indicated above, lone parents often experienced a significant boost in confidence on moving into work, particularly where that move had been a successful one. Where it was less successful, there were different reactions. Some were generally phlegmatic about leaving or losing a job and moved on to other work: they still valued the job as having got them back into the working world or helped to clarify the sort of work they wanted to do. For others, the experience of being failed by work had had a detrimental effect on confidence and in some instances resulted in the decision to ‘give up trying’ or ‘put work on hold for a while’. The experience seemed to be particularly difficult for lone parents who had not worked for some time and who were further from work when they made contact with the programme. Here, lone parents seemed sometimes to have had higher and perhaps unrealistic expectations of its likely impact on their life, and to have invested emotionally in the idea of work.

The accounts of both lone parents and personal advisers place much emphasis on the importance of assistance with the financial transition to work. This was seen by advisers as a crucial part of their role, and much valued by lone parents, although as section 4.4 noted there was some variation in the intensity of support lone parents received. However, although advisers talked generally about the importance of in-work support, much less emphasis seemed to be placed on help with other aspects than the financial transition to work, and the accounts of lone parents provided little evidence of other in-work support being given.

Advisers noted the importance of helping lone parents to find the right job and saw this as an important aspect of building sustainable employment, although the emphasis placed on this varied as section 5.1 noted. They also discussed other factors that can threaten lone parents’ employment, particularly employers’ attitudes and difficulties with childcare arrangements. They described, for example, cases where employers’ attempts to change a lone parent’s hours or otherwise unsupportive attitudes had threatened employment. Some had been able to provide support here, for example contacting the employer to explain the lone parent’s situation or telling an employer about a lone parent’s difficulties with a sick child where the lone parent had not felt able to do this. However, these were described as unusual cases, and more generally advisers felt that there was little or nothing they could do beyond advising lone parents how to talk to the employer about the problem and providing ‘moral support’.
‘Really I think there is very little you can do about it, especially if they are on temporary contracts … You’re almost crossing your fingers when they go out…. In fact you basically just have to tell your lone parent to go off and chat (with the employer) themselves.’

(personal adviser)

Similarly, some advisers described having contacted childcare providers to try to resolve a difficulty, or helping lone parents to make replacement arrangements, but again these were described as rare cases. The difficulty of arranging funding for formal childcare after a Family Credit assessment had been made was also noted, and this was seen to raise problems for lone parents who sought to replace informal childcare with formal. Other advisers said they had talked more generally with lone parents about how work was affecting their lives, but again this seemed the exception rather than the rule.

There seemed, then, to be relatively little emphasis on in-work support beyond financial help, and personal advisers did not always appear to adopt formal systems for following up cases. Some did take a more proactive stance and said they always initiated contact with clients in the first few weeks of work to check that the transition into work had been a smooth one. Others would write after a month or two inviting the lone parent to contact them if they encountered difficulties but indicating that they would not otherwise be in touch again. But there were also advisers who said that, once a client was in work and benefit applications had been made, they would not initiate further contact.

As section 5.1 noted, there was a concern among advisers that clients can become over-dependent if they are not encouraged to make appropriate preparation towards the independence they would need in the workplace, and the tone of advisers’ comments sometimes suggested that this desire to avoid over-dependence discouraged them from initiating more intensive support.

7.4.2 Lone parents’ experiences

Lone parents, too, described receiving different levels of contact. Some had had one or more telephone calls or a letter asking how they were getting on and encouraging them to get in touch if they encountered problems, which they had appreciated. One man was ‘really chuffed’ to have received a card congratulating him and wishing him luck. Others had not had any contact, and although some had managed perfectly well without it, others would have liked it and saw it as a gap in the service.

‘I didn’t hear anything actually…but I would have liked them to phone up, you know, “how are you getting with your job”?… to show they were interested in people going to work…”

(Lone parent: beginning to think about work)
There was a perception among advisers that few lone parents make contact once in work, apart from where there are financial difficulties. They seemed largely to interpret this as meaning that clients do not otherwise encounter significant problems. In fact, however, none of the lone parents in the study sample who had run into difficulties in work had made contact with their adviser. The availability of the adviser for in-work support apart from help relating to benefits seemed to be remote from their minds: they recurrently said that they ‘hadn’t thought’ about approaching the adviser. Indeed, one lone parent said emphatically in the research interview that she would talk to her adviser if she ran into problems, but had not actually thought to approach her even though her employer was threatening to change her hours in a way that she would not be able to accommodate.

A number of issues appeared to underpin this. When questioned further, lone parents sometimes felt that there was nothing the adviser would be able to do in confronting an employer because it was a situation ‘beyond (the adviser’s) control’. They also felt that it would not be appropriate to call on outside help and that this was a problem they needed to deal with themselves. There was also a recurrent view that it was not part of the adviser’s job to provide in-work support beyond help with benefits, and that lone parents’ experiences in work were simply beyond the scope of the programme. The fact that the difficulties they encountered were not always directly related to their lone parenthood sometimes contributed to this view.

‘I hadn’t really thought about it… I don’t know if they would be able to see me now anyway, you need to be on Income Support I think, so I didn’t think about it… I don’t think he’d be able to do anything anyway.’
(Lone parent: beginning to think about work)

‘I’d been in the job five months so I didn’t see any point in getting in touch with them after five months to say, look I’m having problems with this job, can you sort it out, because that would be putting pressure on them… If you’ve gone into the job, I think you have to get yourself out of it.’
(Lone parent: close to work)

Lone parents seemed generally not to have been given a full, clear and explicit explanation from advisers as to precisely what in-work support they would be able to offer. The intensity of support provided by the adviser and the quality of the relationship that had developed seemed not to make a difference. A sense of the adviser’s role being limited to the immediate move into work was described by lone parents who had experienced more limited support focused particularly on the final stages of job search or who had not had any contact once they had moved into work. In cases where the adviser was not thought to have been personally supportive, this also seemed to contribute. However, lone parents who had had much more intensive and holistic help from an adviser whom they described in very positive terms had also not thought to make contact when things had subsequently gone wrong.
Where this was discussed in group discussions, advisers seemed generally to be surprised that lone parents might not always initiate contact. There was a view that lone parents might feel they had ‘let the adviser down’ by not being able to manage work, and that they might not feel able to return if they had not accepted advice about the type of work taken.

To conclude this chapter, then, lone parents’ experiences in work are very mixed. Although some were able to sustain work for over six months, the pattern of unsustained work that had characterised experiences before their contact with the programme remained for others. Help with the financial transition to work was seen as a crucial aspect of the adviser role by both lone parents and advisers themselves, but the factors that threaten sustained employment are wider than financial issues alone. Lone parents seem to have very limited expectations of in-work support beyond benefit transitions, and this seems generally not to be addressed explicitly and fully by advisers in their contact with lone parents.
Chapter 4 highlighted the different ways in which access to resources such as the Labour Market System (LMS) and information about childcare was provided and organised. It also identified different perceptions of the quality of local provision in relation to childcare, education and other services. This chapter discusses other aspects of the operating environment, focusing on how they supported the adviser role in Phase One. It explores management and team structures; the role of operating targets; caseloads and case management; marketing, and views about the location of adviser teams. The chapter concludes by drawing out the impact of changes in the operating environment for the practice of advisers.

Advisers in Phase One worked in teams and were managed by a dedicated lone parent adviser manager. There was a high level of consistency in personal advisers’ appraisal of the management and team structure. On the whole, the views expressed were positive, although there were some organisational aspects which had led to some frustration. During the discussions personal advisers identified a range of features which were both valued and felt to have supported them in their role and in the delivery of New Deal for Lone Parents.

Working in a team environment was also seen to support flexibility in managing fluctuations in individual caseloads. It meant that advisers could share or swap cases when other team members were particularly busy or for some reason absent from the office.
In some areas the team was split over two or more sites and this meant that some advisers had, at least initially, been the only lone parent adviser operating from their location, with a manager based elsewhere. Establishing a sense of team-work in these circumstances had called for careful thought and initially in Phase One some advisers had felt somewhat isolated, but there was generally a strong sense of team membership.

There had also been some development of specialist roles, with individual advisers leading on areas of practice such as organising training, working with the most job-ready clients or networking with providers and other local organisations. In one area some advisers had focused on marketing the New Deal for Lone Parents to lone parents. Opinion was divided about the value of specialist roles. Although they were seen as helpful for building up expertise in particular areas and enhancing the resources available to the team as a whole, they seemed sometimes to create tensions within the team, and there was generally a strong commitment to team-based practice.

8.1.2 Autonomy and discretion

Personal advisers generally felt that they had been given a high level of autonomy and discretion by managers. They felt this had been very helpful in allowing them to develop adviser practice, to experiment and to try new initiatives, and this was felt to have been in keeping with the prototype status of the service and the fact that the New Deal for Lone Parents was the first of its kind. The absence of formal procedures was seen to result in an ‘unusual way of working’ but one that was seen as ‘liberating’ and highly valued.

‘…we could just do what we wanted because nobody had ever done it before, so it was just - you just had to think of things to do because there weren’t any format to follow…if you had a client who wanted to do something there probably wasn’t anything in existence and you had to try and find it.’

(Personal adviser)

It was felt to have facilitated the development of working styles which were responsive to the needs of individual clients and meant that advisers had had freedom to develop networks with local providers and other organisations, and to experiment with different marketing initiatives (see further below).

8.1.3 Support from manager

There was widespread feeling that having a manager who was dedicated to New Deal for Lone Parents provided important support to the adviser role in the prototype phase. This was particularly the case when managers were perceived to have had a clear understanding of the needs of the client group and the demands of the personal advisory role. In the main, a supportive manager was seen to be one who ‘trusted’ the team to use their own initiative and seemed to share the personal adviser’s own understanding of the role.
Similarly, the fact that advisers were dedicated to the New Deal for Lone Parents was also seen to be an important feature of the management structure, particularly for those who were working within Jobcentres and when other New Deal programmes were being delivered. This ring-fenced status supported personal advisers in their desire to focus their attention on New Deal Lone Parents and reduced the anxiety that they would be ‘dragged off’ to work on other projects. Similarly, having a separate budget to the rest of the office was also welcomed as it was felt to reduce the potential for conflict with other New Deal programmes in the office.

The link to policy was understood to be a unique and generally helpful feature of the pilot phase of the programme. The opportunity to make suggestions and recommendations to project management was particularly welcomed. However, there was sometimes frustration where personal advisers felt that their suggestions had not been fully utilised. There was also some difference in opinion about the effectiveness of information flows between project management and personal adviser teams. While some felt that the link with policy increased the speed with which information was shared between teams, others felt that more feedback from project management would have been useful.

The value of collecting detailed management data to keep project management informed about the progress of the programme was also clearly recognised. There was, however, sometimes a feeling that this had created extra demands in terms of time and effort, particularly when personal advisers felt that they did not have a clear idea of the way in which this data was being used.

A final feature of the unusually close relations with project management was felt to be the way in which prototypes had been encouraged to be accessible to media interest. Although this had contributed to the perceived status of the programme and their role, advisers had sometimes felt this had intruded on their time and would have welcomed more support, direction and training in dealing with the media.

Not all personal advisers who continued into Phase Three experienced significant changes in terms of management structure. Some continued to work in a team environment under the same adviser manager. Here, it was felt that the key organisational features which had supported delivery in Phase One - team working and having a dedicated manager - had carried through to Phase Three.
Other personal advisers had undergone more significant changes in line management; some were now distanced managed or working under managers with wider responsibilities in the Jobcentre or for other New Deals. There were also changes in working arrangements, with some personal advisers now working singly from Jobcentres rather than in teams. Views about the effect of these changes on delivery of the programme varied. While some personal advisers appeared comfortable with the changes in management structure, others expressed some reservations about particular aspects of that change – although it is important to note that the strength of feeling on these issues varied considerably both between areas and between personal advisers.

Three main issues emerged. First, there was sometimes concern that line managers with responsibilities for other New Deals did not always fully understand the specific needs of lone parents, the voluntary nature of programme and the implications of this for example for interview length and the amount of work that might be required with some clients. There was a sense that this conflicted with the priority managers placed on targets (discussed further below). Second, there was a sense that the New Deal for Lone Parents has to compete with other New Deal programmes for managers’ attention. Its status within Jobcentres was felt to be low, and this was sometimes linked to the voluntary nature of the programme and its contribution to APA targets. The third concern was that the loss of a dedicated manager to whom the programme was a priority might threaten the ring-fenced nature of advisers’ own posts.

The fact that some personal advisers were now working singly within Jobcentres was also a source of some concern, as this was seen to have reduced the opportunity for sharing expertise and good practice. These changes in working arrangements had usually been manifested in a sense of increasing isolation, but in some more exceptional cases advisers working alone had also handled what they saw as unusually high caseloads, and this was felt to have had implications for their delivery of the programme (see section 7.6).

In Phase One, formal targets had not been set for the prototype teams. However, some had set their own more informal targets, and there had been an awareness of policy interest in, for example, the numbers of clients caseloaded or achieving particular outcomes. There had also been a sense of competition between prototypes. The absence of formal targets in Phase One had generally been welcomed and seen as in keeping with the voluntary and experimental nature of the pilot.
Across the group as a whole, however, there was a general agreement that formal employment targets would have been inappropriate for Phase One of the project. Two main viewpoints underpinned this attitude:

• a belief that too little was known about the client group and effectiveness of the programme to set specific targets on employment levels or other aspects of the programme;

• a sense that formal targets on employment did not sit comfortably with the voluntary nature of the programme.

The absence of formal targets on employment in Phase One was also seen to support the delivery of New Deal for Lone Parents in two particular ways. First, it was perceived to support more flexible and responsive ways of working with lone parents. Without the constraints of employment targets, some personal advisers felt more supported in working at the pace they felt the client required, providing more intensive and long term support for moves into or towards employment. Whilst employment was recognised as the ultimate objective, some personal advisers thus felt that the absence of targets had supported their goal of increasing employability, even if it was recognised that employment may not be achieved during the lifetime of the pilot.

‘I think the advantage that we had was that we weren’t target driven… It gave us the opportunity to sit down with clients and allow their fears to come out… If you were in an interview for an hour or two hours it didn’t matter. You could give that person your whole attention for that timescale.’

(personal adviser)

‘If you’d got targets and you knew you had to get X amount in per week I’m not sure we would have been as able to help people, like Sarah (Vignette 3) where she’s got so many hang ups…So I do feel that (not having targets) was a very good thing for us.’

(personal adviser)

Secondly, the lack of formal targets was also perceived to have supported personal advisers in spending time liaising with outside organisations and providers. This was felt to be particularly important during early stages of the pilot.

There was also a view, however, that targets might have been helpful towards the end of Phase One to give a clearer sense of direction, to clarify the expected roles and priorities of advisers, and to provide a benchmark against which individual or team performance could be measured. This may be an indication that advisers felt the need for more guidance and direction in exercising the wide discretion and autonomy they were given by managers.
The transition into Phase Three brought with it the introduction of formal targets, particularly on Employment Service job placings. However, there was some variation between the areas in the way these targets had been organised. Whilst some personal advisers had been set individual targets, others worked towards team-wide targets. In general, those who had continued into Phase Three recognised the implicit benefits of targets in helping them to gain a clear picture of the requirements of their role and provide some measure of their personal effectiveness. Whilst the need for some sort of target measure was recognised, however, the appropriateness of using Employment Service placings as the main measure was questioned by some personal advisers. Two particular concerns emerged.

Firstly, there was sometimes a view that an emphasis upon job placings was inappropriate for a client group who were not always immediately ready for work. It was felt that a more appropriate measure of advisers’ performance would take into account intermediate goals.

‘To have targets just on placings is a bit silly, because lone parents are not all job-ready…they need support to get to be job-ready so, you know, you may not get a placing on that person for twelve months.’

(personal adviser)

Secondly, there was a general consensus that only having targets on Employment Service placings does not place a sufficient value on other work, such as helping clients who move into non-Employment Service vacancies and providing in-work support. Whilst these concerns were commonly voiced, there were differences in the extent to which advisers felt targets had had an impact upon the delivery of the programme. These are discussed in the final section of this chapter, which looks more broadly at how delivery of the service was felt by advisers to have changed over time.

The method of arranging interviews followed a similar pattern across the prototype areas. Lone parents’ first contact was with a personal adviser who would then book initial interview times with either themselves or their colleagues. On the whole, lone parents were allocated to individual personal advisers, either by geographical areas, or in some offices to the personal adviser who had the most capacity to take on new cases at that time. In all pilot areas, advisers managed their own diaries.

In the main, these arrangements were felt to have worked well. Dealing with lone parent’s enquiries directly was generally felt to be useful as it provided an opportunity to gain some background information on potential clients, to reassure those that were more hesitant that the programme could be of some help to them and to begin to build a rapport with the client. Personal advisers felt that managing their own diaries had afforded them some flexibility in scheduling interviews.
These arrangements have changed slightly in Phase Three\(^{14}\). At the point of fieldwork, initial interviews were being administered by a regional administration teams whom lone parents contacted via a freephone number. Initial interviews were then booked by the administrative team to a personal adviser in a Jobcentre local to the lone parent and a list of times and dates of new interviews sent through to the relevant personal advisers.

Personal advisers working in Phase Three saw both advantages and disadvantages to these new arrangements. The new arrangements were perceived to release more time for advisers to focus upon interviews and their active caseloads. However, problems with double bookings and poor communication had led to some frustrations. There was also some regret that some of the opportunities to gather background information and begin to build a relationship had been lost.

8.3.2 Caseloads and caseloading

Personal advisers reported that they generally caseloaded all lone parents who expressed an interest in participating further with the programme and felt this was in keeping with the voluntary status of the programme.

Caseloads were said to have fluctuated considerably in Phase One, partly as the pilot progressed and partly depending on the time of year or the impact of local marketing activities. In general, uptake was perceived to be higher outside the school holidays and particularly at the beginning of the new school year. This variability was sometimes felt to have caused problems planning workloads, particularly when caseloads were perceived to have become large.

8.3.3 Case management: appointment setting

Advisers generally did not set another appointment at the end of the first interview. They talked about doing so in two circumstances: if the client was highly motivated and keen to move forward quickly, or if a client seemed very unconfident and would need the support of regular contact. There seemed to be an expectation that the adviser would be responsible for initiating contact if they were seeking information or taking other action on the client’s behalf, but otherwise some preference for clients reinitiating contact. This was seen as appropriate if the client was expected to undertake some action in the interim, or to consider how they would like to proceed. It was also used by some advisers as a way of testing a client’s commitment or motivation towards work, particularly as workloads had grown. Advisers said that they would send a note or telephone the client if they had not heard from them for some time, but again acknowledged that this happened less if they were busy.

From the accounts of lone parents and the language used by some advisers, it sometimes seemed as if there might be some lack of clarity as to whose responsibility it would be to reinitiate contact. This may help to explain the experiences of some lone parents who had expected but not received further contact from their adviser.

\(^{14}\) Because all the lone parents interviewed first became involved in Phase One, it was not possible to ascertain clients’ views of these new arrangements.
Some clients had felt happy to initiate contact with their adviser themselves but others had not, although they would have liked more contact. A number of explanations for this emerged:

- limited motivation or ambivalence on the part of the lone parent towards the idea of work: where lone parents felt they might have responded positively if they had been contacted by the adviser, but were not sufficiently motivated to initiate contact themselves;

- lack of confidence that further contact would result in any helpful outcomes: where the first interview had failed to address an issue seen by the lone parent as a significant stumbling block (such as a negative back to work calculation, or no information about childcare for disabled children)

  ‘He did give me his number and he did tell me if at any time I wanted to discuss any changes I should call him, but I haven’t called him because I just don’t see any way out of my situation.’

  (Lone parent: motivated to work but personal circumstantial barriers)

- not being aware that advisers would be receptive to contact from the lone parent – for example where a client felt the adviser had made it clear they would initiate contact and had not said that the client also could. This could be a barrier where clients were anxious and unconfident about dealing with ‘officials’;

- where the client knew that the adviser they saw had moved on, or that the service had been relocated to a Jobcentre – again, this was sufficient to deter the more unconfident clients;

- where clients were not aware that the type of help they now needed was available through the service (such as training or help with childcare);

- where the client felt it was the responsibility of the adviser to maintain contact: this arose particularly where lone parents were ambivalent about work and had responded to the invitation letter at least in part because they felt there was an element of compulsion. Lone parents seemed sometimes to be testing the motivation and commitment of advisers by waiting for the adviser to re-establish contact – an approach that, as noted above, was sometimes reciprocated by advisers themselves.

Although flexibility about appointment setting was unproblematic for some lone parents, and was seen by both advisers and lone parents as appropriate to the voluntary nature of the programme, it may need to be supported by other strategies in these types of cases.

8.3.4 Case management: prioritising cases

Advisers generally said that they did not actively prioritise between cases, except where it was clear that rapid action was called for (for example if a client was about to move into work). However, three particular strategies for managing caseloads did emerge, and were employed more at least by some advisers as caseloads rose and in Phase Three.
First, advisers described encouraging lone parents to take responsibility for action. Although this was largely done where the adviser felt the lone parent was able to take action alone, with support from the adviser, it was also used where there was some doubt about the client’s commitment to moving towards work and was sometimes, as Chapter 5 explored, as a test of commitment. Second, advisers would place the onus on clients to initiate contact – again, sometimes used where there was doubt that the client would make contact again.

Third, some advisers described ‘housekeeping’ strategies for dealing with cases which had been on their caseloads for some time with no contact with the client. They would write, either once and more often, and would remove the case from the caseload if they had no response – some telling the client they were doing so and others not. Although it was said that clients were often not in contact because they were no longer thinking about working, or had moved on without the service, there seemed to be some discomfort with pruning caseloads in this way. Other advisers, however, kept such cases on their caseloads, and would periodically write or telephone to remind the client of their availability. One adviser had passed dormant cases to a new adviser who had not yet built up a full caseload, and found that in some cases the client’s contact with the service had resumed.

These different approaches may help to explain the experience of lone parents who had not had follow-up contact from their adviser when this had been expected.

Marketing the programme to lone parents was something that personal advisers in all prototype areas reported being involved in. However, the level and type of activities varied, as did perceptions of their effectiveness. One particular pilot area reported focusing a considerable amount of effort on marketing activities, reflecting the priority their manager had placed on this.

Initially, pilot projects were dependent upon the initial invitation letter to raise interest among lone parents. There were mixed views about the content and effectiveness of the letter and some teams had modified the wording, personalised it by having it signed by an individual adviser or sent in a hand-written white envelope or, in one area, sent it with a hypothetical better off calculation.
As the programme progressed, the initial mail-outs were increasingly supported by a range of marketing events. For example, some personal advisers talked of organising roadshows in local shopping centres, coffee mornings or giving talks to community groups. In general, there was a feeling that events that were smaller in scale had been more successful in raising interest, as this afforded the opportunity for advisers to talk to lone parents in more depth. Providing childcare or entertainment for children was also found to be a successful way of attracting lone parents to events. One pilot, for example, raised interest by organising a fun day, where parents could find out information about the programme, whilst their children were kept amused by entertainers.15

Because teams had had access to information about who the letter had been sent to, they were able to target marketing activity to particular localities or to individual lone parents who had not responded to the letter, and this was perceived as a key factor in the effectiveness of marketing activity in Phase One. This targeted marketing encompassed a range of different activities from organising reminder letter mailshots to personally inviting lone parents (including those who had so far not responded) to find out more about the programme at specific events. In one area, door-to-door marketing was targeted at those who had not responded to the letter, and this was felt by advisers to be one of the most effective means of attracting interest from clients.

Marketing activity had continued in Phase Three but advisers generally felt it had less emphasis – partly because they no longer had access to information about the mail-outs of invitation letters and partly because of rising caseloads and perceived changes in management priorities. There were mixed views among advisers about the appropriateness of Benefits Agency Offices and Jobcentres as locations for delivering the service. Benefits Offices were felt to have an immediate resonance to lone parents because of the administration of Income Support. However, there was also a view that it might raise concerns that a lone parent’s benefits might be affected by the decision to participate, or not participate, in the service. Jobcentres were therefore sometimes seen as preferable, both for this reason and because of smoother access to LMS and other Employment Service resources. Among clients the manner and perceived attitudes of staff seemed to be more important than locations. However, the Jobcentre was seen as an off-putting environment by some, and in more extreme cases where clients were particularly unconfident, an environment they could not consider entering.

To conclude this chapter, this section explores the way in which the delivery of the New Deal for Lone Parents has changed, reflecting changes in the operating environment as well as other influences.

8.5 Locations
There were mixed views among advisers about the appropriateness of Benefits Agency Offices and Jobcentres as locations for delivering the service. Benefits Offices were felt to have an immediate resonance to lone parents because of the administration of Income Support. However, there was also a view that it might raise concerns that a lone parent’s benefits might be affected by the decision to participate, or not participate, in the service. Jobcentres were therefore sometimes seen as preferable, both for this reason and because of smoother access to LMS and other Employment Service resources. Among clients the manner and perceived attitudes of staff seemed to be more important than locations. However, the Jobcentre was seen as an off-putting environment by some, and in more extreme cases where clients were particularly unconfident, an environment they could not consider entering.

To conclude this chapter, this section explores the way in which the delivery of the New Deal for Lone Parents has changed, reflecting changes in the operating environment as well as other influences.

15 The very limited extent of experience of these initiatives among lone parents in the study sample means that it is not possible to comment on how they were perceived by clients.
First, although it should be emphasised that there was much diversity in advisers’ views, the environmental change implicit in the Employment Service’s responsibility for the national New Deal for Lone Parents programme was perceived by some to have impacted on practice. These advisers reported a gradual move towards a more work focused approach, influenced by different team and management structures, the introduction of targets for placings, rising caseloads and access to LMS. Advisers reported more emphasis on getting people into work, more clarity among advisers and to clients that the aim of the programme was work, more responsibility for action being placed on clients, shorter and more structured interviews, and more prioritising of cases which were likely to result in the lone parent moving into work.

It is important to emphasise, however, that there was much diversity in responses to the operating environment of the national programme. Four groups can be identified:

• one set of personal advisers felt there had been little or no change in their practice because they were already providing in Phase One the service they felt was required in Phase Three. They felt broadly comfortable with the introduction of targets which supported them in working in a more work focused way with clients, and targets were seen as achievable and realistic

• the second set of advisers again felt they had not changed their approach, but their styles of working were generally more holistic and client-centred than those in the first group. They felt, however, that the new operating environment had had little or no impact on their approach which they did not feel inhibited their ability to meet targets. Perhaps because of this, targets appeared not to be given a significant emphasis by managers

• a third group felt that the new environment, and particularly the introduction of targets, had led them to change their practices, usually with some regret. They felt less able to work in a holistic way, that they had reduced their involvement with the least job-ready clients, and that they now encouraged clients to take more action for themselves. Within this group there were descriptions of managers being very focused on targets. It was said that some question aspects of advisers’ practice – such as longer interviews and supporting clients who want training – which advisers felt were necessary for some clients to move forward

• the fourth group had so far largely maintained Phase One approaches but felt they were operating somewhat against the direction of management culture, and felt frustrated and uncomfortable as a result.

Changes in the operating environment were not, however, the only influence leading to changes in practice. The second agent of change identified by advisers was the maturity of the programme from a pilot programme to national roll-out. It was said that experimentation had been encouraged in Phase One as advisers tried to find appropriate ways
of tackling barriers, but that there was now a stronger sense of what works. In Phase One advisers had felt they had to take a broad approach in their work and to do as much as possible for clients to ensure good experiences of involvement in the service.

‘I always felt that I ought to be able to do more and offer more and be everything to the lone parent. It felt as if, you know, all the responsibility was on you to, you know, just fulfil all their needs … so I think that our expectations of ourselves as advisers were over-estimated really.’

(personal adviser)

There had also been improvements in some areas in the provision of childcare, education and training – sometimes because advisers had stimulated the development of new services – and changes in the benefit system (such as Lone Parents Benefit Run-on and the Working Families’ Tax Credit), which gave more options in their work with clients.

The third agent of change was the growth of advisers’ own experience in the role. Again, this prompted different sorts of change. Advisers felt they had learnt more efficient and effective ways of working and had sometimes drawn back from offering intensive personal support, using the telephone more for contact instead of encouraging meetings, and reduced to reducing the number of home visits they did. For some, it had led to more ease with a client-led and less directive approach, encouraging clients to make decisions, and more confidence about tackling difficult underlying issues. For others it had led to a clear sense of what works, and more willingness to take a directive approach giving clients a clear steer.

These issues are explored further in the following final chapter, which draws together implications of the findings for the development of the New Deal for Lone Parents and of the personal adviser role.
This final chapter highlights some of the implications of the study findings for the development of the New Deal for Lone Parents and the role of personal advisers within it.

**Diversity of client experiences of the service**

It is inevitable, given the heterogeneity of the lone parent population and the intention to provide a tailored and individual service, that there will be much diversity in clients’ experiences of the New Deal for Lone Parents. However, the differing circumstances of lone parents do not alone explain diversity in their experiences. There were some lone parents who were intensely satisfied with the help they received from the New Deal for Lone Parents and felt that the programme had played a central role in helping them move into or towards work. However, in some instances the support provided did not always match well with lone parents’ own needs, and there seems to be some unevenness in the service provided.

**Diagnostic roles**

Thorough investigation of a client’s needs must be an essential aspect of a personalised and tailored service. Yet what was provided to clients did not always match their needs, and this is an important part of the explanation of why some clients moved forward and others did not. Lone parents described the difficulty they faced in articulating their needs of the programme if they had not worked for some time, felt distant from the labour market in many ways, and knew relatively little about the possible scope of the service. The process of diagnosing needs and negotiating the support a client is to receive involves an interplay between the lone parents’ knowledge of the service, and the service’s knowledge of the lone parent.

Advisers describe different approaches, but it seems that a narrower articulation of the scope of the service and a more focused investigation of client circumstances may lead to some types of need not being identified, and may fail to arm clients with the knowledge they require to make the programme work for them. Although some advisers stress the importance of this aspect of their work, it is possible that others under-estimate its centrality.

**Supporting discretion**

Personal advisers operated with a high level of autonomy in the prototypes. Although there are some indications that a more structured approach may be being taken in some areas in Phase Three, there remains a high level of autonomy. This is likely to have an important function in enabling advisers to provide a client-centred service. However, given indications of unevenness in the service provided, it raises questions about how discretion can be supported.
Advisers valued the opportunities provided by the prototypes for team work and saw this as important in the dissemination of good practice. The focus seemed to be on sharing information within, rather than between prototype teams – understandably given the sense of informal competition between teams – but wider dissemination is likely to play an important role in shaping good practice and supporting discretion. Although training was not a focus of the study, the general view among advisers seemed to be that the most useful learning was acquired in the field, and this has implications for the role of continued training for advisers.

Advisers generally described managers providing support at a distance. They welcomed the priority given to the programme by dedicated managers, but valued the space they were given to develop roles, approaches and relationships with other organisations. There were some concerns about the greater presence of managers in Phase Three particularly where it was felt they may not have detailed knowledge of the client group or may not see the programme as having a high priority. The integration of the programme within mainstream Jobcentre business was viewed with some concern. It may be that the ideal management model lies somewhere between these two manifestations, and that effective managers can support advisers in balancing discretion and fairness.

Finally, the high level of discretion may also need to be supported by greater transparency, so that clients have a clearer idea of the scope of the service and the range of possible interventions, and by continued monitoring of service standards.

Lone parents’ needs of the service are very diverse and there are likely to be many who require very practical and focused help such as better off calculations and job matching. But there are others who will require an intensive and holistic package of support if they are to move towards and into work. Where this is provided, the programme has the potential to make a very significant impact, breaking patterns of failure by work and perhaps even changing the trajectory of a lone parent’s life.

Distinguishing between cases where a limited engagement will be highly effective and those that require more intensive support is an essential element of the diagnostic role of advisers. There is clearly a potential for duplication of effort, of inefficient usage of advisers’ time, and for clients becoming over-dependent on the programme. Advisers are probably also right to be concerned that some clients’ needs extend beyond the boundaries of their own professional competencies.
It may be that greater use of referral to outside agencies would enable advisers to balance the needs of those who require focused support and those with more intensive needs. The success of such a strategy is clearly dependent on the quality of provision, both within the Employment Service and externally. However, referrals to outside agencies were generally experienced positively by lone parents in the study sample.

The breadth and depth of needs of some clients also raises questions about the role of prioritising and targeting. There are some indications that this is already happening at an informal level, where advisers test a client’s commitment and drive by putting the onus on them to take action or initiate contact, and where managers are perceived to question some aspects of the way in which advisers operate. This suggests that there may be a need for greater clarity about the scope of the adviser role in different types of cases, particularly those where more intensive support is likely to be required. If the adviser role is to be defined it will need to be communicated sensitively to lone parents – particularly in the context of a voluntary programme. If not, this will need to be communicated to advisers, who are beginning to pick up mixed messages about the priority to be given to clients with more extensive needs of the service. Targets on intermediate outcomes as well as on placings would also help to support advisers’ work with clients for whom the journey to work will be a long one.

Parenting and childcare

A significant part of the explanations for why some lone parents move forward and others do not is their views about their parenting role and childcare. From the accounts of lone parents, the focus of advisers’ attention seems to be on the availability of and financial support for funding, rather than on attitudinal barriers such as the preference for being the sole carer or for informal care as the next best thing.  

This is arguably entirely appropriate. Lone parents’ views are consistent with those of significant proportions of the general population, and likely to reflect underlying cultural views about the role of childcare and of parenting. Changing these views is likely to require long term approaches tackling provision, quality and regulation of the order of the National Childcare Strategy. However, an issue which may be able to be addressed by the New Deal for Lone Parents is the need for advice and guidance around making decisions about childcare. Whilst the provision of financial assistance for informal childcare costs currently falls outside of the scope of New Deal for Lone Parents, it is important to recognise the demand for such provision amongst lone parents.

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16 See also Finch et al. *A Further Look at the Evaluation of NDLP Phase One Data: Focus on Childcare* (published 2000)
Many of the lone parents in the study sample described being failed by work before their participation, and not all found that this pattern was broken when they subsequently returned to work. Although advisers stress the importance of sustainable work as a goal, the focus of in-work support seems to be on financial issues. Clients, too, seem not to expect support beyond transitions within the benefit system.

This suggests there is a need for more clarity about the aims and scope of the programme with regard to in-work support – both to advisers and to lone parents. This is particularly so given that advisers perceive some potential for conflict between sustainable work and placings targets. If in-work support is to be an important part of the programme, there will need to be a greater focus on interventions which prepare lone parents for the world of work and for a higher level of financial independence, and perhaps also on employee advocacy.

Finally, there are some indications in the study findings that lone fathers may have rather different needs of the service from lone mothers, and different relationships with advisers. There are also suggestions that external provision for people who are further from the labour market (such as pre-vocational and work preparation courses) is less suitable for men. The New Deal for Lone Parents may need to stimulate more provision in this area.
This appendix supplements the information given in Chapter 1 of the report. Appendix B contains copies of fieldwork documents.

**Research design**

The research used a combination of individual interviews and group discussions. In-depth interviews were used with lone parents, to ensure that the full history of their experiences and views about work, as well as their involvement in the programme, could be explored. Group discussions were used with personal advisers because they provide a forum for an exchange of views and experiences, and for discussion of differences that arise within the group. Since it was not possible to undertake ‘matched’ interviews with personal advisers who worked with the lone parents interviewed (for reasons discussed in section 1.3) it was decided that group discussions should be used for more general discussion of approaches and interventions, and to allow advisers to discuss their reactions and approaches to the three ‘vignette’ cases.

**Sample design and selection**

The sample of lone parents was selected from the sample of participants in the survey which formed part of the evaluation of Phase One of the New Deal for Lone Parents, undertaken by the National Centre. The core survey sample was designed to be a random sample of lone parents in receipt of Income Support who had received a letter inviting them to participate in the programme. The survey also included a random sample of participants in the programme, to boost the number of participants covered.

The sample for this study was selected from these survey samples, according to a specification drawn up by the research team. Each person on the sample list was sent a letter explaining the nature and purpose of the study, and giving them a period of time within which they could opt out of the study if they wished to do so.

Screening and recruitment was then carried out by National Centre interviewers. They were issued with quotas, and a short screening questionnaire was used to check respondent details, identify changes since the survey was undertaken, and ascertain whether they met quota requirements.
Quotas were set for:

- Gender;
- Age;
- Ethnicity;
- Target participants & non-target participants;
- Involvement in New Deal for Lone Parents:
  - Current participants on NDLP (Phase Three);
  - Past participants - both those who last had contact before and after November ’98;
- Respondents’ current activity:
  - Those currently in work;
  - Those who have been in work some point after contact with NDLP but no longer in work;
  - Those in training/education since NDLP;
  - Those who have not been in work or training education since NDLP.

Once recruited, respondents were left a letter giving the time and date of the interview and reassurance about the purpose of the study and about confidentiality. Where a respondent was not recruited, they were also left a letter thanking them for their help.

The sample of personal advisers was provided by the DSS. They were sent a letter, which was followed up by a telephone call by a member of the research team to explain the purpose of the research and invite participation. Again, a letter was left confirming details of the group venue.

Fieldwork with lone parents was carried out in August 1999 and with personal advisers in November 1999. All interviews and group discussions were carried out by members of the National Centre research team using topic guides designed to allow interviews and groups to be free-ranging and exploratory in nature.

All lone parents who took part in an interview were given £15 in recognition of their time for taking part in the research. This helps to encourage participation and discourage broken appointments.

Interviews and group discussions were tape recorded in stereo and transcribed by experienced transcribers. Stereo equipment facilitated clear and accurate transcription and meant that transcribers could identify and attribute each participant’s contribution in the group discussions. This was important for making comparisons in the approaches of individual advisers.
The verbatim transcripts were analysed using ‘Framework’, an analytic tool developed by the National Centre. This was originally a manual process, involving the summarising of data on to A3 charts under thematic headings, with a row representing each respondent. The process has recently been computerised using Excel. This has considerably enhanced the ease of inputting data, the ability to reorganise the material, and the ease of reading completing charts. The charting frameworks were generated by the research team based on familiarisation with transcripts.

The matrices for both the lone parent interviews and personal adviser groups discussion were developed in Excel. The lone parent interview matrix consisted of charts, each representing one theme. Each chart had around 6–8 columns, which represent sub-themes, and rows representing individual respondents. The lone parent interview charts covered the following topics:

- Background;
- Employment History and orientation to work at point of contact with NDLP;
- Entry onto NDLP;
- Contact and content;
- Personal adviser and lone parent interaction;
- Impact and outcomes of participation on NDLP.

The serial numbers for individual respondents were entered in the first column of each chart, and data summarised in the relevant cell. The appropriate page reference to the transcript was noted against each block of summarised data, to allow researchers to re-examine the material and to extract verbatim quotes. The completed charts were printed on A3 sheets (a total of 10 sheets per chart, each showing four respondents).

Charts for the personal adviser group discussion were developed in a similar way. Chart headings for the personal adviser discussions covered the following areas.

- Background;
- Responses to the vignettes;
- Type of support offered to clients;
- Personal advisers’ approaches;
- Objectives and targets;
- Provision – childcare, training, in-work support;
- Summary.

This method of analysis is highly flexible; allowing headings to be changed or amended as required and rows to be re-ordered within a useful analytic framework. It allows an individual case to be followed through the charts, and comparisons to be made between cases and groups of cases.
• Recruitment questionnaire for lone parents
• Confirmation letters for lone parents
• Topic guide for lone parent interviews
• Approach letters for personal adviser groups discussions
• Topic guide for personal adviser group discussion
• Vignettes
**Code One Only**

6. Have you had contact with a NPL? Personal advice?

**END**

**Code One Only**

6. Have you had contact with a NPL? Personal advice?

**END**

**Code One Only**

6. Have you had contact with a NPL? Personal advice?

**END**
August 1999

Dear

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for the research about the New Deal for Lone Parents. I confirm that the interview will take place as follows:

**date:**……………………………………………………………..

**time:**……………………………………………………………..

**place:**……………………………………………………………..

**name of interviewer:**………………………………………………

The interview will last between 1 hour and 1½ hours, and you will be given £15 in appreciation of your time and help. By taking part, your entitlement to any benefits will not be affected in any way, either now or in the future.

The National Centre for Social Research has been asked to carry out this research on behalf of the Department for Social Security (DSS). However, we would like to emphasise that we are a fully independent social research organisation and **all work we carry out is undertaken in the strictest confidence. No information which could identify you will be passed to anyone else. Taking part in this study will not affect any benefit you may receive, or any dealings you may have with the DSS.**

Interviews will ask about people’s experiences and views of the New Deal and how effective it is in meeting their needs. We hope that you will enjoy taking part in the interview. If you require any further information, please contact me or William O’Connor on 0171 250 1866 or write to us at the above address.

Yours sincerely
1. Current summary

2. Current statement

1. Background

If not in work/training, explore whether looking for work/training at moment

Experiences and experiences of others

What work does this work to do

How would you go about finding a job?

How many work does this work to do?

Nature of work

Description of activity

For each activity...

- Education, training, employment, or work

- Opportunity for employment, training, or work

- Other

Experiences

- Experience of employment, training, or work

- Opportunity for employment, training, or work

- Other

- Current situation

- Other

- Experience of education, training, employment, or work

- Opportunity for education, training, employment, or work

- Other

- Current situation

- Other
• Any other comments
  yy of the proposition they would like to see changed/improved
  how could NDK have helped
  procedure suggestions that should have been
  procedures noted with recommendations to be shared elsewhere
  • Other comments on NDK
  • Conclusion of NDK
   clear of heavy directions
   implementation/functional
   work ethic
   look forward
   job security/choice
   motivation to work
   confidence/feel
   
  • Other career opportunities
  • Other references
  • how they feel about the process
  • how they would handle the job
  • Personal characteristics
Evaluation of New deal for Lone Parents Phase One

As you may already be aware, the DSS has commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (formerly SCPR) to undertake a further study, investigating Phase 1 of the New Deal for Lone Parents. The purpose of this study is to explore the longer-term effects of participation for lone parents and the experiences of Personal Advisers involved in the delivery of Phase 1. The National Centre for Social Research, is an independent social research institute, which undertook earlier research exploring lone parents’ initial experiences of the service. This new study aims to build on that research by drawing more fully on the experiences of Personal Advisers and by talking to lone parents some time after their contact with the programme. A leaflet introducing our organisation is enclosed with this letter.

As part of this evaluation we are organising a series of group discussions with Personal Advisers who were involved in the delivery of Phase 1. We would very much value your contribution and are writing to ask whether you would be willing to take part. ((We understand that you are not now working as an NDLP Personal Adviser but we are still very interested in your views and experiences of this phase of the programme.)) The discussion will focus on the experience of being a Personal Adviser, approaches to different kinds of cases and views about the systems and structures required to support the Personal Adviser Role. The information gathered during the discussions will provide us with a valuable insight into the actual delivery of NDLP at ground level.

We would like to assure you that all information collected during the discussion will be treated as confidential. Nothing will be reported in a way that would allow individual advisers to be identified. The discussion is to be held in ______________. This is taking place:

ON: __________________
AT: __________________
FROM: __________________

FROM: __________________
A buffet lunch will be provided upon arrival at 12 pm and we shall be aiming to start the discussion promptly at 12.30 p.m.

A member of the research team will telephone you during the next week to confirm whether you will be able to attend. If you have any queries in the meantime please do not hesitate to contact us.

We very much hope that you will be able to attend the group discussion and look forward to meeting you on November ________.

Yours sincerely,

Laura Mitchell  
William O’Connor  
Marion Claydon  
Tessa Sanderson  
Jane Lewis  

Research Team
3. APPROACH DIFFERENCES & VARIATIONS

- Types of needs that are present in the process
- How these needs are handled in the process
- How this is done in practice as part of the training

2. OVERVIEW OF CLIENT NEEDS

- What are the needs of the client in Phase I (after the training)
- Which needs are present in Phase I
- Which needs are present in Phase II
- Comparison of needs in Phase I vs. Phase II
- Identification of gaps in needs

1. BACKGROUND

- Initial reminder to focus on phase 1, after checking for any changes

   (For common PA groups)

   - Which changes or differences in the PA are not significant
   - Which changes or differences in the PA are significant
   - Which changes or differences in the PA are important
   - Which changes or differences in the PA are not significant

   (NOTE: ANY CHANGES) Specify source

   - Comparison
   - Downstream benefits
   - Benefits; impact of change
   - Following input from other agencies
   - Consultation

   (NOTE: ADDITIONAL COMMENT) Specify source

   November 1999

   Personal Affairs Discussion Groups
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