MODERNISING SERVICE DELIVERY:
THE LONE PARENT PROTOTYPE

by Andrew Thomas, Vanessa Stone and Daphne Cotton
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SECURITY

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SUMMARY

Introduction

As part of the Government's comprehensive review of welfare provision, the Department of Social Security (DSS) commissioned BMRB to undertake a study of the Lone Parent Prototype. This was an evaluative study to consider how well the Prototype reflected the principles of an Active Modern Service from the perspectives of both customers and staff.

The study was designed to explore attitudes towards new ways of delivering social security benefits for lone parents, focusing on a number of issues which included tele-claiming, integrated services, having a single (named) point of contact, data sharing, case-management, and location of services.

Research methods

The study was qualitative in nature and comprised depth interviews with customers and a series of paired depths and mini group discussions with staff.

The customer sample was structured to reflect a wide range of individuals in terms of their involvement with the Lone Parent Prototype (or not), method of claiming, previous experience of claiming, benefits applied for, place of residence, number of children and age of their youngest child.

The staff sample included people responsible for tele-claiming and processing in Glasgow, as well as those who carried out follow-up and face-to-face interviews in London. Both managers and operational staff were involved in the fieldwork.

In total, 72 individuals took part in the study: 55 customers and 22 staff.

The study was carried out between July and October 1998 in seven areas: the four Prototype sites in London, the two control sites (also in London), and the staff offices (covering two of the Prototype sites and Glasgow).
Experience and views of the Lone Parent Prototype

Overwhelmingly, participants’ views about the Lone Parent Prototype were positive, with non-participants expressing considerable enthusiasm for the Prototype concept. Underpinning these views were six key features:

- easier access to the benefit system,
- increased customer focus and service, with staff being perceived to take a much greater interest in the customer and their benefit application,
- increased customer care, with helpful advice being offered and customers feeling that they were being kept more informed of the progress of their claim,
- a less stressful experience which resulted in reduced customer abuse and aggression, a view corroborated by staff implementing the Prototype,
- a system which was felt to be less open to fraudulent claims, a view that was also held by BA staff, and
- an overall perception that the social security system was becoming much more proactive and customer orientated, the consequence of which was to encourage a more positive view of the DSS and BA.

Tele-claiming was the main method being tested for the Prototype and the following provides a summary of customer and staff reactions:

- simplifies access to the benefit system
- avoids duplicating questions across benefits and only requires individuals to tell their story once,
- reduces the need for customers to travel to one or more offices, and reduces the need to arrange, potentially expensive, child care,
- is perceived to be ‘the way to go’ and in line with other large organisations a view shared by customers and staff,
- demonstrates greater customer focus and offers a faster and more efficient customer service,
- provides for more accurate collection of information with less missing data,
- offers the opportunity to spot some types of fraud as well as inconsistencies in information received,
- in conjunction with a processing role was felt by staff to provide an interesting and satisfying way of working with the public,
- offers a number of potential cost savings in terms of greater accuracy of the information collected at the application stage, reduced administration costs due to increased compliance, and the suggestion that employment-related information at the time of the claim might also lead to cost-savings in terms of a swifter return to the labour market.
There were very few negative views of the tele-interview from those who actually experienced it. Language problems and having insufficient time to reflect on questions were the main problems arising.

Some customers preferred to stick with *postal claiming* simply because that method had been trouble-free in the past. The main worry with postal claiming was the unreliability of the postal service which could cause delays in the processing of their claim.

A few customers preferred *face-to-face interviews* in any situation because they liked the reassurance of seeing the person they were speaking to. They also felt that it helped staff to see the *honesty* of their claim.

Wider aspects of the Lone Parent Prototype were a number of features and potential extensions that were explored with customers.

People preferred an *integrated* service because

- it allowed access to the benefits system through a single point of contact,
- information need only be given once in a single application,
- the process was simpler and quicker

There were some reservations expressed

- in particular around the involvement of the Child Support Agency because of
  - the negative associations most people held about the CSA,
  - the intrusive nature of their questioning,
  - a wish not to discuss painful and sensitive issues when putting in a claim for IS,
  - the need for more time to reflect on the questions and how to answer them,

- integration might slow down the processing of claims

Although there were some exceptions, the prevailing preference was for accessing the benefits system through the DSS/BA and by telephone. Where personal visits were necessary then an appointment system was felt to be essential.

Customers assumed that data would be shared between the agencies with some respondents considering that

- different agencies should only have access to the information they needed,
- respondents should be informed as to what information is being shared between departments

There were few concerns about the confidentiality of the tele-claim process with only a minority of respondents feeling that a password was necessary.
Alternative points of access to the benefits system were explored and included post offices, CAB’s, libraries and supermarkets. The prevailing view was for access through the DSS/BA, although the Job Centre was deemed to be a possibility. Overall, people preferred less, but more efficient ways of applying for benefit with perceived lack of privacy and lack of advice being the key objections.

There was limited enthusiasm for accessing the benefits system via electronic kiosks or the Internet. Reasons were diverse, the key ones being limited knowledge of technology and a perception that personal information could be accessed by others.

Respondents preferred to have their case managed by a single, preferably named, point of contact as this would ensure a ‘personal service’ and, it was thought, a more efficient service. There was a strong desire to deal with as few people as possible. Customers were less concerned about how their applications were processed— it could be one person or a team— but their preference was for a single channel of communication between the agencies involved and themselves.

Respondents could not envisage any circumstances when it might be necessary for external specialists to be brought in to deal with certain aspects of the benefit claim. This was generally thought to be something that could be optional and arranged only with the specific authorisation of the customer.

The study respondents could rarely envisage a role for the private sector in the processing, administration or payment of benefits. Although some people thought that the private sector might make the service more cost-effective and efficient others felt it could be less accountable, pose a security risk, and be more expensive.

Respondents desired a service which was sympathetic to the needs of young children and to other needs such as disabilities but overall did not feel that there needed to be a specific service for lone parents.

**Working on the Lone Parent Prototype — the staff perspective**

Staff working for the LPP thought it was crucial for the Department to ‘modernise’ the service. Although there were aspects of the Prototype that would need to be changed, staff generally viewed the Lone Parent Prototype as a success in that it had added to the Department’s understanding of how best to modernise the service.

Lone Parent Prototype staff were drawn from the BA and the CSA and it was clear that they enjoyed working together. Many positive comments were made about the high morale and good working environment which had been engendered during the training. Staff described a working culture that was more satisfying than previous experiences, particularly for CSA staff.
However, links between the DSS/BA staff and the London Borough of Camden were not as close but following a joint review, steps were put in place to resolve problems arising about communications and duplication of work. The Local Authority had found things easier since having computer access to general DSS information and suggested that extending this link would improve efficiency and greatly enhance the processing of Housing Benefit as part of the Prototype.

Staff seemed to get a great deal of job satisfaction from working on the prototype. The reasons were as follows:

- Their computing skills were enhanced because they were learning to use more advanced software than they had access to in their previous jobs.
- They had greater involvement with customers which they valued, and the efficiency with which claims could be processed pleased them.
- Staff felt more involved in their cases because they saw them from the beginning to the end.

However, there were aspects of the Prototype which were less satisfying for staff. These included:

- It could be hard to plan the working day.
- Asking the same questions over and over again could be monotonous.
- Insufficient preparation and training for certain aspects of the Prototype made some staff very uncomfortable, especially during the initial stages.
- Some of those on higher staff grades felt over-graded for their job and felt considerable frustration over the loss of responsibility and level of decision-making they had on the Prototype.
- Information technology whilst indicating considerable potential was often very problematic in operation.
- Whilst the training provided a clear explanation of the aims of the project they would have liked more time on two aspects of the training: a greater focus on practicalities and information technology.

Aspects that staff thought worth cultivating from the Prototype included:

- Tele-claiming.
- Single point of contact.
- Integrated working.
- The combined claim form.
- Enhanced information technology.
The Lone Parent Prototype was generally considered, by staff and customers alike, to provide an excellent basis from which to develop the delivery of social security benefits.

If the DSS/BA aims to build an inclusive relationship with its customers as part of its transformation into an Active Modern Service there are many successes identified in the Lone Parent Prototype. These include:

- the tele-claim process
- single point of contact
- integrated working between agencies,
- increased opportunities to identify fraud,
- the potential to offer non-benefit advice and information,
- increased customer focus reflected in heightened customer satisfaction and reduced aggressive and abusive calls,
- generally increased staff satisfaction.

Three specific areas for extension were considered to be feasible:

- widening the range of benefits,
- extending the Prototype to a wider range of client groups, specifically people with disabilities and the elderly, and
- developing a more proactive approach to the delivery of or signposting to, non-benefit-related information and advice.
INTRODUCTION

As part of the Government's continuing programme of welfare reform, the Department of Social Security (DSS) has been developing a new approach to the delivery of welfare services. This approach, known as the 'Active Modern Service' (AMS) is intended to reflect a shift in emphasis away from a department that is seen as primarily a 'payer of benefits' towards a simpler, customer-orientated service that provides advice and guidance, help with job-seeking, and financial support.

The AMS approach goes hand in hand with other government initiatives that aim to engender a culture shift from passive customer processing to one of proactivity whereby customers are helped and enabled to find a productive destination following a period of unemployment.

AMS has required the development of a series of service delivery design features. These include:
- case management
- better information
- integrated working
- information sharing
- better support for staff

These have been encapsulated into a group of prototypes to test out alternative modern methods of delivering social security services. One of these is for lone parents and includes joint working between the Benefits Agency (BA), the Child Support Agency (CSA) and one Local Authority (LA), the London Borough of Camden.

1.1 Background

The Lone Parent Prototype (LPP) was set up in the Spring of 1998 to test over a time-limited period a variety of approaches that could be adopted in an Active Modern Service.

Customers initially had their tele-claim taken over the telephone by staff based in Glasgow Benefit Centre (GBC referred to as 'Glasgow' hereafter). The information collected was entered onto the computer and a print-out of the claim form was sent to the customer. The form combined the information needed for processing four benefits (integrated services): Income Support, Child Support, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. All the participants were asked to attend for a follow-up interview at a local BA office a few days later, at which point their form was to be signed as correct and any evidence supplied to support their claim.
The LPP operated in four sites in London which were linked to the processing centre in Glasgow. All the participants were lone parents living in four catchment areas. However, all the processing of claims was carried out by the same staff responsible for tele-claiming at Glasgow (case-management). Customers were encouraged to contact a named member of the LPP staff should they have any enquiries (single point of contact).

The Department of Social Security commissioned BMRB Qualitative, a division of BMRB International to consider how well the Lone Parent Prototype reflects the principles of an Active Modern Service from the perspectives of both customers and staff. Views were sought about the efficiency and acceptability of the initiative, barriers identified and solutions explored.

1.2 Aims of the research
- To evaluate the Lone Parent Prototype from the perspectives of customers and staff
- To consider the principles of the Lone Parent Prototype and its broader application in the delivery of social security services

1.3 Methods
The research was wholly qualitative in approach because evaluation of the Prototype required detailed information of personal experiences, motivations and views. Qualitative methods allow an in-depth exploration of complex issues.

Depth interviews were considered appropriate for this study because of the personal nature of some of the information sought - the lone parent’s individual experiences and views - and also because of the practical difficulties of assembling lone parents with diverse childcare needs.

Paired depths and discussion groups were considered to be more appropriate for the staff interviews. Paired depths allow for a less public forum for raising issues, and the group discussions are useful for canvassing the views of a larger number of staff and getting participants to focus on the key issues as insightfully as possible.

1.3.1 Customers
55 depth interviews were conducted with customers in their own homes. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and a half and followed a topic guide, or aide memoire (reprinted in the Appendix). The topic guide helped keep the interviews focused on the aims of the research while at the same time allowing participants to raise issues of importance to them.

All the interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to allow for detailed analysis.

The fieldwork was carried out between July and October 1998.

Further details of the research methodology may be found in the Appendix.
Sample profile

The sample was structured to include participants with a variety of experiences and backgrounds. The sample included the following:

- customers who had agreed to participate in the Lone Parent Prototype,
- non-participants – to explore why they did not take part, and
- customers in two of the control sites where the LPP did not operate.

Selection criteria included

- methods of accessing the Lone Parent Prototype – tele-claim, postal, face-to-face
- a range of benefits,
- new or repeat claims
- age of youngest child, and
- sex

See Table 1 in the Appendix

132 Staff

22 members of staff who were working on the Lone Parent Prototype were included in the study. Staff were interviewed either in 5 paired depths (two staff members) or in mini-group discussions (six staff in each). A total of 5 paired depths and 2 mini-groups were conducted.

The staff fieldwork was held in both Glasgow and London during October 1998 in DSS offices. The paired depths lasted up to two hours each and the group discussions about three hours.

A topic guide was used to keep the discussion focused on the aims of the study but allowing staff to raise issues of importance to them. A copy of the staff topic guide may be found in the Appendix.

The interviews and group discussions with staff were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim to allow for detailed analysis.

Sample profile

Staff involved in the Prototype were drawn from the Benefits Agency and the Child Support Agency and both were represented in the research. An officer from the Local Authority was also included.

The staff sample comprised a mix of people responsible for taking tele-claims and processing in Glasgow and those responsible for follow-up and personal interviews in the London offices.
2 EXPERIENCES OF THE PROTOTYPE AND VIEWS ON THE DIFFERENT METHODS OF CLAIMING BENEFITS

2.1 Previous claiming experience

Respondents generally had an extremely negative view of the whole benefit claiming system. For many this was a result of previous claiming experience but for new claimants it was through hearsay. There were some very graphic descriptions of the Benefits Agency offices as unsavoury places full of 'wimps, down-and-outs and spongers', and certainly not a fit place for children. Some respondents acknowledged that their local BA offices had improved in recent years.

Previous claimants reported that staff were often unhelpful, abrupt and even rude. They were made to feel degraded and undeserving, some said they felt guilty claiming benefits even though it was not their fault and they had no choice. At the Benefit Office they had to endure very long waiting times or being passed from one person to another and having to repeat their personal details several times. For some lone parents, who had been recently separated or who had a very difficult and perhaps violent relationship, this could be an upsetting and humiliating experience.

There were many stories of lost application forms as well as documents and claims taking 'forever' to be processed. It was often a frustrating experience because customers were not informed of the progress of their claim and had no way of knowing whether their application was being dealt with or whether it had been lost or mislaid. Respondents were very understanding of the frustrations of both claimants and staff and many believed that it was this frustration which led to the often abusive behaviour which was so prevalent in Benefit offices.

you can go in at 9 o'clock in the morning, because it's a busy day you can still be there until two or three o'clock in the afternoon it wastes everybody's else's time, it gets people rude, it causes an abusive situation, everybody gets ratty and over-emotional and it doesn't help anybody.'

(Tele-claimant, female, IS, HB, CTB, youngest child under 5)

The expectations of people who had put in a recent claim some of whom were brought into the Prototype, were therefore not high.

2.2 Accessing the Prototype

The reception staff at the four Prototype offices were instructed to invite onto the Prototype any lone parent wanting to put in a claim for benefits, including a child support application. They were either given a telephone number for Glasgow or passed over to Prototype staff at the Benefit office. Participating in the Prototype was to remain voluntary, with clients fully aware that they would be taking part in a new system for claiming benefits and that they could decline to participate and put in their claim in the normal way.
Many claimants were not brought into the Prototype initially because reception staff were not identifying them as lone parents either because they were rushed or because lone parents were not identifying themselves as lone parents.

"It depends on the pressure on them. Sometimes if it's a really busy day they are just on autopilot. They should still identify them every time. No excuse they still get missed." (Staff)

Others were sending in the old AI claim forms because they had acquired them from other places such as Job Centres, Local Authorities welfare and refugee agencies. The AI claim form is a 40-page booklet which normally has to be filled in by anyone claiming Income Support. It comes in a pack which also contains claim forms for Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and Child Support Maintenance.

Those who took part in the Prototype were generally aware that teleclaiming was a new way of claiming benefits that was being tried out. They were generally happy to participate because it was sold to them as being a quicker and easier way to claim benefits and ultimately as a more efficient way to have their claim processed. However a considerable number did not realise that they had a choice.

"I didn't know I had a choice in it. They said 'you are a lone parent and we are starting a new service. It's very new, other people don't know about it so if you get into the wrong section you could have to wait in a queue because you're a lone parent your case is dealt with a lot quicker.'" (Tele-claimant, female, IS CSA youngest child 11-16)

The idea of being able to telephone a claim through from their own home had a very strong appeal particularly to those who had young children and to those who had experience of long waits in the unpleasant environment of their local Benefit Office. One respondent's reported response was "fantastic get it done, do it!" (Tele-claimant, Female, IS HB youngest child under 5)

Another respondent was reported by staff to have

"jumped at the chance and I think the general feeling is why has it taken us this long to offer this kind of service?" (Staff)

2.2.2 Understanding the Prototype

Understanding of the Prototype, beyond the fact that it was concerned with undertaking a claim over the telephone, was fairly limited. The idea of it being an integrated service and that this was innovative, was not generally appreciated. Many claimants thought that Housing Benefit and Income Support claims were processed together anyway because in the past they submitted both application forms to the DSS. Some were only making a claim for Income Support because their Child Support application had already been dealt with and they were already receiving Housing Benefit.
We're duty bound to actually explain it to the customer and we do, but sometimes, even though I've explained it three times in three different ways, the customer still doesn't understand the concept of the Prototype - their question will still be 'when do I get paid? is it going to affect when I'm going to get my money?' I normally say it's quicker (Staff)

The fact that participating in the Prototype was an optional claiming method for all lone parents was not always appreciated. Customer understanding of the Prototype was as follows:

- a quicker system of claiming benefits for lone parents,
- a way of claiming for people who have problems with the English language, and
- an option for people who have problems understanding some of the questions.

This misunderstanding of the Prototype can also be seen in some staff perceptions of customer reactions. For example, there were staff reports that customers were sometimes offended by being offered this service. In other words, they were not stupid and were quite capable of filling out a form themselves.

'I think a lot of people think that I'm intelligent enough to fill out a form. I don't need anyone to come and help me do it... there's a feeling that you're treating them like they are stupid, trying to lead them by the hand through the process' (Staff)

2.2.3 Reasons for not participating in the Prototype

There were very few lone parents who actively declined to participate in the Prototype. The numbers were so small that it proved impossible to provide enough names from which to recruit twelve respondents as originally planned.

Some of the reasons for lone parents not participating in the Prototype were purely administrative. For example, one respondent had participated in a tele-claim and had then withdrawn from the Prototype and was classified as a non-participant, some were asked to participate after having already filled in a written application and declined on that basis. Other respondents were quite sure that they had never been asked to participate.

Reasons given by other non-participants for not wanting to take part included:

- not wanting to take part in something which was new,
- a fear of not being in control of the application process,
- wanting to know in advance what questions were going to be asked and what documents would be required,
- wanting to get advice first on how to present the child support part of the application.
• feeling happier writing down some of the more difficult and personal information, particularly for the CSA application and
• a decision that it was not worthwhile because they were only claiming during the summer holidays.

Experiences of being brought into the Prototype were many and varied. The evidence points to a lot of confusion on the part of lone parents. For those who were directed to the tele-claim method on first enquiring about claiming benefits, these were more likely to be the most straightforward. However, others were brought in at different stages of their application process and they were not always clear what was happening.

Tele-claimants

Those directed to the tele-claim method, either when they presented themselves to their local Benefits Agency office or when they telephoned in for an application form, had two choices - they could call Glasgow directly from the Benefits Office from a special telephone in the waiting area or they could go home and call from their own telephone and Glasgow would call them back. Sometimes the Prototype staff arranged a time for Glasgow to call the claimant at home. If the lone parent was already in the Benefit Office they tended to stay and do the tele-claim from there. Otherwise telephoning from home appeared to be the preferred option.

Those who opted to call from the special telephone in the Benefits Agency were often unhappy about the process. There were complaints that the telephones were sometimes broken, that it took a long time to get through to Glasgow and that sometimes when they got through there were not enough people on duty to take their claim. Another issue that was raised was the lack of privacy. They were open booths, not enclosed telephone boxes, and people did not feel they could talk without being overheard. One person, who was slightly shorter than average, complained that her head was half out of the booth:

'...totally broken which is the usual case, because obviously somebody smashed the lid out of it. Then you phone up and they say 'there's only one person on at the moment'.' (Tele-claimant, Female IS youngest child under 5)

There was the additional problem of trying to make a claim and keep control of young children.

'I think if I was in the office with my child I wouldn't be prepared to do it. It's not possible with a child, unless you've got a friend with you that can take the child out when it throws a tantrum - you can't do any of the claims and keep your eye on them.' (Tele-claimant, female, IS, HB, CTB youngest child under 5)
The Prototype staff were quickly aware of the problems associated with telephoning from these open telephones and when it was possible they offered the lone parent a private room from which to make their telephone call to Glasgow. This was very satisfactory from the lone parent’s point of view.

Those who telephoned from home seemed, on the whole, extremely happy with the process. They found it easy, convenient and comfortable. If they needed to refer to documents they were close at hand. While there were still a few complaints about the length of time it sometimes took to get through to Glasgow, the general response was that they could get through quite quickly.

The staff in Glasgow reported no complaints by customers of these difficulties in getting through to them by telephone.

**Personal Claimants**

This was an option offered to those who had some special difficulty, usually language problems or for some reason were unwilling or unable to use the telephone. These people could make their claim in person at the Benefits Agency with a member of staff entering their details directly into the computer. It was basically the same as the telephone claim method except that the claimant was responding to a person face-to-face rather than over a telephone to Glasgow.

From the staff perspective, this method was very time-consuming because the computer link with Glasgow was slow. It was also very slow just getting the information which was typed in to appear on the screen. Some concerns were expressed that the client could read the information that came up on the screen and that confidentiality guidelines could be breached if information other than their own personal details appeared on the screen. The few people who made their claims in this way were usually quite satisfied because they were dealt with in a private room and the claim was done for them by sympathetic and helpful staff. However, some who made their claim this way said they would be happy to make a claim over the telephone next time.

'Yes, I was upset, I was crying but the man was nice and he said ‘do you want to stop and do it another day but he was really good about it. I suppose if you did do it over the phone you can sit in your own home and do it and you’d feel more relaxed doing it anyway’. (Personal claimant female, IS, CSA, HB, CTB, youngest child under 5)
Postal Claimants

It was for the postal claimants that the process was probably the most confusing. These were lone parents who had acquired an application form either by calling at the BA office personally or by telephoning or writing in to ask for one to be sent. Or they might also have obtained a form from the Job Centre, the Local Authority or from a welfare or refugee agency. Because the aim of the Prototype was to get as many people as possible to take part, postal claimants were generally asked if they would like to make a tele-claim, regardless of whether or not they had already completed an application form. If a fully completed postal claim form had been received with all supporting documentation to meet the Evidence Requirements then the IS claim was processed if payment was due before taking the tele-claim.

Sometimes the lone parent rang Glasgow because they had sent in an application and they had not had any response to their claim. Sometimes Glasgow rang because a written application they had received was incorrect or incomplete. In either case this was an opportunity for staff to give them the option of perhaps speeding up the process by making a tele-claim. However, the lone parent did not always understand why they were having to answer questions again and they were not always aware that they had actually made a tele-claim.

The staff made the point that these postal claims had the effect of undermining the Prototype project because they had to be processed by the LPP team, regardless of whether or not they agreed to join the Prototype at some later stage. It was felt that if the Prototype were to be rolled out nationally then the issue of postal claims needed to be addressed.

"If a postal claim does come in we are going to have to process it in a different manner for the sake of the benefit being sorted quicker." (Staff)

### Positive Views of Tele-claiming

The response to tele-claiming was overwhelmingly positive from all groups of respondents – the Prototype participants and non-participants, the Control Group and the staff. These were the main views:

- easier to answer questions verbally than to fill out a form,
- more convenient, comfortable and private making a claim from home,
- staff relaxed, helpful, understanding, happy and fun,
- a personal service and perception that staff were trying to help and
- tele-claiming as the way forward in the modern world.
Easier to answer questions verbally than to fill out a form

Customers generally found it easier to answer questions than to fill out an extremely long application form. There was also the reassurance that if a question was confusing it could be sorted out there and then and so avoid the possibility of making a mistake and possibly delaying the processing of the claim.

'It proved useful in that if I had filled my own form in, I am not always sure that I have put the right answers. Sometimes it is confusing what the question is, but because I had spoken to him over the telephone, he could clarify what they were really asking, so I knew that I had given the right answer.' (Postal claim, Male IS youngest child aged 5-11)

This was also a view put forward by those without personal experience of tele-claiming.

The staff view was that written applications rarely arrived correctly filled out and complete with all the evidence. During the telephone interview they could put a question in a variety of ways so that the customer really understood what was being asked of them. They could also make sure they understood what evidence was required at the follow-up interview.

Some claimants felt that giving difficult personal information over the telephone was easier than having to say it to someone face-to-face.

'It was embarrassing really having to sit there and say I was separated because I was very raw because it had just happened and I would have felt better not knowing whose face it was at least.' (Personal claim, Female IS youngest child aged 5-11)

More convenient, comfortable and private making the claim from home

Those doing the tele-claim from home found it much more convenient and comfortable. It was less time-wasting because they did not have to spend hours and sometimes whole days at the BA office. It was easier for them to plan their day, for example if they had to pick up children from school. It was also easier to keep children happy in their own environment while on the telephone.

Those with very young babies were particularly anxious not to have to go down to the Benefit Agency and one young first-time mother said how embarrassed she felt when people commented on the fact that she was there with such a young baby and should she not be at home. Besides, if it was necessary to refer to documents and information they were easily accessible and close to hand at home.
Privacy was something most claimants felt strongly about and they resented having to give out personal information where they could be overheard. This was said to happen frequently at Local Authority offices where questions were asked at the counter. In some BA offices the walls were so thin in the private booths that everything could be heard through them.

‘If you’re at work your wage slip’s private so why shouldn’t you have the same sort of standards if you’re not working?’ (Tele-claimant, female, IS, HB, CTB, youngest child under 5)

Staff: relaxed, helpful, understanding, happy and fun

The helpful and sensitive attitude of the staff was one of the aspects of the Prototype which had the greatest impact on customers when asked about their experiences. They felt that staff went out of their way to make them feel relaxed and at ease. It was a major factor in the positive feedback staff themselves received. The Scottish telephone interviewers were particularly liked for their sense of fun and humour. Customers did not know that often these staff were sometimes desperately trying to fill the rather long gaps between questions caused by the slowness of their computers. So their technology problems inadvertently had a positive effect.

‘Yeah was great as well because he was very jovial, very happy, very polite and took the muck, you took the muck back, nobody really got upset and it was just very calm, very relaxed. You didn’t feel like you do sometimes when you’re signing on, that you’re there bothering them’ (Tele-claimant, female, IS, HB, CTB, youngest child under 5)

‘The girl was very relaxed and made me relaxed too. We had a little joke. She kept saying I know the questions sound really stupid. She couldn’t stop apologising. She asked me if I was OK for time.’ (Tele-claimant, female, IS, CS, youngest child aged 5-11)

‘On the phone they have more respect for people. Maybe because they are not looking at your face to face. (How did that come across?) The way they spoke to me, I have always felt guilty for claiming Income Support and bringing up two children on social security. I didn’t feel that this time.’ (Tele-claimant, female, IS, HB, youngest child aged 5-11)

Customers felt it was a personal service and that the person at the end of the line was really trying to help.

Customers were surprised at the degree of personal service they received. They had names and extension numbers of staff who had dealt with their claim and they felt that they could telephone them if they had a problem. The rapport built up during the course of the telephone interview made the customer feel that their needs were understood. They were very appreciative of the fact that when a member of staff said they would ring them they actually did.
Tele-claiming is the way forward

Those with experience of conducting other business by telephone saw tele-claiming for social security benefits as an inevitable step into the modern world. They could see that much commercial business was already conducted by telephone.

When asked how long they would be prepared to be on the telephone for a tele-claim most said about half an hour. However, when asked if they would prefer two shorter calls rather than one long one, even if it took longer than half an hour, most said they would prefer to get it over with in one session.

Negative Views of Tele-claiming

There were very few negative views of the tele-interview from those who experienced it. Even those who had been apprehensive about doing it beforehand said it was fine. The main problems mentioned were:

- language problems, strong Scottish accents and insufficient time to reflect on questions,
- customers no longer in control of the application process,
- concern about giving Child Support information over the telephone without time to reflect and seek advice if necessary,
- perception that giving personal information over the telephone is difficult and / or not private.

Language problems, strong Scottish accents and insufficient time to reflect on questions

Those who did not have English as a first language did have some problems understanding the questions and for these people the strong Scottish accent was an added difficulty. However, most customers stressed how 'nice' the Scottish interviewers were, they explained things well and were very patient when they did not understand. Some of these customers said they would prefer to do a written application. There were some comments that it was rather taxing when there was little time to reflect on the questions:

'I don’t like it because when you speak to a person you don’t know if you don’t speak good English English is slow hard to understand if it’s on the telephone it’s easier face-to-face because you can speak slow' (Tele-claim, Male, IS, CS, youngest child under 5)

From the staff point of view, doing a tele-claim with someone who has to use an interpreter could be very difficult, unless Language Line was available.

‘You cannot actually do the interview with the interpreter, you need a two-way system’ (Staff)
Customers no longer in control of the application process

Some customers felt very uncomfortable at the idea of not knowing in advance what questions were going to be asked and not having time to think about how they wanted to respond. They also wanted to be prepared for the interview and know what documents and dates would be needed.

'I think basically because I wanted to look at the forms. I wanted to be more prepared. I don't know, I just wanted to see what questions they were going to ask me, see what kind of things I needed, what documents I needed, have a bit of time to think about it' (Non-participant Female IS, youngest child 5-11)

Concern about giving Child Support information over the telephone without time to reflect and seek advice if necessary.

Some lone parents were very concerned about answering Child Support questions over the telephone, particularly if refusing permission for an absent parent to be contacted. Some lone parents might need to get advice on how best to present their case. A staff perspective on this was that if people have not got time to make up a story they are more likely to tell the truth.

Perception that giving personal information over the telephone is difficult and/or not private

For some respondents it was easier to give personal information over the telephone than face-to-face, but for others the opposite was true.

'I don't know why but I don't think it's private, I don't know why. It's over the phone so it's not necessarily private, it's giving somebody information anonymously' (Postal claim, Female IS, CS, youngest child aged under 5)

Others expressed the view that they would much prefer to write down difficult personal information.

'It's easier to do that sort of thing on paper than on the phone speaking to somebody, especially as they were a bit taken aback and didn't know how to handle it, the but I did have to talk on the phone about' (Non-participant, Female, IS, youngest child aged 5-11)

From the staff perspective there were a number of issues raised about the tele-claim method

• Good rapport leads to greater co-operation from customers
• Tele-claim scripts amended early on in favour of more informal introductions and explanations
• IT problems
• Easier to detect fraudulent claims
Good rapport leads to greater co-operation from customers

Not only did staff think they were getting better quality information from customers during the tele-claim interview but they thought that the good relationship they built up during the telephone interview led to greater co-operation from the customer during the follow-up face-to-face interview. Staff reported virtually no angry or abusive calls.

There was some concern expressed about a potential downside for staff to this over-personalised service in that customers may have unrealistic expectations of them. They would ring up when their money did not arrive on time expecting that the staff could immediately put it right. They would also pour out personal details of their story which did not have any relevance for their claim.

Tele-claim scripts amended early on in favour of more informal introductions and explanations

The staff all agreed that the scripts they were intended to read out to the customer were far too long and stilted.

'It’s like a cold call you’d get at home with someone trying to sell you double glazing windows. It sounds like that. We don’t read the script out verbatim it’s not possible we cover the points in the script but I don’t think any of us read it out verbatim. You feel so stupid.' (Staff)

'I think if you were to read out the whole script a lot of people would say no, just send out the form.' (Staff)

The question wording was often altered to suit the customer.

'You pitch the way you ask the question dependent on the person you’ve got on the phone. You do change how you talk depending on the person you’re speaking to.' (Staff)

The fact that customers generally reported being very relaxed doing their tele-claim suggests that this casual flexibility worked well and made the claimant feel comfortable.

IT problems

The main problem experienced by staff during the telephone interview was the slowness of the computer. Sometimes there was a long gap while they had to wait for the next question to come up on the screen. As pointed out above, the staff tended to fill this gap by chatty or jokey asides in order to avoid the embarrassment of sitting in silence. This had the very positive effect of helping to create a good rapport during the interview.
Easier to detect fraudulent claims

The staff felt it was much easier to get a feel for something which was ‘not quite right’ when speaking to someone as opposed to reading a written application. They felt that contradicting themselves verbally was a lot more difficult to explain away than perhaps putting the wrong information down on a form. If there was a suspicion of a fraudulent claim the interviewer in Glasgow could communicate their suspicions to the staff in London who could be forewarned before the personal follow-up interview.

2.3.4 The computer print-out of the application form

This provided a complete record of the information given in the tele-claim interview which was in theory, printed out immediately after the telephone interview and sent to the claimant together with confirmation of the time and date of the follow-up interview. In practice, however, there were a lot of problems with the printer; the forms were often not printed out in time to reach the customer before the follow-up interview.

When the form was received it was reassuring to the customer. They could check the information they had given and correct any errors which might have occurred. Customers seemed generally happy with the form and the way the information was presented. The parts which were not relevant to the customer were deleted and so it was easier to read.

‘It seemed more personal, it seemed like “this is me”, rather than looking at something and thinking “am I being categorised or stereotyped”, because it’s you and all the answers are already down there. It seems more professional, you don’t feel so uneasy’ (Tele-claim, female 15, HB, CTB, youngest child under 5)

2.3.5 The follow-up (evidence) interview

Following the tele-claim interview an appointment was made for every claimant to have a face-to-face interview with a member of staff at their local BA office and to bring along evidence for their claim. This usually took place within a few days of the telephone interview. Before the appointment the claimant should have received a copy of the tele-claim application.

Positive views of the evidence interview

• The appointment system meant very little waiting around
  Customers liked having an appointment for a particular time which meant they could plan their time and not have to set aside a whole day. Most were happy that they had been seen within a reasonable time of the stated appointment.

• Better waiting environment and private interviewing room
  The privacy of the interviewing room was appreciated by the customers and some commented that the waiting area for lone parents was much nicer than the general area. These were people some of whom were feeling very raw and vulnerable after a recent break up of a marriage who sometimes got quite upset during the interview.
because he was in a private office and there was nobody around and the person was so much more relaxed and I was much more relaxed and it was much more comfortable.' (Tele-claim. Female. IS. HB. CTB, youngest child aged 5-11)

'even our waiting room was different There was more seating, it was cleaner there were toys and the toilet was nearby I didn't have to wait long and the children played' (Postal claim Female. IS CS youngest child aged 5-11)

Staff were helpful, sensitive and kind

Customers spoke about the Prototype staff who interviewed them in an almost effusively positive way Most of them were quite amazed by how very kind and considerate they were to them They made them feel there was time to deal with their claim and they explained everything very clearly to them

'I can't praise them [the interviewers] enough The first time I put the form in I felt degraded and cheap and stupid But you come out of there feeling very confident with yourself because they made me feel like a person, and not a person begging for money They understood my needs' (Tele-claim Female, IS, CS, youngest child aged 5-11)

'the person made me feel like time wasn't a problem Usually it's all very fast but this time it was "we've got an appointment, we're going to deal with everything no matter how long it takes' 'It made me feel more important really' (Tele-claim Female, IS, HB, CTB, youngest child aged 5-11)

The Prototype staff offered a very personal service to customers giving them their name and direct line telephone number so that they could ring them if they had any problems, or if their money did not come through on time They would also ring them and keep them informed of the progress of their claims. if they were not able to sort out something straight away Customers were quite surprised by this level of service

'I give my name, they know me and I know them, they get to know you and they always say "I'll call you within the hour" and they do, even if they don't have the information, they still call you to say that they haven't got the information, and they do call' (Postal claim, Female, IS, CSA, youngest child aged 5-11)

For staff this was a much more satisfactory way of doing their job than the previous experience of having to deal with claimants very quickly and under pressure It must be added here that the Prototype was deliberately over-resourced and staff were not target-driven as is usually the case
Negative views of the evidence interview

- Confusion over appointment procedure at the Benefit Office
  There appeared to be a lot of confusion for lone parents concerning whether they had to join the normal reception queue when they came along for their appointment. If they did not have their purple application statement from Glasgow with them, they were made to join what was at times a very long queue. This meant that some ended up being in the wrong place and being late for their appointment. It seemed that the security staff were not well briefed about this aspect of the service.

- Perceived as a repeat of the tele-claim
  There was a perception by some customers that because they had to go through all the questions on the application form during the follow-up interview, they were in fact repeating the tele-claim. To some this seemed like a waste of time and they were inclined to feel very irritated by this. The staff, however, were obliged to go through every question in turn because the customer had to be able to sign a declaration to say that they had had the form read over to them and there were no amendments.

- Follow-up interviews very time-consuming
  The staff did try to customise the times set aside for the interview according to the needs of the individual claimant. However, these interviews were still perceived by the staff to be very time-consuming. The IT was too slow if they had to access anything on the computer; for example, if clients had not received their application copy before coming to the interview. It was also difficult to deal with all the benefits in one interview especially if it was a difficult case and staff were having to explain and give advice at the same time.

If customers did not turn up or turned up late for their interview, it had a knock-on effect on that member of staff's schedule for the rest of the day.

2.4 Views on other claiming methods

2.4.1 Personal claims
  These were claims directly entered on to the computer, exactly as in a tele-claim except that the claimant was speaking to someone face-to-face in their local BA office, instead of by telephone to Glasgow. Very few used this method. The staff found it very difficult mainly because of the IT problems. The link between London and Glasgow was very slow indeed. The customers did not seem particularly put out by these problems and just seemed happy that someone was giving them claim individual attention. Many found it reassuring to see the information going onto a computer and felt that it was now somewhere safe and it couldn't be lost.

2.4.2 Postal claims
  A number of respondents reported satisfactory trouble-free claims using the postal system or hand-delivering written applications. These people saw no reason to convert to tele-claims, especially if it meant that they would now have to attend a follow-up interview as well.
However, for others there was a widespread mistrust of the postal system as a secure means of delivering claims and documents to the DSS. There were numerous stories of ‘lost’ claims although customers had a good idea that it was not always the postal system that was to blame. The fact that there was no way of knowing whether or not a claim had arrived safely meant that by the time the ‘loss’ was established there was already considerable delay in the processing of the claim. Many claimants would hand deliver their applications for benefit in order to be sure that they did actually arrive.

From the staff perspective it was through the postal claiming system that a lot of fraudulent claims were felt to go undetected. It was much more difficult to detect fraud from a written application. By moving to a tele-claiming system which involved a face-to-face interview as well, they saw the whole process going full circle and back to the time when all benefit claims necessitated a face-to-face interview.

2.4.3 Face-to-face contact

Some customers preferred face-to-face contact in any situation. They liked, or needed, the reassurance of speaking to a person they could see. However, most people when asked if they felt a need to see someone face-to-face, said that it was only necessary when there was some problem which needed to be sorted out or some complication or grievance to be dealt with.

‘Sometimes it’s better to talk to the person because they understand better – if you write something they can think you’re lying but if it’s face to face it’s better because a lot of people are lying’ (Personal claim, Female, IS, youngest child under 5)

There were some claimants who were very conscious of the fact that people, including the DSS, might think that they were fraudulent. They thought that by having a face-to-face interview it would be much easier for the staff to see that they were telling the truth, and they were very anxious to be believed and not to have any suspicion hanging over them.

Customers were asked if they would prefer to have a face-to-face interview in their own home or at the BA office. There was a tendency to state a preference for an office interview. Many respondents disliked the idea of strangers and DSS staff in particular, coming to their home. They felt that their personal possessions would be scrutinised and judgements made about their eligibility for benefits.

‘There’s always the feeling that you don’t really want a stranger in your home and also because one starts thinking about means testing, like being nosed out and investigated, I don’t want that – they start thinking why isn’t she claiming, that obviously looks like a new sofa’ (Postal claim, Female, IS, youngest child under 5)
Those who participated in the Prototype had generally a very positive experience compared to previous claim experiences.

The staff were seen as much more polite, sensitive and helpful and this resulted in some changes in customer perceptions of the DSS and the Benefits Agency. It also meant that customers felt very differently about themselves as claimants and less aggrieved with the system which previously seemed to put them down as 'undeserving sponges'.

"before they didn't care. You were just a number. This time I was a person and they were there to offer you a service and to help you. If you have any problems or queries they can give you all the information you need. If there is any trouble they give you their personal name, not just their surname. They give you their extension number. It was brilliant" (Tele-claim, Female, IS, CSA youngest child aged 5-11)

The Lone Parent Prototype was seen as a more efficient system. There was less duplication of information as all the necessary information, as far as the customer was concerned, was stored on computer. In fact from the staff point of view, there was still far too much duplication and some of this was due to legislative rulings about sharing of information between departments and this had to stay in place until the law was changed.

The fact that there was much less waiting around in Benefit Offices was a huge bonus and the appointment system for the follow-up interview was felt to be a big success.
3 WIDER ASPECTS OF THE LONE PARENT PROTOTYPE
- CUSTOMER VIEWS

The previous chapter was concerned with customer views and experiences of access to the benefits system and their preferences for the different ways in which they could make a claim for benefit, with specific emphasis on tele-claiming. Underpinning the Lone Parent Prototype are a number of features, and potential extensions that required evaluation. These were:

- providing an **integrated** system for claiming benefit,
- the **sharing of data** between government departments and agencies,
- perceptions about the **confidentiality** of tele-claiming,
- preferred methods and points of **access** to the benefit system,
- preferences for a **case versus team approach** to the management of customers,
- involvement of **external specialists**,
- the potential role of the **private sector** in the delivery of social security benefits, and
- the perceived need for a benefit service that is **lone parent specific**

These will be discussed, in detail, in the following sections.

3.1 An integrated approach to the delivery of social security benefits

The Lone Parent Prototype currently allows a customer to apply for four benefits simultaneously. These are Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit, Income Support and Child Support. With information being collected during a single telephone interview the Prototype draws together three agencies: The Benefits Agency, for Income Support, The Child Support Agency, for Child Support, and the Local Authority for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

Prior to the Prototype a customer would have been required to complete a separate application form for each benefit, with an inevitable duplication of questions, particularly relating to the household composition and a person’s financial circumstances. With the Lone Parent Prototype integration occurs at the point of application whereby a customer may apply for one or more of the above benefits at the same time, without duplication of questions.

Some of the participants in the Lone Parent Prototype were not aware that integration was new. Typically, recent immigrants into the country and first-time claimants often assumed that the benefit system was already an integrated service and that the Lone Parent Prototype was providing nothing new. In addition, some of the repeat claimants who were making

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1. While the Lone Parent Prototype was active in four areas – Euston, Ealing, Acton and Highgate - an integrated Housing Benefit / Council Tax Benefit service was available in only two of these – Euston and Highgate.
an application for either a single benefit or a combination of Housing Benefit and Income Support also tended to assume that the service was already integrated. This view was primarily based on their experiences of sending Housing Benefit and Income Support application forms in the same envelope. For them, however, integration was seen to occur at the processing stage rather than at application. Others were keenly aware that the integrated application was new and often commented on the fact that there was less repetition in the questions they were asked. The opportunity to make an application for Child Support was often the critical factor in alerting customers to the integrated approach adopted by the Lone Parent Prototype.

The concept of an integrated service was highly regarded and seen as a more natural and efficient way of delivering social security benefits. Indeed, there was some incredulity that the benefits systems were currently so fragmented and required so much duplication of information. In this respect, many repeat customers commented how irritating it was to be asked a large number of questions that were common to each of the benefits for which they were applying. 'They must know this about me by now' was a common refrain.

3.1.1 Positive aspects of integration

From all customer perspectives - participants in the Prototype, non-participants, and 'controls' - an integrated 'front-end' offered considerable benefits. These were

• A simplification of the application process,
• A single application form,
• Considerably reduced repetition of the same information
• A speedier application process and
• A less humiliating experience as one is 'only having to tell your story once'.

Many lone parents in the study did not enjoy being dependent on benefits and were often very sure about the separation from their partner. Anything that reduced their having to re-live their experiences was very welcome.

'Bright! You don't have to repeat your story over and over and over again. If they had access to information on the computer then they wouldn't have to ask me, it would all be there.' (Postal claim, Female, IS CSA youngest child aged under 5)

'It is a brilliant idea because there is nothing more soul destroying than filling in one form and giving the same information on another.' (Control, Female, IS, youngest child aged 5-11)
Coupled with the tele-claiming service, integrated data collection was felt to be an extremely valuable service as it reduced, or even eradicated, the need to visit a number of offices when applying for more than one benefit. In turn, this reduced the amount of waiting time, which was especially welcome given customers’ concerns about having to occupy their pre-school children and their often negative perceptions of the Benefits Agency environment (Chapter 2)

- anything that avoids being sent to lots of different places (Control Female, IS, CSA, HC, CTB, youngest child aged under 5)

3.1.2 Negative aspects of integration

The main concern about integration was the involvement of the Child Support Agency. This was for four main reasons. First, there were often fairly negative perceptions of the Child Support Agency that were held by both participants and non-participants in the Lone Parent Prototype. Fuelled partly by media comments but also direct experience, the Child Support Agency was seen in a very negative light and one which customers often wished to dissociate from their application for benefit.

Second, again partly based on hearsay and partly experience, some of the respondents felt that the Child Support Agency was much too intrusive in terms of the questions they asked. For example:

"They want to know who the fathers are, whether you've had boyfriends, who you've slept with - it makes me really angry. I'm quite tempted to tell them that I've slept with the whole block [lives in a block of flats] it's none of their business - I don't mind telling them who the father is but why should I tell them anything else. It's none of their business!" (Personal claim, Female, IS, CSA, HB, CTB, youngest child aged under 5)

Third, some of the participants in the Prototype felt they had been forced to make an application for Child Support. They felt out of control of the process, which made them feel less at ease with the whole process.

"An intrusion actually, and I hadn't requested it, I didn't like that at all." (Postal claim, Female, IS, youngest child aged under 5)

Fourth, and partly related to the previous issue, lone parents felt they had good reason not to make an application for Child Support at that particular time. For some, there was a fear of provoking an already violent ex-partner, for others, it was more to do with their relationship breakdown being a relatively recent event, and a desire to put them out of my mind.

These negative perceptions were primarily from those who had had some experience of the Child Support Agency or who felt that they had reluctantly given information relating to the father of their children in their IS application. They were in favour of integration generally but felt that the personal information relating to their CS application would be less private if the agencies were integrated. They felt very strongly that this information, some of which was intensely personal, should on
no account be accessible to anyone who did not need the information. If these fears relating to confidentiality could be allayed they would not oppose the idea of integration.

'I suppose the thing is if they're integrated, you don't know if you can trust it, that's the thing. I suppose it's like with all big bureaucracies you're never sure how much they share information.' (Non-participant, female IS HB, CSA youngest child over 5)

From the customer perspective it is not possible to say whether or not integration made any difference to them in terms of their willingness to co-operate and give Child Support details. The customers who had already made a Child Support application through the CSA were generally not making another application through the LPP, or if they were it was more of a formality of giving the same information over again. However the staff perspective was that the customers were more inclined to give child support details because they were spoken to kindly and given a much more personal service.

INTERVIEWER: You're actually giving them your name, aren't you?

STAFF: 'Yes, you'll get more Child Support details as well, more co-operation and things like that.'

A secondary issue about integration was the concern that such an approach could delay the payment of benefit. Raised primarily by those who had not participated in the Prototype, there was some concern that any delay in the processing of one benefit would have a knock-on effect for all the other benefits for which they had applied.

'It could be an improvement because I think they'd get on more quickly if they do it all at once. Less forms, so I think it would be an improvement. But, would one delay the other? It could be less efficient if the person you spoke to then had to ring round all the other offices that were dealing with the other benefits.' (Postal claim, Female, IS CSA, youngest child aged under 5)

In practice none of the participants in the Lone Parent Prototype felt that this had occurred. For many, their perception was that the processing of their benefit application had been faster than usual.
3.1.3 The perceived potential of integration

The study respondents, as discussed above, were very enthusiastic about the concept of integration and felt that the Prototype provided a basis for considerable expansion. Customers felt that further integration could include a range of benefit and non-benefit related services. For example:

- Application for a range of additional benefits to include
  - Family Credit
  - Child Benefit
  - Incapacity Benefit
  - Crisis loans
  - Free school meals
  - Milk tokens

- Advice and information, through signposting, about
  - the New Deal for lone parents
  - Further education
  - Training opportunities
  - Work opportunities
  - Childcare facilities
  - Opportunities to boost confidence and become work-ready
  - Counselling

In respect of the information and advice that could be either provided or signposted, there was a strong view that while this should be offered it should not be obligatory. This was to take into account individuals' readiness to pursue activities such as training and work in the light of their separation, and their views about when it would be acceptable to pursue other options given the age of their children. With some respondents taking the view that they would only consider work when all their children were at school, whilst others were keen to enter the labour market before this time.

A number of participants in the study felt it would be useful if the Prototype team could keep their information and advice needs on file and contact them at a specified time in the future.

3.2 Sharing data between government departments and agencies

Customers tended to have a fairly limited knowledge about how the social security system worked, particularly in terms of how benefit applications are processed. With the Lone Parent Prototype information that is collected through the telephone interview is related to the relevant department or agency for processing.

From the customers' perspective views about the sharing of data between departments was largely accepting and unproblematic. This was primarily because respondents - participants and non-participants in the Prototype - assumed that information was already shared by the DSS/BA and the Local Authority an assumption that arises from the fact that Housing Benefit and Income Support applications are often posted in the same envelope. It was also not an issue to which respondents had given much thought.
There was often the assumption that, as with all other benefits, the relevant departments and agencies would also share information. However, customers were very unsure about what information was being, or likely to be shared.

Data sharing between government departments and agencies was initially felt to be perfectly acceptable, with typical comments including:

- 'all the relevant people need the information they're all in touch anyway' (Postal claim, Female, IS, CSA, youngest child aged under 5)
- 'No, not really actually, because it’s all tied together isn’t it?' (Postal claim, Female, IS, youngest child aged under 5)
- 'they basically all ask the same questions anyway' (Personal claim, Female, IS, youngest child aged under 5)
- 'I've nothing to hide' (Personal claim, Female, IS, CSA, HB, CTB, youngest child aged under 5)

However, given the opportunity to consider the issue of data sharing, respondents were often keen to introduce a number of conditions. This was particularly so for those who had experienced violent relationships, individuals who had recently separated, and those who had negative experiences of dealing with either the Child Support Agency or Social Services.

When considering the issue of data sharing there was some feeling that:

- each department or agency should only be given the information that they require in order to process the specific benefit application.
  1. 'What information do you feel that perhaps the council shouldn’t see?'
  
  R 'Of all the information I gave to Glasgow I do feel that some of it was irrelevant to Housing Benefit because they’re just for housing. They’re just interested in how many people are in the house and what ages they are and that’s it. The DSS asked me some questions, that I cannot recall, but it’s not necessary for the Council to know' (Tele-claim, Female, IS, CS, youngest child aged under 5).

- sensitive information, such as details of sexual partnerships or relationships that have been violent, should be restricted to those departments that require such information.
  
  'I suppose if I had AIDS I wouldn’t want the world to know about it, but then if I could request that that information is kept confidential' (Postal claim, Female, IS, CS, youngest child aged under 5).
Customers would like to be informed as to what information would be shared and with which government departments and agencies. If it was only going between specific organisations, or maybe you could have somewhere where you could say, "No, I don't want that particular party to know that information", but it's only people that need to speak to the CS4, that the CS4 be allowed to see that information." (Control Female IS, CS youngest child aged under 5)

Social Services and the Child Support Agency should only be given information about an individual's case if they have been explicitly authorised to do so by the customer. This view tended to be associated with bad past experiences of dealing with either of these agencies. There was also some fear that violent ex-partners could be further intimidated through involvement of the Child Support Agency. In such instances the customer felt that they should have the power of veto in order that they might protect themselves.

I: 'Any reservations about giving it to them and them sharing it with other agencies?'

R: 'Not now I wouldn't. At the beginning, when I separated from him I would have. At the time he was very violent. I had to keep the children away from him. We were in a safe house. It would have inflamed the situation if the Child Support Agency would have become involved.' (Tele-claim, Female IS, CS youngest child aged under 5)

Respondents were much more concerned about the sharing of data between government departments and private companies - an issue that will be discussed further in Section 3.7.

3.3 Confidentiality

Respondents in the study were specifically asked whether they had any concerns about the confidentiality of the tele-claim approach to benefit application. With one or two exceptions, participants and non-participants were largely unquestioning and confident that the telephone call was as confidential and secure as a postal claim. Overall, there was a general view that, as with benefit application forms, individual records were confidential and securely stored. They had no reason to question this, the tele-claim interviewer was also reassuring in this respect. The exceptions were those people who were concerned about giving any personal information over the telephone, irrespective of whether they were dealing with a government department. In each case however they had participated in the Prototype service and were pleased with the outcome.

Without exception, there was no spontaneous desire for individuals accessing the benefits system by telephone to be given a password. When questioned in more detail a small number thought a password might be an extra safeguard but generally the National Insurance number was felt to be sufficient as a unique identifier.
Few of this sample of lone parents had bank accounts and most had little awareness of the security arrangements that banks use when customers access their services. Those that were aware tended to think that a similar password arrangement would be a sensible security precaution.

Where individuals did raise some concern about confidentiality was in relation to the way in which some Local Authorities were perceived to keep Housing Benefit files. Raised by only a handful of individuals, but nevertheless a significant issue for them, there was some concern that personal files were not necessarily kept in confidential storage. This was partly based on perceptions and partly on experience. For example, a small number of individuals became more concerned about confidentiality issues when they found that the Local Authority appeared to have lost their file. Equally, when telephoning the Housing Benefit Office they were disturbed to hear a member of staff call across the office - 'Anyone seen Mrs X's file?'. Similarly:

When I used to work at the town hall - cleaning - people's files were all over the place' (Postal claim, Female IS, youngest child aged 5–11)

These comments refer to a range of local authorities, not necessarily linked to the Prototype.

3.4 Accessing the service

Participants in the Prototype were particularly enthusiastic about having a single point of contact for the collection of all the information that was required for benefit application. This was perceived as a major step forward and was highly regarded by customers.

An issue arises as to whether there should be other routes into the benefit system. These might be a series of telephone numbers each operating a tele-claim service identical to that tested out in the Lone Parent Prototype, access to a wider range of benefits through existing agencies, such as the Local Authority or Child Support Agency, other points of contact, such as the CAB's electronic access, via the Internet, for example, to the benefit system. These are discussed in turn below.

3.4.1 Single or multiple telephone access points

Overwhelmingly respondents - both participants and non-participants in the Prototype - were keen to see the simplest of methods for accessing the benefit system. From their perspective a single telephone number was the most appropriate as it would be the simplest and the least confusing. In this respect a number of people indicated that they did not want to be 'fazed with finding out the local number'.

'I would have thought that your National Insurance number would have been enough. Who else is going to know that? No one in my family, even, knows my number, so I would have thought that would have been enough.' (Non-participant, Female IS, youngest child aged under 5)
Generally, the expectation was that any telephone number would access the benefit system through the DSS/BA, rather than any other agency. There were mixed views about the Local Authority being the access point, with views often depending on their past experiences. There was virtually no support for accessing the benefit system through either the Child Support Agency or Social Services.

3.4.2 Access to a wider range of benefits through visits to existing agencies

In many respects, peoples views about accessing the benefit system through visits to local agencies were similar to those expressed in relation to telephone access. Views about visiting either the local Benefit Office or the Local Authority were very mixed and based on their local experiences, with some preferring the Benefits Office and others preferring the Local Authority. On balance, Local Authorities were preferred, partly due to slightly better waiting environments, and partly shorter waiting times. Overall, given the choice of accessing the benefits system by telephone or by visiting an existing agency, there was considerable preference expressed for the telephone. Where personal visits were felt to be necessary then a specified appointment time was felt to be essential.

There was no support for accessing the benefit system, in person, through the Child Support Agency.

3.4.3 Alternative points of access

A number of recent studies have considered directly, or tangentially, customer views about accessing the benefit system or having their benefit paid through other routes including non-government points of contact. These might range from the Post Office or a local Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) through to a local supermarket.

In this study the general preference was to access the benefit system through existing agencies and primarily through the DSS/BA, although the Jobcentre was deemed a possibility. Generally, the lone parents in this study could not see the point of having more points of access, they preferred less, but more efficient, ways of applying for benefit.

A number of objections were also made about alternative access points. These were:

- a fear of being identified and then labelled and stereotyped as either a claimant or a lone parent. This was particularly so in relation to the supermarket as a point of access,
- limited accessibility to organisations such as CABs, which were often felt to have restricted opening hours and
- the perceived lack of privacy, particularly in Post Offices and supermarkets.

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'The CAB office is only open certain times. The library? Seems an odd place to have it. Jobcentre might be okay. I suppose. the supermarket that is bizarre. Everyone would know your business. Post Office is the same. No privacy.' (Postal claim, Female IS, HB, CTB, youngest child aged over 11)

- a lack of advice available in access points that did not have benefits-trained staff

'Blimey, you can get everything under one roof can't you. I think that's getting a bit far fetched [supermarkets] but somewhere like a library or a benefit office where they have expert advice. I think places like that would be good to get the form and fill it in because there would be somebody there to actually help you fill it in.' (Postal claim. Female IS CS, youngest child aged under 5)

- the perceived cost of using alternative access points together with a concern that such costs would be reflected in the level of their benefit

'You can just imagine it, can't you. They pay [supermarkets] vast amounts of money to deal with the benefits and then they [government] haven't got enough to update the benefit next year.' (Control Female IS, youngest child aged 5-11)

3.4.4 Electronic access to the benefits system

Current research has also been considering customer views about access to the benefit system (as well as a wider set of government-related transactions) through electronic means. This might be via a dedicated electronic kiosk located, for example, in a Post Office, or via the Internet.

Access to the benefit system through either an electronic kiosk or the Internet met with very limited enthusiasm. Those who were the most enthusiastic tended to be people who were proficient keyboard users and already had experience of the Internet. Overall however, reactions were fairly negative.

In respect of the Internet barriers to use included the absence of a telephone line, no access to a personal computer, lack of confidence in using a computer, lack of confidence in using the technical aspects of the Internet, perceived cost of accessing the Internet, perceived lack of help and advice that would be available and concerns about the confidentiality of Internet transactions.

'No, because people can tap into the Internet and see your personal business.'

(Personal claim, Female, IS, youngest child aged under 5)

Electronic kiosks met with similar negative reactions. Perceived barriers to their use included lack of confidence in using electronic media, a perceived lack of help and advice that would be available on-line, lack of privacy and a view that any publicly-located kiosk would always be broken.

In addition, respondents were concerned about the cost of either of these initiatives to the Government. The respondents preferred an increase in benefit rather than additional potentially expensive methods of access.

Some respondents preferred to deal with benefit issues in person. For them, dealing with the benefit system electronically was an anathema.

That's just forcing everybody to live their lives at a keyboard and I don't think it's a very good idea. I'm not against the Internet, it serves a purpose, but there's a part of me that doesn't want anything to do with the Internet! (Postal claim, female, IS, youngest child aged under 5)

3.5 A case versus team management approach to customer service

Customers did not readily understand the distinction between collecting the necessary data for benefit application and the subsequent processing of those claims. For example, in the Lone Parent Prototype, whilst there was a single point of contact who collected the necessary information for Income Support, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit applications, the processing was carried out by a number of people. This was often not recognised by participants in the Prototype.

Customers express a preference for the management of their case through a single, preferably named point of contact. This was based on the following customer requirements and perceptions:

- the desire to provide information only once
- a preference for a 'personal service' that was felt to be most appropriately provided by a single member of staff
- the desire to build up a relationship with the BA staff - a desire that was based on the assumption that the more information a single person has about their case the more likely they were to receive all the benefits to which they were entitled
- a view that if less people were involved in the processing of their benefits the BA will have to become more accountable as it will be less easy for members of staff to pass the buck. Currently, there is a strongly held view that with so many people involved in benefit processing it is easy for one agency to blame another for any inefficiencies. Were there to be a single point of contact customers have the perception that this would be less likely to occur, and
- a view that BA staff should have a working knowledge of all the benefits currently available and should be able to deal with any queries that arise.

When it was explained to customers that there are currently 22 social security benefits they became much more sympathetic to the idea of a team-based approach to benefits processing. Indeed, there were some respondents who already recognised the complexity of the benefits system and felt that it was far too complicated for an individual member of staff to fully understand, in detail. From the customer's perspective, however, there was a strong desire to deal with as few people as possible, for all the reasons discussed earlier.
Consequently, from the customer's point of view the ideal way of dealing with the benefits system would be one in which they dealt with a single person. This member of staff would collect the information needed to process the application, undertake follow-up calls for any missing information and relay the decision back to the customer. Customers were less concerned about how their applications were processed - it could be one person or a team of many - but their preference was for a single channel of communication between the agencies involved and themselves. Some customers were less strict in their requirements and felt that a single channel of communication was being very optimistic. However, even in these instances there was a preference to deal with no more than two, and at most three, different individuals.

Customers wished to retain the option of dealing with a female member of staff in certain circumstances.

3.6 Involving external specialists

For most of the study respondents the question of whether external specialists could be brought in to deal with certain aspects of the benefit claim was largely hypothetical. Generally, respondents could not envisage any circumstances where this might be necessary. In the one instance where a customer - a recent immigrant into the UK - required specialist advice regarding whether her children were legally resident in the UK and were entitled to benefit, she preferred to deal with the Home Office direct rather than through a potentially circuitous route through the Benefits Agency.

While some respondents were unconcerned about involvement of external specialists - “anything that makes it easier for me” - others were more cautious in their approach. Overall, there was a strength of feeling to indicate that the involvement of external specialists should be an option and be arranged only with specific authorisation from the customer.

3.7 The role of the private sector

In many instances the study respondents could not envisage a role for the private sector in the processing, administration or payment of benefits. As a consequence it was often necessary for the research team to explain what the private sector was and how it might be involved in the administration of social security benefits.

For customers, the negatives tended to outweigh the positives. On the positive side there was some suggestion that involvement of the private sector might result in a cheaper and more efficient administration of benefits - a view that tended to be held by individuals who had particularly negative experiences of the benefit system. In one instance a lone parent felt that the private sector might have “more clout in getting my maintenance from my ex-husband”. In a similar vein another argued:

“Yeah, to a certain extent I think that would be better because perhaps they’d have more of a jurisdiction and more authority over these people [ex-partner] to actually pay up.” (Tele-claim, Female 15, HB CTB youngest child aged under 5).
On the negative side the private sector were felt to be less accountable, more likely to pose a security risk and be more expensive than the state. 'My initial response would be no I don't think it's a good idea because there's always this feeling that when the private sector gets involved it's somehow to do with profit for them, so no, I don't like that idea at all' (Postal claim, Female, IS, youngest child aged under 5)

'If it's the private sector I don't think they'd be that concerned about keeping your information under control but the DSS would Over the years I've never had to say the DSS has given out information when they're not supposed to' I don't think private people would take it seriously' (Postal claim, Female, IS, CS, youngest child aged under 5)

In addition, there was some concern that involvement of the private sector would result in civil servants being made redundant and a corresponding decrease in the quality of service. 'I am not happy about that If they were privatising it the people who are doing the job now might lose out There is more of a security risk The ones working for the government - there is less risk of them corrupting the data. The people who are doing the jobs now would lose out And they are going to be making money out of it It would be a profit organisation I don't think money should be made out of it' (Postal claim, Female, IS, HB, CTB, youngest child aged over 11)

Overwhelmingly the lone parents participating in the Prototype were positive and enthusiastic about the service they had received For them the social security system should be sympathetic to their specific situation They had often experienced difficult or violent relationships some had only recently separated and were feeling fragile and vulnerable all of those with pre-school children felt that they needed a service that recognised the stresses of dealing with small children In these respects the Lone Parent Prototype had fully met their expectations

However there were mixed feelings about the need for a specific service geared to the needs of lone parents For some respondents there was a feeling that such a service was stigmatising 'No need for a special service] 'You are a swan bag' Why differentiate between people I am a lone parent and I am doing my best to get on with my life' (Control, Female, IS, youngest child aged 5-11)

Others were keen on such a service as it recognised their needs 'For me it is easier I don't want to go up the office with small children with all them men swearing up there It is much better if I can do it from home I only split up recently and I don't really want to have to tell all and sundry about my experiences' (Tele-claim, Female, IS, HB, CTB, CS, youngest child aged 5-11)
However, the prevailing view was that the social security system, in
general, should be much more sympathetic to people with young children,
irrespective of whether they were a lone parent as well as others with
special needs such as people with disabilities and the elderly.
4 WORKING ON THE LONE PARENT PROTOTYPE
– THE STAFF PERSPECTIVE

The staff working on the Lone Parent Prototype (LPP) were drawn from both the Benefits Agency and the Child Support Agency. There was also a link into the Housing Benefit section of Camden local authority to further test integrated working. Their involvement is described in a separate section ‘Working with the Local Authority’ (Section 4.3).

Staff came into the Prototype by different routes. Some had responded to an advertisement whilst others were approached directly. A few had been involved from the very beginning at the design stages. They were attracted to the Prototype because it was something new and they saw the LPP as something that would shape the future of the DSS as a whole. Some wanted to get away from their previous jobs and others were keen to enhance their computing skills.

4.1 The role of the Prototype

The staff saw the Prototype as encompassing many new ideas. These new concepts were to be underpinned by a much greater focus on customer care which could be achieved with the aid of advanced information technology. The overall aim was to identify ways in which the DSS could become more efficient and cost-effective. LPP staff thought it was crucial for the DSS to test different approaches as the organisation had to ‘modernise’.

‘We are also affected by the outside environment. And there are so many corporate companies using the same type of software as we’re using and it’s an obvious way forward for us to copy the outside. Because we’re such a big organisation it’s really difficult for us to be innovative.’

Running a prototype provided an opportunity to explore how this could be accomplished. Although there were aspects of the Prototype that would need to be changed, staff generally viewed the LPP as a success.

‘The project team have been learning from day one so they have found the barriers that are there to delivering the service—that is the purpose of the Prototype. What do we have to sort [out] or change, or should we change learning lessons so you can implement it properly.’

4.2 Multi-agency working

The Benefits Agency and the Child Support Agency

LPP staff were drawn from the BA and the CSA and it was clear that they enjoyed working together. Many positive comments were made about the high morale and good working environment which had been engendered during the training.
I think we've worked really well as a team. The way things have been done have been very good, because we haven't just been thrown in and left with the people in London who we don't know. We were all brought here and worked together, trained together. So if somebody rings you up you can recognize who it is and normally you have a friendship with them as well. We all know each other, we all speak to each other.

Staff described a working culture that was more satisfying than previous experiences, particularly for CSA staff.

Team-working had become an important aspect of the Prototype, and staff saw many benefits including a much better exchange of information. In the past, staff might have been too busy to keep each other up-to-date on changes in a case but with the Prototype staff they were 'always informing each other.' This saved both time and paperwork.

'There are some things that affect us immediately. We have got other actions to do to close the claim down and to have that happen right there and then instead of 3 or 6 months down the line, it makes our business tidier, there is a lot less clutter.'

One aspect of team-working in the Prototype was individuals working in pairs—one person from the BA and the other from the CSA. They looked to each other for advice but also support. Whilst staff drew on each others expertise, CSA staff seemed to turn more to BA staff than vice versa. This was possibly because customers were looking to sort out a claim for income support and were less interested in dealing with the Child Support element of the Prototype.

For some staff, working on the Prototype did not seem too different from their previous jobs. This was particularly the case for those who had experience of processing Income Support claims.

For legal reasons, staff could only process claims relating to their employing agency although some of the staff would have liked to have been involved in processing other claims. Even so, staff felt they had learnt a lot about the work of the partner agency and they also felt their perceptions of the partner agency had changed. For example, staff from BA felt they had a better understanding of the difficult work undertaken by the CSA.

Many of the staff were attracted to working on the Prototype because they saw it as a way of shaping the delivery of social security benefits in the future. They greatly appreciated opportunities to feed back issues to their managers.

'One of the things from the design team was to have people from the field to advise the techies and the policy people that this could work, or 'that's a really bad idea and forget about it'. So especially on the Prototype. What do you think about this?' and 'What do you think about that?'
For some, this type of co-operation between levels of management was a new concept

'The senior members of staff are available and you can call them and then changes are made. This is unusual because you could never speak to someone at headquarters and say 'I don't like this, please change it' you would have to make a submission.'

4.3 Working with the Local Authority

Only one local authority (LA), the London Borough of Camden, was involved directly with the Prototype – otherwise Housing Benefit forms were passed on in the normal way. For residents of the LA taking part in the Prototype, additional information was collected by LPP staff as part of the combined form and then information was passed directly to the LA for processing. In this way customers did not have to complete an additional form to claim Housing Benefit

However, this had not run as smoothly as had been hoped. The Local Authority could not justify letting go of staff to work alongside the LPP staff given the relatively small number of customers involved. Contact between the LPP and LA staff had been limited. There was also an issue around how Housing Benefit was triggered and processed which made it harder to link it into an Income Support chain. For example, information needed by the LA had not been getting through

'We either have to look for further information or we get an Income Support start date computer print out but no claim form, so we have to send out [our own] claim form'

This had led to some duplication of work for the LA which the LPP ought to have prevented. If the LA did not receive all the information they required from the BA, they either had to write back for the information or get it directly from the client in order to process the Housing Benefit claim. The LPP view was that it was important to get the Income Support claim processed as quickly as possible

'Documentation – half the time they didn’t bring what you wanted, or what we wanted, in. But we would still go forward and if we had enough for Income Support [we’d] get that going. Because that to us is the number one priority – they need money to live'

Both the LA and the LPP staff were keen to resolve any problems so that information could be exchanged more effectively. Having highlighted the problem, the local authority produced a checklist for LPP staff which was being implemented at the time of the research. The checklist itemised all the information needed before a Housing Benefit claim could be processed and included information that needed to be given to customers (for example that they had to provide evidence within a time-limited period)

'There is a tick sheet now so once we get that from the BA we can use that. We can put that straight on file so the claimant knows they’ve got 4 weeks to supply the information.'
Better understanding between the LA and the LPP made it clear that whilst some information could be sent through early (the claim start date) other information could only be sent once the IS claim had been adjudicated. Once this misunderstanding had been resolved information from London was sent to Glasgow rather than directly to Camden LA Staff in Glasgow then passed on all the relevant information to the LA.

'It's only in the last couple of weeks that we've stopped sending the claim forms from here to Camden. We've had nothing but problems with it. It's being done in Glasgow now.'

The LA had found things easier since having computer access to general DSS information and suggested that extending this link would improve efficiency and greatly enhance the processing of Housing Benefit as part of the Prototype.

'If we had IT - something connecting the two offices. It's only recently that we've got a terminal which actually goes into the DSS so we can look up some very general information. But maybe that's the way to get round it - more liaison in that respect so that we have computer link-ups so that information can be sent down - checks can be done.'

There was a feeling that the Local Authority involvement had been incorporated into the prototype late in the design process and that this in some way explained why the LA appeared to be less well integrated than the other two agencies.

4.4 Job satisfaction

Positive aspects

'I have quite a lot of job satisfaction doing this because the person comes in, often they clearly need help, and if you can advise them and then in a few days they hear from Glasgow, they are happy and I am happy. It is a good feeling and something I haven't had for a long time.'

Staff seemed to gain a great deal of job satisfaction from working on the prototype. Their computing skills were enhanced because they were learning to use more advanced software than they had access to in their previous jobs. They had greater involvement with customers which they valued and the efficiency with which claims could be processed pleased them.

Staff felt more involved in their cases because they saw them from the beginning to the end. Seeing the whole process made the job more diverse and interesting, but it also gave them more control over the paperwork which in turn led to less frustration. In the past staff often found that papers went missing between offices so that the information they needed was not readily to hand causing back-longs and low morale. This was no longer the case.'
we keep the files in the same room. It is very rare for a file to go missing they don’t seem to have as many A1 claim forms missing which involves duplication of work [in New Claims sections] if you need something for reference at a later date you have to actually fax down a memo saying you need this, then they have to look in a warehouse – so again the time factor on things like that.’

As the caseload had been low at least in the early stages of the Prototype staff were able to get on top of their work and it was satisfying not to have paperwork mounting up. On a more emotional level staff found the working environment enjoyable and appreciated being treated as individuals

‘They have encouraged us to be individuals in this project – with a valued input Our opinions and our work is appreciated. For that just to stop on 31st December – I wouldn’t be happy.’

Staff had a high sense of involvement in shaping the service, something they had hoped for when they joined the Prototype. They were also pleased to receive such positive feedback from customers

‘That’s one of the beauties of this project and it’s one thing I’ve really enjoyed doing the feedback I’ve been getting, one to one, the lone parents that I’ve been talking to as they leave the office I’ve never had so many people saying ‘thank you, this is really good’ and all that kind of stuff.’

Negative aspects

Whilst some staff talked about morale being ‘sky high’, there were aspects of the Prototype which were less satisfying for staff. The job could be very demanding, it could be hard to plan the working day never knowing how many customers would phone up with enquiries processing of claims could be interrupted by a two minute enquiry or a complex tele-claim interview that might take over an hour to complete.

As time progressed staff became very familiar with the electronic claim form. Asking the same questions over and over again could be monotonous

Staff sometimes felt inexperienced when dealing with certain aspects of the Prototype. This lack of experience made them feel uncomfortable.

Some Executive Officers in London felt over-graded for their job and felt considerable frustration over the loss of responsibility and level of decision-making they had from their involvement in the Prototype. These staff had envisaged a greater role in shaping the Prototype than they experienced.
Other issues that were mentioned included a worry that focusing on one client group could be deskilling and concerns associated with doing a multi-skilled job and not knowing where one stood anymore with regard to grading.

'I think it's difficult to measure us against other people, especially the civil service... it's quite difficult to see how we are doing as well.'

Some expressed a desire for written work objectives so that they would know the standard they needed to be working towards.

'From my point of view I've not even had work objectives yet, and the project is nearly at an end... I know what is expected of me, but I don't have it down on paper to see to what standard I am working towards.'

4.5 Staff concerns

Staff commented on various aspects that should be taken forward from the Prototype including tele-claiming and offering an integrated approach. But also highlighted areas that would need to be changed if the LPP way of doing things was to become mainstream. Many aspects had worked well. For example, handling tele-claims, inter-agency working, and improved customer care had all worked well. There were, however, some issues that had confounded the project. Training, information technology and handling postal claims (Section 2.3.1) were all issues that some staff felt could be changed for the better.

4.5.1 Staff training

Staff were trained in Glasgow during the month before the Prototype went live. All the staff were trained together except when they were learning about each other's agency. The training programme cultivated enthusiasm among staff and provided a clear explanation of the aims of the project as well their role within the Prototype. However, staff would have liked more time on two aspects of the training: a greater focus on practicalities of the Prototype and information technology.

Staff thought the project was described well but considered that there needed to be a greater balance between theoretical issues and the practical aspects of the LPP, such as filling in the electronic form claim. This was particularly true for the areas they were less familiar with, for example CSA systems from the point of view of BA staff.

'We had some CSA training. It was ok, but it was... not well. The law says this and the law says that. Really I wanted the practical side of things - what form do I fill in, and do I fill in this box. It was covered, but not too well.'

There was a feeling that the (CSA) trainers had done what they were supposed to do - provide an overview, but that everyday problems and everyday solutions' really needed to be the focus of the training.
Staff were of the opinion that there had not been enough time to set up the project. The information technology was still being developed while staff were trying to learn how to use the computer software.

"They were rushing through the programme as people were literally walking about putting in cables. Then they were having to read through them so that they could get other things up. It was just a fiasco. The testing impacted on training as well because if something didn't work they had to go and retest it. And that ate into the precious little time we had."

For a few people the IT training was too advanced leaving them feeling very unprepared.

"I think they expected us to be more literate than we were. There were people who were literate and they thought this was the level. I was terrified to say something, and then I thought 'No, I can't stand this. You have to tell me what toggle means - because they were going so quick'."

- while for other staff it was not advanced enough.

Staff would have liked more time to practice with the IT, and "consolidate" what they had learnt before going live. The time-scale meant they finished the IT training on the Friday and the system went live on the Monday. However, the low number of cases coming through during the first week gave staff some time to get up to speed.

4.5.2 Information Technology

Staff were thrilled to be working with information technology that was so much more advanced than they had been used to in their previous jobs. They saw working on the LPP as an opportunity to enhance their computing skills which they were able to do. However, there were some 'teething problems' with the IT resulting from the speed with which it had been developed. Many issues were addressed as the Prototype evolved.

The IT was thought to be crucial to the success of the Prototype and so expectations were high. The software seemed to be well regarded with perhaps a few "tweaks" being needed so that it could be that bit more effective. For example making it easier for staff to move from one section to another without having to put a response into every box on the form.

LPP staff would have liked more support from the IT specialists.

"We felt that one person from Staffware should be on site for the first couple of weeks - it might have instilled us with a bit more confidence. When they did come up it was as quick as this and they were away again. You could see them thinking 'this can't be an IT fault, this must be a user fault'. It could have been a user's fault but that was because we were so poorly trained. We couldn't solve the problems ourselves."
Staff were keen to learn about the IT and would have liked copies of the computer manuals so they could try and solve their own problems before turning to specialist support. When computer staff fixed the software, the LPP staff would have liked to have known what the solution was so they could have learnt about the system. This information was rarely forthcoming.

There were two factors which caused particular problems for staff working in the London LPP sites. Firstly, the printers were erratic — either not printing at all or the print-outs were illegible. Secondly, the connection between the server (in Glasgow) and the London offices was very slow.

Team working became crucial to the printing problem. Significant delays would have been added if Glasgow staff had not got involved with printing off the forms, and then faxing them down to London, so the claim could be dealt with while the customer was in the office. There were also printing problems in the Glasgow office.

This month we have had severe problems printing. Now if I am trying to print out people’s claim forms on the day that we have interviewed them on the phone and we have said that we will post it out to you in a couple of days, [post is slow to London] and then the printer won’t print or prints gibberish — which just compounds the delay.

The slow link between London and Glasgow had proved more difficult to overcome. Some of the London staff had given up inputting the initial personal interviews directly onto the computers because the system was so slow.

The program takes forever to load up and to move from one bit to another. It could be ten times slower than Glasgow — you just can’t transfer or store the information quickly enough.

Staff were keen to see aspects of the Prototype adopted by the DSS. There were mixed opinions over how this could be achieved. However, there were key principles such as tele-claiming and having an integrated service, that staff thought should be continued.

I think it has been very successful. That we can give good customer service. That staff want to give good customer service, and that gives them satisfaction in their job giving a better service. Staff really feel quite strongly that they have been involved and have had a very small influence elsewhere. If nothing else had happened just that is a good thing.

Aspects that staff thought worth cultivating from the Prototype included:

- tele-claiming
- single point of contact
- integrated working
- the combined claim form
- enhanced information technology
Overall staff thought it unlikely that case-management could be maintained unless the staff-customer ratio was high. If the workload increased then individual staff would be unable to maintain the quality of service they had achieved through the Prototype. There was already an element of CSA staff taking on more of the tele-claiming process to allow BA staff to focus on the processing of claims. Staff envisaged that the information gathering and processing would be separated because it would be more cost-effective, but there was some disappointment that one of the more fulfilling aspects of the Prototype would be lost. Keeping staff in the same building might help, but the relationship with customers would still suffer.

Staff thought that the approach, overall tested in the Prototype could be extended to other benefits, although the benefits system might need to be simplified if the single point of contact element were to be maintained.

Some staff also thought that the follow-up interview would be too expensive for the DSS to extend and would need to be restricted to high risk cases for example new claimants those with no National Insurance number or where there were suspicions of fraud.

Staff had a gut-feeling that the Prototype approach would be expensive, but also felt that the reduction in fraud, more accurate information and higher compliance with Child Support applications would all lead to cost-savings.

Even though staff were disappointed that the information technology had not worked as smoothly as they felt it should have, they felt it was crucial to any new way of delivering the service. Staff thought that greater investment in this area was crucial.

There were also concerns expressed about whether the DSS might be attempting to take over the processing of Housing Benefit from local authorities, and vice versa, that local authorities might take responsibility for more benefits.

"There was an initial worry that it would mean that BA would take over Housing Benefit. Why, if they are trying to put everything under one umbrella and have a one stop shop, why are you looking at [f]our new benefits as well? and I am sure that there is that concern with BA, that maybe benefits, local authorities are taking over the other side because that is also one of the suggestions."

In the same vein, staff were concerned that integration of services would lead to job cuts.
The Prototype staff wondered whether the enthusiasm and experience they brought to the project could be easily replicated in the normal environment. Most of the staff had been working in the DSS for many years and brought considerable flexibility to the project. However, they recognised a Prototype was very much about testing new ways of working and many issues had been identified through working on the Lone Parent Prototype that would help the DSS provide a better service in the future.
5 THE LONE PARENT PROTOTYPE: IS IT A MODEL FOR ACTIVE MODERN SERVICE?

5 | Future ways of working - positive aspects of the Lone Parent Prototype from customer and staff perspectives

Overwhelmingly, participants' views about the Lone Parent Prototype were positive, with non-participants expressing considerable enthusiasm for the Prototype concept. Underpinning these views were six key features:

- easier access to the benefit system
- increased customer focus and service, with staff being perceived to take a much greater interest in the customer and their benefit application
- increased customer care, with helpful advice being offered and customers feeling that they were being kept more informed of the progress of their claim,
- a less stressful experience which resulted in reduced customer abuse and aggression, a view corroborated by staff implementing the Prototype,
- a system which was felt to be less open to fraudulent claims, a view that was also held by BA staff and
- an overall perception that the social security system was becoming much more proactive and customer orientated, the consequence of which was to encourage a more positive view of the DSS and BA.

In the light of this very positive impact of the Lone Parent Prototype it is useful to identify those features which were felt to be worth cultivating and that have a positive contribution to make towards the development of an Active Modern Service. As these have already been discussed extensively earlier in the report they are presented here in summary form:

- Tele-claiming:
  - simplifies access to the benefit system,
  - avoids duplicating questions across benefits and only requires individuals to tell their story once,
  - reduces the need for customers to travel to one or more offices, and reduces the need to arrange, potentially expensive, child care
  - is perceived to be 'the way to go' and in line with other large organisations, a view shared by customers and staff
  - demonstrates greater customer focus and offers a faster and more efficient customer service
  - provides for more accurate collection of information with less missing data.

* Other research such as Education and training whilst claiming Jobseeker's Allowance Workskill pilots by Andrew Thomas, Sue Griffith and Nick Pettigrew (1998, DfEE) has indicated that where government agencies become more customer focused and appear to be actively providing help, customers tend to become more predisposed towards that agency.
- offers the opportunity to spot some types of fraud as well as inconsistencies in information received
- in conjunction with a processing role was felt by staff to provide an interesting and satisfying way of working with the public
- offers a number of potential cost savings in terms of greater accuracy of the information collected at the application stage. Reduced administration costs due to increased compliance and possible cost-savings of employment-related information were to be provided at the time of the claim and led to a swifter return to the labour market

- Integrated approach / combined application forms:
  - is perceived by customers to be a more logical way of working
  - reduces duplication of common household questions
  - is less humiliating as a customer only has to discuss their experiences once
  - is felt to enhance co-operation from the staff perspective

- Single point of contact:
  - simplifies access to the benefit system
  - requires customers to only 'tell their story once'
  - reduces the need to contact a number of offices which in turn minimises customer irritation from being 'passed from pillar to post'
  - minimises the need to travel between offices
  - potentially increases take-up of all the benefits to which an individual is entitled,
  - provides opportunities for increased customer focus and
  - enhances customer perceptions of the social security system

- Providing additional help and advice:
  - works well as part of the tele-claim process,
  - is highly regarded by customers as it brings closer the concept of the 'one-stop shop approach to the delivery of social security benefits and related services,
  - has considerable potential for expansion into non-benefit related areas such as training and employment advice

- Closer inter-agency working:
  - is perceived by customers to increase the speed with which benefit applications are processed,
  - reflects customer views about the way in which they consider agencies should work together
  - has very positive outcomes for staff in terms of understanding a wider set of social security benefits, understanding and being more sympathetic towards how other agencies work, and recognising best practice from other agencies and using this to amend existing administrative systems
• Gathering feedback from operational staff:
  - is welcomed and highly regarded
  - enhances job satisfaction
  - has the potential to recognise and attend to administrative and processing inefficiencies providing the feedback is acted upon

• Improved information technology:
  - has a key role to play in providing a fast efficient, integrated service. Although as currently implemented the Prototype IT system is felt to be limited in its potential Nevertheless, it has demonstrated the role for sophisticated IT systems in the administration of a tele-claim based social security service

Overall, from the customer perspective the Lone Parent Prototype was felt to represent a step forward in the delivery of social security benefits. The DSS/BA appeared more customer focused and reflected the beginnings of a one-stop shop approach to the delivery of benefits and allied services. Participation in the Prototype had undoubtedly raised expectations about the way in which benefits would be delivered in the future, with many of the study respondents eagerly awaiting further developments.

5.2 Future ways of working - operational aspects of the Lone Parent Prototype that need to be addressed

Overall, the implementation of the Lone Parent Prototype was felt to be very successful, given the timescale in which it was operating. Nevertheless, there were a number of operational issues that arose. These focused around:

- cost and time implications of undertaking 100% tele-claims plus a follow-up interview
- combining the tele-claim operation with benefit processing,
- information technology, and
- staff training

5.2.1 Cost and time implication

Staff were very concerned that the combination of tele-claims plus a follow-up face-to-face interview was very costly in time and staff resources. There was also some question as to whether this was wholly necessary. It was suggested that follow-up interviews might be targeted. Two ways were suggested: a one-in-ten random interview a follow-up interview to be targeted at individuals where the tele-claim interviewer felt there was a possibility of fraud.

5.2.2 Combining tele-claiming with benefit processing

Currently, Prototype staff combine the roles of taking benefit applications over the telephone as well as the subsequent processing of the claim. In the early stages of the Prototype this was relatively easy to manage. As the caseloads increased so the juggling of these two roles became more difficult and stressful. Perhaps the obvious conclusion to draw would be to separate out the two roles with one set of staff dedicating their time to taking benefit applications (a call-centre approach) and others being concerned with benefit processing.
However, this would have two very significant disadvantages. First, from the staff point of view, one of the major advantages of the Prototype is the way it has combined the two roles, with a consequent increase in overall job satisfaction. Should the roles be dissociated, staff would no longer have the satisfaction of playing the central co-ordinating role which customers value highly. Additionally, staff would no longer have such an interesting and wide ranging job. Second, from the customers perspective, a key requirement of a modern social security service is one that offers a simple but comprehensive, route into the benefits system ideally with a single channel of communication. This would be very difficult to attain in a situation where the tele-claim and processing roles are separate.

5.2.3 Information technology

The information technology that was developed was often a sore point amongst Prototype staff. While on the one hand they were appreciative of the sophistication of the software, particularly in the way in which it revealed the potential for the role of IT in handling benefit applications, on the other hand there was considerable criticism about the way in which the IT was implemented and subsequently supported.

For the future the following would need to occur:

- software to be fully tested and operational in terms of processing speed and 'bugs', before going live,
- staff to be fully trained in the use of the software before going live,
- the tele-claim scripts to be written in plain, customer-friendly, language
- hardware links between different benefit systems (e.g. Income Support and Child Support) to be put in place, in order to avoid duplicating the task of data entry.

5.2.4 Staff training

Staff were very appreciative of the effort that had been put into training as a run up to the Lone Parent Prototype. In particular, the bringing together of staff from different agencies and locations was felt to be virtually unique and considered a major success.

However, staff were also constructively critical of the training they received and felt that the emphasis was often biased towards 'public relations' rather than more practical aspects of the Prototype. Views were mixed about the required content of the training, although there was a strong feeling that it should be more practically based and tailored more to the individual needs of staff.
5.3 Potential extensions to the Lone Parent Prototype

The Lone Parent Prototype was generally considered, by staff and customers alike, to provide an excellent basis from which to develop the delivery of social security benefits. Three specific areas for extension were considered to be feasible:

- widening the range of benefits,
- extending the Prototype to a wider range of client groups specifically people with disabilities and the elderly, and
- developing a more proactive approach to the delivery of, or sign-posting to non-benefit-related information and advice.

If the DSS/BA aims to build an inclusive relationship with its customers as part of its transformation into an Active Modern Service, there are many lessons to be drawn from the Lone Parent Prototype.

It is very clear from the views of the lone parent participants that they responded to the caring and helpful customer service they received. Staff perceptions too were that happy customers were less likely to be abusive and aggressive and would be more likely to co-operate and therefore be ultimately less likely to defraud the system. For this to happen completely, the customer needs to really feel that they are working in partnership with, rather than against, the DSS. The Lone Parent Prototype was felt to have demonstrated a much more customer orientated approach to the delivery of social security benefits and provide a very firm basis from which an Active Modern Service could be developed.
REFERENCES
# Appendix

Table 1: Sample profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience of the service</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants in the LPP</td>
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<td>Customers who declined to take part in the LPP</td>
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<td>Customers in control sites</td>
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<table>
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<th>Type of benefits applied for</th>
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<td>Income Support</td>
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<td>Child Support</td>
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<td>Repeat claim</td>
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<td>One child</td>
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<td>More than one child</td>
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<td>Youngest child under 5</td>
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<td>Youngest child 5 or over</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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Recruitment

The customers who took part in the study were recruited by specialist staff at BMRB Qualitative. Initially, a letter was sent from the DSS to customers asking them to opt-out of the study if they wished to. After the two-week opt-out period had elapsed, few people had dropped out of the study, and staff at BMRB Qualitative contacted potential participants to arrange an interview. Contact was usually made over the telephone, but some face-to-face recruitment was undertaken where a customer was not on the telephone. We felt it was crucial to include people not on the telephone since the study was testing reactions to using the telephone when making applications for benefit.

Staff were recruited to the project by the Department of Social Security.

Conduct of the interviews and group discussions

The study comprised 55 in-depth interviews with customers, four paired-depths with staff, and two mini-group discussions with staff (6 respondents per group). The customer depths were conducted in the respondents' homes. Respondents were given £20 as a thank you for participating. A topic guide was used to structure and facilitate the interviews and discussions. All the interviews and discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Analysis methods

BMRB Qualitative is committed to a thorough analysis of the qualitative data and have a set of procedures to ensure a systematic and comprehensive approach to data analysis. Throughout the analytical procedure, care is taken to ensure that the extraction and interpretation of findings is based on the raw data rather than on a researcher's impressions. A set of content analysis techniques known as Matrix Mapping is employed to ensure an optimum synthesis of findings from the verbatim data. These techniques include an executive researchers' review of the audio tapes and verbatim transcripts, respondent profiling (in terms of demographic characteristics and key attitudinal or behavioral features), and a full topic analysis using a range of techniques such as cognitive mapping and data matrices. This report has been compiled from a full content analysis of the audio tapes and transcripts with verbatim quotes being provided where appropriate, to illustrate and illuminate the findings.
Dear

YOUR VIEWS ON USING THE NEW SERVICE FOR LONE PARENTS

I am writing for your help with a research project. The Department of Social Security have asked an independent research company BMRB, to carry out a research study looking at customers' views on the new Lone Parent service offered in your locality. We are interested in your views on this service and any ideas you may have on how you would like to see our service develop in the future.

Your name has been selected randomly from our Agency records of people who have recently claimed Income Support, and we would be very interested in your views. A researcher may ask to interview you in the next two months and we would be grateful if you could take part in the survey.

Anything you discuss with the interviewer will be treated in the strictest of confidence and the results will be presented in such a way that no-one will be able to identify you or your family.

This is an important opportunity to make your views known. The more people who agree to take part, the better the research will be. However if you prefer not to be contacted, please let me know by Thursday, 20th August 1998. You can telephone me on 01132 327802, or write to me at the above FREEPOST address (you do not need to put a stamp on the letter). If you write or telephone please remember to give your full name and address. Whatever you decide, I can assure you that it will not affect your benefit or any dealings you have with the Benefits Agency either now or in the future.

Unfortunately the interviewers will not have time to talk to everyone, so if you have not been contacted by the middle of September you will know that you are not being asked for an interview.

I hope that you agree to take part in this survey because your views are very important to the Benefits Agency.

Yours sincerely,

Anne Harrop
Principal Research Officer
LONE PARENT Prototype (Users)

An evaluation of a single point of contact method of delivering Social Security services to lone parents

The benefits included in this Prototype are Income Support, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and Child Support Application. The organisations involved are the Benefits Agency, the Local Authority (Camden) and the Child Support Agency.

Aims:
- To consider the views and experiences of lone parents who have used this Prototype service
- To identify customer attitudes to tele-claiming, in particular any obstacles to using this method
- To assess customer understanding of, and attitudes towards, data sharing between organisations in support of their claims
- To consider customer views on having a single point of contact for all their social security business and to identify any particular needs of lone parents
- To explore customer views on the principle of AMS (Active Modern Service) and its broader application in the delivery of social security services

1. Introduction
- Welcome
- About BMRB International
- About the study, funded by the DSS. Aims are
  - (i) to evaluate a new way of delivering services to lone parents and
  - (ii) inform further debate about development of welfare services
- Tape-recording and confidentiality

2. Background
About the respondent
- Length of time as lone parent
- Number and ages of children
- Employment situation
- Benefits claimed or reasons for using the service
Overview of claiming experience

- Previous claim/service experience
- Knowledge of benefits available
- Expectations about how most recent claim would be dealt with - how much did they understand about how the 'normal' claims process works
- Were their expectations met, was the service different
- Experience of New Deal (emphasize that we are talking about the Prototype be sure that they refer to Prototype and not New Deal)

3 Experience of the Prototype service

Presentation and explanation of Prototype

- How did they initially make their claim (in-person, postal, telephone home/benefit office)
- What happened next, how was the prototype presented (Probe for telephone claiming)
- From the explanation given did they understand what would happen
- Any concerns
- Why did they decide to participate (Probe for why attractive)
- Amount of choice given over claim method
- Any concerns about whether a 'joint' claim would be processed effectively

Overall experience of making their enquiry or claim

Making the claim

- Getting the appointment
- Time spent waiting
- Number of staff they saw/talked to

Information and advice

- Information or advice given - views about

The interview

- Overall view of the interview (excluding discussion of method used)
- Views on the telephone interview (did the conversation flow?)
- Any difficulty with staff answering your questions
- Were their needs understood
- Were their feelings respected
- Written statement of claim or application (Prompt: Was it clear, accurate, comparison with previous claims)
- Providing evidence for the claim / any difficulties
- Views on dealing with one person by phone, seeing another face-to-face and possibly having another process then claims
- Views on having to call the office personally 48 hours later

64
Processing the claim
- How long did claim(s) take to process
- Did this meet their expectations
- Getting the decision(s)
- Was there any confusion over any aspect of the claim
- Level of satisfaction with the service received (Prompt approach of staff, suggestions for improvement)

Views about claim methods
- If tele-claim, ask A, B, then C
- If postal, ask B, C, then A
- If face-to-face, ask C, B, then A

A VIEWS ON TELE-CLAIMING (ASK ALL)
- Views on using the telephone to claim benefits (Probe for likes, dislikes, including access to a telephone, paying for calls, presence of children or others while tele-claiming)
- Confidence about tele-claims
  - process
  - outcomes
  - security
    - views about using a password
    - views about personal details being given to them over the phone
- How long would they be prepared to use the telephone for when making a claim
- Would they prefer one long call or several shorter ones
- Under what circumstances would a telephone interview be considered inappropriate
- What can be done to help overcome any problems identified
- Would they use the telephone to make a claim (again)
- What other business (to do with benefits) might be conducted by phone
- What social security business ought not to be conducted by phone

B VIEWS ON POSTAL CLAIMING (ASK ALL)
- Views on using the post to claim benefits (Probe for likes, dislikes)
- What business is best dealt with by post
- Under what circumstances would using the post be inappropriate
- Would postal claiming be used in future (Probe for why the preferred method over tele-claiming)
C Views on having face-to-face interviews (ASK ALL)
• Views on having face-to-face personal interviews when claiming (Probe for likes / dislikes)
• What business is best dealt with face-to-face
• Under what circumstances would having a personal interview at the office be inappropriate
• Would they want to have personal interviews in the future (probe for why preferred method over tele-claiming)
• Preference for having an appointment or just walk in
• Preference for home visits or office interviews

4 Attitudes towards the service delivery model being tested
• How did this claim experience compare with previous experience
  - positives
  - negatives

Customer’s attitudes towards the service
• Overall satisfaction with the new lone parents service
• Do the current opening hours meet their needs (Probe for when they would like to do business, and whether this is different for visiting the office or using the telephone)
• Thoughts on changes to the system (Probe the prototype generally comparison with previous experiences of making claims)
• Perceived changes in efficiency with new service compared with previous experiences of claiming (Probe for examples of more/less efficiency, no difference)
• Any preference for contacting particular agencies and by different methods (Probe for reasons)
• Would they make a joint claim again reasons
  - preferences for integrated / previous way of working

Integrated service
• Did they realise they were dealing with an integrated service - did they know which services were involved
• Any reservations about making a child support application together with application for benefits
• What do they think of the benefits office, child support agency and local authority working together
• What other services could be included eg social services
• Advantages / disadvantages of an integrated service
Data sharing and confidentiality

- Understanding of data sharing arrangements between these organisations
- Perception of confidentiality and how well this is protected
- Views on agencies sharing information from one application form
- Is it acceptable for some agencies to share information but not others
- Ask for examples of when sharing data is acceptable or advantageous, and when it is not
- Are there any types of personal information which should not be shared between agencies

Ways of providing the service

Gateways into the service

- preference for
  - single point of contact versus signposts to multiple points of contact for these 3 social security services
  - single / multiple points of contact for other social security services

Service provision

- preference for
  - a single advisor (face-to-face / by phone)
  - case-management
  - different benefits staff at a single location each able to answer questions about a single benefit
  - single advisor who would need to refer to others / may not be able to answer all questions on the spot (where should the ‘others’ be located – would it matter if elsewhere?)

- views on the idea of the private sector providing social security services
- are there any areas where they would find it acceptable to be passed over to experts/specialists instead of the DSS dealing with the claim end to end

Location / access to services

- when visiting an office regarding a claim, where would they prefer to go (Benefit Office, CAB Library, Supermarket, etc.)
- views about accessing services by
  - internet
  - electronic kiosk (eg in a Post Office)

Particular needs of lone parents

- Views on a special service for lone parents (as opposed to a general service for all social security claimants)
- Any other service which lone parents would like to be offered at the same time

CLOSE AND THANK YOU
LONE PARENT PROTOTYPE
(NON-USERS: CONTROLS AND NON-PARTICIPANTS)

An evaluation of a single point of contact method of delivering Social Security services to lone parents

The benefits included in this Prototype are Income Support, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and Child Support Application. The organisations involved are the Benefits Agency, the Local Authority (Camden) and the Child Support Agency.

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  - (i) to evaluate a new way of delivering services to lone parents and
  - (ii) inform further debate about development of welfare services
- Tape-recording and confidentiality

2. Background

About the respondent
- Length of time as lone parent
- Number and ages of children
- Employment situation
- Benefits claimed or reasons for using the service
Overview of claiming experience
• Previous claim/service experience
• Knowledge of benefits available
• Expectations about how most recent claim would be dealt with - how much did they understand about how the normal claims process works
• Were their expectations met (Prompt: any differences)
• Experience of New Deal (emphasise that interview is not about New Deal)

3 Experience of the Prototype service / service received
Presentation and explanation of prototype
(NON-PARTICIPANTS ONLY)
• How did they initially make their claim (in-person, postal, telephone home / benefit office)
• What happened next: how was the prototype presented (Probe for telephone claiming)
• From the explanation given, did they understand what would happen
• Any concerns
• Why did they decide not to participate (Probe: lack of access to a telephone, dislike of telephoning, language problems, other reasons)
• Would they be happy to use a telephone elsewhere (eg, CAB office, parents’ home)
• Amount of choice given over claim method
• Any concerns about whether a joint claim would be processed effectively
• Would they make a joint claim in the future

Overall experience of making their enquiry or claim
Making the claim
• Getting the appointment
• Time spent waiting
• Number of staff they saw/talked to

Information and advice
• Information or advice given - views about

The interview
• Overall view of the interview (excluding discussion of method used)
• Any difficulty with staff answering your questions
• Were their needs understood
• Were their feelings respected
• Views on claim form (Prompts: was it clear, number of questions asked, information required)
• Providing evidence for the claim / any difficulties
• Views on dealing with one person by phone seeing another face-to-face and possibly having another process their claims

Processing the claim
• How long did claim(s) take to process
• Did this meet their expectations
• Getting the decision(s)
• Was there any confusion over any aspect of the claim
• Level of satisfaction with the service received (Prompt approach of staff suggestions for improvement)

Views about claim methods
• If tele-claim, ask A B then C
• If postal, ask B, C, then A
• If face-to-face, ask C, B then A

A Views on tele-claiming (ASK ALL)
• Views on using the telephone to claim benefits (Probe for likes, dislikes including access to a telephone, paying for calls, presence of children or others while tele-claiming)
• Confidence about tele-claims
  - process
  - outcomes
  - security
  - views about using a password
  - views about personal details being given to them over the phone
• How long would they be prepared to use the telephone for when making a claim
• Would they prefer one long call or several shorter ones
• Under what circumstances would a telephone interview be considered inappropriate
• What can be done to help overcome any problems identified
• Would they use the telephone to make a claim (again)
• What other business (to do with benefits) might be conducted by phone
• What social security business ought not to be conducted by phone

B Views on postal claiming (ASK ALL)
• Views on using the post to claim benefits (Probe for likes dislikes, why the preferred method over tele-claiming)
• What business is best dealt with by post
• Under what circumstances would using the post be inappropriate
• Would postal claiming be used in future
C Views on having face-to-face interviews (ASK ALL)

- Views on having face-to-face personal interviews when claiming (Probe for likes, dislikes)
- What business is best dealt with face-to-face
- Under what circumstances would having a personal interview at the office be inappropriate
- Would they want to have personal interviews in the future (probe for why preferred method over tele-claiming)
- Preference for having an appointment or just walk-in
- Preference for home visits or office interviews

Attitudes towards the service delivery model being tested

Views on an integrated service

- Any preference for contacting particular agencies and by different methods (Probe for reasons)
- Any reservations about making a child support application together with application for benefits
- Views about visiting several different places when making applications
- What do they think of the idea of the benefits office, child support agency and local authority working together
- What other services could be included eg social services
- Advantages / disadvantages of an integrated service

Data sharing and confidentiality

- Views on agencies sharing information from one application form
- Is it acceptable for some agencies to share information but not others
- Ask for examples of when sharing data is acceptable or advantageous, and when it is not
- Are there any types of personal information which should not be shared between agencies
- Any other concerns about multi-agency working

Ways of providing the service

Gateways into the service

- Preference for single point of contact versus signposts to multiple points of contact for these 3 social security services
- Preferences for single / multiple points of contact for other social security services
Service provision

- preferences for
  - a single advisor (face-to-face / by phone)
  - case-management (one-person contact team, phone number)
  - different benefits staff at a single location, each able to answer questions about a single benefit
  - single adviser who would need to refer to others / may not be able to answer all questions on the spot

- view on the idea of the private sector providing social security services
- are there any areas where they would find it acceptable to be passed over to experts/specialists instead of the DSS dealing with the claim end to end

Location / access to services

- when visiting an office regarding a claim, where would they prefer to go (Benefit Office, CAB, Library, Supermarket, etc.)
- views about accessing services by
  - internet
  - electronic kiosk (eg in a Post Office)

Particular needs of lone parents

- views on a special service for lone parents (as opposed to a general service for all social security claimants)
- any other service which lone parents would like to be offered at the same time

CLOSE AND THANK YOU
An evaluation of a single point of contact method of delivering Social Security services to lone parents

The benefits included in this Prototype are Income Support, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and Child Support Application. The organisations involved are the Benefits Agency, the Local Authority (Camden) and the Child Support Agency.

Aims:
• To consider staff experiences of the prototype and to assess satisfaction with it
• To identify barriers to implementation of the prototype and what can be done to overcome these
• To identify which barriers are unique to the prototype and which are existing problems in current service
• To explore staff and training issues in implementing the Prototype
• To consider views on the principles of Active Modern Service
• To inform the debate on reform of the delivery of Social Security services

Introduction
• Welcome
• About BMRB International
• About the study
• Confidentiality

1. Background (briefly)
• Current responsibilities - Lone Parent Prototype
• Previous responsibilities
• Other projects' they have worked on
• What attracted them to the Lone Parent Prototype
• What did they hope to get out of working on the Prototype (expectations)
• Did their experiences fit with their initial expectations
• Future plans
• Perceptions of the participating organisations
  *DSS *BA *CSA *Local Authority
• Has their perception of participating organisations changed whilst working on the Prototype
• Perceived changes over the years
  - attitudes to client / customer orientation
  - attitudes to staff / staff-management relationships
  - security
• Views about these changes
  - positives / negatives
• How have these changes come about

2. Customer reactions to the Prototype
• Do customers recognise the new way of working
• Customer reactions
  - have customers expressed positive reactions (what)
  - what do customers appear to like
  - what do customers appear to dislike
• Have customers expressed any concerns or irritations (what)

3. Staff reactions to the Lone Parent Prototype
(Obtain an initial overview and probe specific sections)
• What do they perceive the purpose of the prototype to be
• How do they view the Prototype
• Has the Prototype succeeded in meeting its objectives
• Are there areas / issues that need to be reviewed
• What do they think of Active Modern Service

Now focus on specific issues plus any others that have arisen
• Integrated working
• Customer service
• Working culture
• Training
• Information Technology
• Practicalities of the Prototype
• Others: staffing terms and conditions, management issues

3a Practicalities of the Prototype
Glasgow only (tele-claiming)
• How do customers feel about tele-claiming
  - speed of response / getting through (distinguish between initial call to Glasgow and direct call to Prototype line)
  - understanding the question
  - answering personal questions over the phone
• Do customers ever get distressed, angry or abusive (probe for examples thoughts on why this happens)
• Are there ever interruptions during a tele-claim (reasons)
  - from the customer end
  - from the staff end
• How do their 'scripts' work in practice
• Practicalities of using IT while on the phone
• Views about quality of information collected
  - comparison with face-to-face postal
• Any customer-related difficulties experienced
  - what would be the solution
• Any circumstances when tele-claiming should not be used

London only (request to tele-claim and conducting face-to-face interviews)
• Customer reactions on being asked to tele-claim
• Any circumstances when tele-claiming should not be used
• Do customers ever get distressed, angry or abusive during face-to-face interviews (probe for examples thoughts on why this happens)
• Are there ever interruptions during face-to-face interviews (reasons)
  - from the customer end
  - from the staff end
• How do their 'scripts' work in practice
• Practicalities of using IT during face-to-face interviews
• Views about quality of information collected - comparison with tele-claim, postal
• Any customer-related difficulties experienced
  - what would be the solution
• Experiences and views of the evidence/follow-up interview
• How their interviews tie-in with the New Deal
• Would it be appropriate to cover employment issues during interviews

3b Integrated working
• How well does the integrated approach work
  - how was integration / liaison achieved
  - did the agencies understand each other
  - which benefits / agencies work best
  - which benefits / agencies work least well
  - solutions to problems identified
  - communication/links between Glasgow and London
• Perceived benefits of integrated working
  - on customer service
  - on delivery of benefit
  - in terms of the nature of their job and job satisfaction
  - understanding how other agencies work
  - on the service provided to customers generally (not just lone parents)
• Any disadvantages of integrated working
  - generally
  - as a result of the way in which the Prototype has been implemented
3c Customer service
- Perceived effects on customer service
  - service delivery
  - establishing customer relationship
  - staff / customer relationship
  - whether staff felt able to 'make a difference' for customers (active case management)
- Did they feel case ownership
- Were they keen to act as a single point of contact (reasons)
- Can they be expected to cope with all of a customer's information needs
- What hand offs (referrals) appear to be acceptable to customers when the Prototype cannot meet their needs
- How did they feel about having an overview of each case - ownership from start to finish
- Would they prefer specialisms (staff specialising in tele-claiming, staff specialising in claim processing)
- Changes required / improvements needed

3d Training
- Training received (not IT)
- Views about training
  - coverage
  - timing
  - top-up training
- Any training needs not covered / outstanding
- Can all staff be trained to work with tele-claims

3e Information Technology
- Training received
- Views about coverage and quality
- Practicalities
  - ease of use
  - speed
  - back-up support

3f Working culture
- Relationship between staff and manager
- Relationship between agencies
- Views on working cultures of different agencies
- Job roles / satisfaction
- Impact of Prototype on staff behaviour and skills
- What sorts of competencies are needed to work on the Prototype
- Does working on the Prototype require a shift in values or focus
3g Other issues

- Terms and conditions
- Other management issues
- Staffing
  - Thoughts on returning to the old way of working (likes dislikes, preference to stay with Prototype or return)
- Should the Prototype be continued
- Should it be extended (in same or different format, reasons)

4. Overview

- Overall what has the Lone Parent Prototype achieved
  - for customers
  - for staff
- Have their views about the Prototype changed over time
- How did they feel about working within the Prototype procedures (did they feel tempted to make short-cuts)
- How does the Prototype relate to the principles of the Active Modern Service
  - how well does the Prototype reflect how they believe services should be delivered
  - what are their views of AMS
  - do they support the principles of AMS (reasons)
- Could aspects of the Prototype be applied more generally (to all client groups)
  - what would be the impact of this
  - where and how
  - would there be more or less vulnerability to abuse

CLOSE AND THANK
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Department of Social Security
Attn Keith Watson
Social Research Branch
Analytical Services Division 5
4th Floor, Adelphi
1-11 John Adam Street
London WC2N 6HT
Telephone 0171 962 8557
This report represents the findings from the social research evaluation of the Lone Parent Prototype. This tested a series of service design features including case management, integrated working, cost-effectiveness and information sharing. The aim of this evaluation was to consider how well the prototype reflects the principles of active modern service delivery of social security services from the perspectives of customers and staff from the various agencies involved. Views about the efficiency and acceptability of the initiatives were sought, barriers identified and potential solutions to the modernisation of social security services explored. The research was carried out by BMRB International.

The Department of Social Security Social Research Branch is responsible for commissioning and managing the Department's research programme. The research programme serves the information needs of Ministers, the Department and its Agencies. Research contributes to the development and implementation of new policies, and the monitoring and evaluation of existing policies. It also plays an important role in providing customer feedback on the Department's services.

Researchers in the branch work closely with Departmental colleagues responsible for making policy and delivering the services for which the Department is responsible. Most projects are carried out by external contractors who work closely with in-house researchers throughout the project. A programme of work is agreed annually and details are announced.

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