NEW DEAL FOR LONE PARENTS: EVALUATION OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR INNOVATIVE SCHEMES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aims and method of the research

The research presented in this report describes and evaluates the various innovative schemes run by voluntary sector organisations which were set up in parallel with Phase One of the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and designed to help lone parents on Income Support to take up paid work. The study was commissioned by the Department of Social Security (DSS) and undertaken by Social & Community Planning Research, an independent research institute, between November 1997 and March 1998.

The method involved consultation, through in-depth interviews and focus groups, with users of the schemes and with scheme organisers or staff. A total of 95 lone parents and 14 organisers took part, together with 40 employers. Largely, the report reflects the users' perspective which is summarised below along with implications for the effectiveness of future approaches.

Context: The New Deal for Lone Parents

The NDLP is a programme of back-to-work help for lone parents on Income Support. Phase One was launched in July 1997 in eight areas around the UK, based on Benefits Agency districts. It offers a tailored package of help and advice on jobs, benefits, training and child care, through the provision of advisers (or caseworkers) who work on a one-to-one basis with participants. Lone parents with school age children (aged 5 years 3 months and above) are invited to participate in the programme; lone parents whose youngest child is below school-age may ‘opt in’ to the programme by requesting to participate. In parallel to the NDLP, contracts were awarded by the DSS, following a competitive tendering exercise, to deliver six innovative schemes. The schemes, whilst also designed to help lone parents into work, adopted different strategies to those of the New Deal.

Context: The Innovative Schemes

Six schemes were evaluated, all located in the voluntary sector. They included a telephone advice line for lone parents, a printed information booklet for employers, and four schemes that worked directly with lone parents over a period of time, providing training or guidance. The four schemes that worked directly with lone parents offered a varying mix of elements on such aspects as careers guidance, job search skills, workplace skills, IT access/training, business skills, and employment advice. The extent to which work experience or work placements were offered, or child care provided (on or near to the site), and the emphasis placed on either a group or an individual one-to-one format (or both), varied.
Each scheme was found to put a different emphasis on the particular barriers to employment that it addressed (Section 2.1). The manner by which the barriers were addressed also differed. To differentiate between the four schemes that offered direct training and advice and to distinguish the essence of each approach, we labelled each respectively as: **job guidance approach, job club approach, tailored menu approach, and motivational approach**.

**Job guidance approach**  
Scheme C provided a six week course of job search skills and careers guidance. The key elements of the scheme included: job search skills and career guidance provided through group sessions and one-to-one mentoring, access to information technology, confidence-raising & motivational work through group sessions, an employment recruitment register advertising job vacancies on-site, work placements both on-site and with external employers and post-course support for participants. The scheme also provided free child care for under-5's at a nearby local authority nursery.

**Job club approach**  
Scheme D offered back to work or self-employment advice and training. It provided a ten week course offering the opportunity to gain credits towards an NVQ in Administration (Level 1 & 2) and receive support and guidance in relation to job seeking and work readiness. The scheme resembled the Job Club model of help for the unemployed with a focus on job search skills and preparing for work but with additional on-site training towards a vocational qualification. The key elements of the scheme were: vocational skills up to Level 2 NVQ, access to IT training packages, work experience, one-to-one guidance and advice on request.

**Tailored menu approach**  
Scheme E offered the following key elements: vocational skills training, individually tailored provision, a Job Link worker providing one-to-one support and guidance with job search skills and Back to Work Refresher courses. The scheme also offered: business/self-employment skills and advice, business plans and business courses. Work placements were offered. There was ongoing post-course support available for participants, including one-to-one counselling and access to IT facilities. The scheme also provided free on-site child care in its existing nursery or offered a contribution towards child care costs. The scheme developed a Lone Parents Networking Forum.

**Motivational approach**  
Scheme F provided a 12 week course. A key emphasis of the course was to raise the confidence and self-esteem of participants by broadening their horizons through self development. The key elements of the course were: group activities relating to motivation and work preparedness/workplace skills but also personal sessions and after care on leaving the scheme. In addition to the motivational elements, the scheme provided: job search skills, advice and information relating to
jobs, further training, self-employment and business start up. The scheme was able to provide occasional child care for day seminars by making use of a local authority mobile crèche.

Some schemes were experienced more positively than others (Chapter 4). This section briefly summarises the response to each one, as expressed by users.

**Scheme A. The employer information booklet**  This was welcomed by the employers interviewed as a useful reference source on lone parent issues, with its information presented in an accessible form. Although the booklet was intended to focus exclusively on issues relating to lone parents, this specific targeting was questioned by employers. They felt that many issues addressed in the booklet were equally applicable to a wider section of their workforce including any employees with parenting or caring responsibilities. Information on in-work benefits (such as Family Credit) was appreciated and the case studies were welcomed (with a call for even more detail). The booklet was felt to be particularly appropriate to smaller employers, who would be less likely to have family-friendly policies (some larger employers felt there was an element of 'preaching to the converted'). Nevertheless, they stressed the difficulty of implementing some of the booklet’s suggestions and wanted more information on how to do this in practice, for example on how they could start an employee mentoring scheme or on what the implications would be of developing a child care strategy for their company. The business case for employing lone parents was not felt to be entirely convincing. Some reservations were also expressed about the booklet’s design and layout. (Section 4.1.2)

**Scheme B. Telephone Advice Line**  This met with a very positive response from callers. It was regarded as a valuable service, providing information in a readily-accessible way (with no need to leave home, and the chance to remain anonymous), from an agency trusted as specialising in issues of lone parenthood. Staff answering calls were deemed sympathetic, non-judgemental, and good listeners. Often it was found that they were able to help beyond the scope of the original query, and information given was perceived as accurate and printed follow-up materials sent by post were appreciated. The only criticism was that, as a national service, the advice line was not able to provide detailed local information. Callers suggested two improvements: that access be widened even further (in terms of cost/hours/more lines), and that the additional option of meeting an adviser face-to-face in a drop-in advice surgery might be offered, especially where the case was complex. However, these suggestions take no account of the limited resources of the provider, and the fact that their geographical location would make face-to-face drop-in sessions impractical. Overall, the impact of the telephone line extended beyond the provision of information or advice. It played a role in improving confidence and facilitating further action on the part of the caller. (Section 4.2.2)
Scheme C. The Job Guidance Approach  
Response to this particular scheme was mixed. Some aspects were appreciated, others not. There was strong appreciation of the provision of free child care and travel allowances (crucial to the attendance of some). The teaching of job search skills (e.g., in relation to CVs, application forms, and interview techniques) was found valuable, as was provision of information on state benefits and return-to-work costs, and access to resources such as IT, reference facilities, telephoning and photocopying. The scheme also incorporated a group element which was found beneficial.

On the negative side, the scheme was experienced as rather disorganised, lacking structure, with sessions often late in starting; there were problems with uneven staffing due, for example, to staff shortages or changes; IT training was seen as insufficient; and links with employers, as promised in the scheme's promotional literature, proved unsatisfactory. Overall, this led to varied outcomes for participants. Some participants experienced gains in confidence and broadened horizons, had grown more accustomed to work routine, and developed IT and job search skills. Others however felt strongly disappointed. (Section 4.3.2)

Scheme D. The Job Club Approach  
This scheme also met with a mixed response. There was some appreciation of a businesslike, professional approach offering a stepping stone to work. Some help was gained with job search skills (CVs, application forms, interview techniques) and advice on business projects was valuable to some participants, as well as access to IT resources and a good reference section. Those who took part in work experience through the scheme, on the whole, found this valuable. Yet criticisms were expressed. A key point related to a perceived insensitivity to the diversity of the lone parent population, to individual needs, as well as to general issues associated with lone parenthood. As a result, the scheme was experienced by many as inflexible. It was felt to lack attention to individual participants' needs for advice, support or motivation to broaden individual horizons. The approach was considered too specific and narrow. It placed a clear emphasis on participants who had little or no skills or work experience (all had to take a basic level NVQ in secretarial and administrative skills for example, whatever their background). This did not suit all participants. Other stumbling blocks concerned the lack of practical support with child care, and limited follow up support. Little use was made of the group dynamic beyond teaching, to build confidence. Outcomes were mixed. Some participants found the job search skills and business advice useful, others, demoralised by the low level and rigidity of the vocational training, were left with unmet needs. (Section 4.4.2)
Scheme E. The Tailored Menu Approach. There was an emphatically positive response to this scheme. As well as one-to-one advice and guidance (including business advice), the opportunity to use a number of further training options was appreciated, including IT and other skills training on site, and opportunities for work experience. The free on-site child care was appreciated. The commitment and sensitivity of the scheme organiser was particularly praised. There was also a successful ‘Lone Parent Network’ group that met regularly, as a vehicle for talks and peer support, which was run by lone parent participants. The focus on African Caribbean clients was appreciated by some, though for others was unimportant. There was some evidence that this focus might deter potential clients of other community groups. The only criticism (and this was little expressed) related to variable post-scheme support due to pressures on staff time, and a slight feeling that the scheme might be under-publicised. There were hugely positive outcomes reported, turning round confidence and motivation, broadening horizons and moving people on, into or towards training or jobs. (Section 4.5.2)

Scheme F. The Motivational Approach. This scheme also met with an emphatically positive response. This was due largely (as with Scheme E) to its focus on the individual, offering tailored options, without necessarily plunging in directly and solely to job-related issues but beginning by fostering confidence and motivation according to individual need and then working towards individual goals. The additional element of group support (with groups headed in this scheme by staff rather than participants) was also very much valued, as was a module on ‘self development’. All this was additional to teaching job search skills, intensive preparation for job interviews (including role plays using video equipment), and business advice. The provision of a mobile creche on site was appreciated when available. Staff were valued as very supportive and sensitive to lone parents’ needs – both on the scheme and after – this was found to be very enabling. There was some criticism of rather dated IT equipment (no formal IT training was available on site but participants were referred elsewhere for this as necessary). The scheme received great praise from participants. Outcomes were described in terms of increased confidence and self esteem, and far-broadened horizons and ambitions, as well as the acquisition of skills useful for job search or work. (Section 4.6.2)

Implications for effective practice

It seems unlikely that there can be a ‘blueprint’ for an ideal scheme to help lone parents into work. Many factors affect outcomes, including those related to the local labour market and others to do with the scheme’s contractual obligations (Chapter 5). However, because elements across the schemes in this study varied, and each of these elements met with consistently positive or negative responses from the lone parent participants, it is possible to draw implications from what was valued (or not) and why. Elements that were especially valued in schemes that were directly
involved with lone parents over a period of time (Schemes C-F) have implications for the design of similar schemes in the future (Chapter 6). They suggest the need for the following key elements:

- **a flexible rather than rigid approach**, allowing for individual diversity among participants; (able to respond or adapt to varying needs, tailored to suit the individual, so that rather than following a set structure, the route through the scheme could to an extent be participant-led);

- **a more holistic approach**, in some cases taking a wider view of an individual’s needs than those relating to getting a job as soon as possible (for example broadening horizons or first addressing emotional and other issues as help along the way to a job, if these were barriers to work); an aspect of this would be:
  - an agenda to include the building of participants’ self confidence;

- attention to be paid to the crucial importance of the scheme staff or organisers; judging from participants’ accounts, successful schemes were led by exceptional staff. These individuals acted as mentor, motivator, enabler, role model, almost a ‘good parent’ to the participant; they were understanding of lone parents’ issues or problems; non-patronising and non-judgemental. This appeared to make a huge impact;

- **opportunities for participants to meet others in a group**: groups worked especially well for some participants. They combated the isolation often experienced as a lone parent, provided mutual support and an arena for learning from the experiences of others. Schemes which did not offer this component missed an opportunity to use the lone parent participants themselves as a resource in helping each other;

- **links with other agencies, service providers and employers**, to provide maximum support to the individual lone parent, whatever their needs, when moving on into training or work.

These features were additional to the need to offer more direct job search skills, which included:

- job search guidance and advice, and job search skills training;
- use of resources such as IT, vacancy bulletins, newspapers, telephones;
- work experience/work placements;
- self employment advice/help;
- vocational skills training or signposting to this;
- exit guidance and continuing support.

The other important feature, seen as an essential resource, is the provision of child care, or financial support for child care with flexible child care choices. This was said to offer the added benefit of helping participants to become accustomed to leaving their children in the care of another person, as they would in a working routine.
Further implications from the key features described earlier include the need to consider:

* the personal qualities, background or training of the scheme organisers and staff;
* a broad definition of outcome measures, beyond numbers placed in work, when assessing such schemes. Broadened horizons and raised expectations of the lone parent participants were found to be a positive outcome of the above approach. This in itself was considered a valid, if unquantifiable, outcome, that moved some participants nearer towards sustaining a lasting job even if paid employment was not achieved in the short-term.

A particular difficulty for organisers, when starting up a scheme, involved the initial recruitment of participants which was found to take some time. This was facilitated where links existed with other organisations who could provide access to the target population.

SCPR undertook an extensive research study at the same time as the research into the innovative schemes to evaluate the impact of Phase One of the New Deal for Lone Parents prior to its national implementation. (New Deal for Lone Parents: Learning from the Prototype Areas, DSS, 1999). This enabled the research team to compare some elements of the two programmes.

Awareness of the NDLP varied among the innovative scheme participants. During the interviews they were given a brief outline of its elements and asked to comment on the schemes in comparison. Scheme organisers had a high awareness of the New Deal for Lone Parents. Compared to the NDLP (Section 6.3), the most effective innovative schemes were thought to be:

* better able to provide intensive support, for example offering lone parents more time, a wider agenda, and the ability to include a group element;
* more likely to enable participants to achieve lasting jobs, even if in doing so the process took longer. Some concern was expressed that the New Deal for Lone Parents would solely address job needs to the exclusion of other factors which could remain as barriers to long term job prospects, such as low self-confidence.

Problems with recruitment were more acute for the schemes than for Phase One of the NDLP. Yet as scheme participants were self-referred, they were a more motivated group than some of those targeted by the NDLP. The innovative scheme participants were more equivalent to those who volunteered to participate in Phase One of the NDLP. These participants sought out New Deal provision rather than waited to respond to invitations from New Deal advisors.
It was notable that proportionately more of the scheme participants, than among the participants of Phase One of the NDLP, had higher level educational qualifications (degree level or equivalent).

The role and ability of New Deal personal advisers was found to be central to participants’ experiences of NDLP, researchers noted an equivalent ‘organiser effect’ in the innovative schemes. Those who had participated in the innovative schemes found the role and ability of the scheme organisers critical to the success of the scheme.

Finally, it was believed by both the lone parents and scheme organisers, that the schemes could perform a useful role alongside the New Deal for Lone Parents. In particular, by providing access to:

- vocational skills training, leading to marketable qualifications;
- guidance and support in the development of personal transferable skills, such as communication skills; and
- a supportive environment, bringing lone parents together and tackling feelings of isolation.
The research presented in this report describes and evaluates the innovative schemes which were set up in parallel with Phase One of the New Deal for Lone Parents to help lone parents on Income Support to take up paid work. The research was commissioned by the Department of Social Security (DSS) and undertaken by Social & Community Planning Research, an independent research institute, between November 1997 and March 1998.

The New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) is a programme of back-to-work help for lone parents on Income Support. Phase One was launched in July 1997 in eight areas around the UK, based on Benefits Agency districts. It offers a tailored package of help and advice on jobs, benefits, training and child care, through the provision of advisers (or caseworkers) who work on a one-to-one basis with participants. Lone parents with school age children (aged 5 years 3 months and above) are invited to participate in the programme; lone parents whose youngest child is below school-age may ‘opt in’ to the programme by requesting to participate. In April 1998 the NDLP was introduced nationally (Phase Two) for new and repeat claims to Income Support from lone parents whose youngest child is aged over five years and three months. In Phase Three, from October 1998, the programme has been extended to all existing lone parents on Income Support.

The New Deal for Lone Parents offers a tailored package of interviews and advice and job search. However, it contains no core training or group components as offered by some of the innovative schemes. An extensive research study took place at the same time as the research into the innovative schemes to evaluate the impact of the first phase of the New Deal for Lone Parents programme prior to its national implementation.

In parallel to the New Deal for Lone Parents, contracts were awarded by the DSS, following a competitive tendering exercise, to deliver six innovative schemes. The schemes, whilst also designed to help lone parents into work, adopted different strategies to those of the New Deal. Of the six schemes, four focused on offering courses involving advice and training, whilst the remaining two used different approaches: a telephone advice line for lone parents, and an information booklet for employers respectively.

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The key features of each scheme are detailed in Chapter 2, but in summary the four schemes which focused directly on offering guidance or training to lone parents offered a varying mix of such aspects as careers guidance, job search skills, workplace skills, IT access/training, business skills and employment advice. The extent to which work experience or work placements were offered, or child care provided (on or near to the site), and the emphasis on either a group or individual one-to-one format (or both), varied.

The contracts to run the schemes were awarded to voluntary sector organisations. Placement targets were set in relation to each contract (except on two contracts, one to provide an employer information booklet and the other to extend a telephone advice line) in relation to the number of lone parents taking up paid work of 16 hours per week or more for a period lasting at least eight weeks. Most schemes commenced in April 1997, two began in July 1997.

1.2 Researching the Innovative Schemes

1.2.1 Aims

The research aimed to appraise the effectiveness of the schemes in meeting their objectives. In broad terms, at the outset, it set out to investigate:

* views of participants and organisers on the effectiveness of the schemes, and their component features;
* the impact of the schemes on participants' job search activities and success in gaining employment;
* other outcomes resulting from participation;
* factors affecting outcomes, and ways by which the operation of the schemes might be changed or improved to enhance their effectiveness;
* the views of employers in relation to all of the schemes.

As the project progressed, these aims became modified, partly as a result of low take up in the initial stages and partly as a result of confidentiality issues.

The intention to consult employers about their views of the effectiveness of the schemes was rejected when it became clear that speaking to employers with direct links to schemes might threaten the confidentiality and privacy of lone parents who had taken part in the research. Instead, employers were consulted solely in relation to the information booklet. As a part of this consultation, these employers were also asked to comment generally on strategies which they felt might be effective in helping lone parents back to work.

Each of the schemes was evaluated independently, such that individual features could be appraised in detail. However, by combining evidence from each, some more general conclusions about the organisation and operation of these and similar schemes can be reached.
1.2.2 Research design and methods

**Qualitative methodology** Qualitative methods were used as the primary method of investigation. The use of qualitative methods was appropriate in providing participants with the opportunity to elucidate their views fully without the constraints of structured questioning. Qualitative methods also made it possible to explore and describe how the schemes were organised and operated, to assess the features that were appraised as more, or less, successful and to examine the routes by which different types of outcomes were attained. However, whilst the approach made it possible to explore the different range of outcomes from the schemes, it was not able to measure the effectiveness of the schemes in meeting their contractual targets for placing lone parents into work on completion of the schemes.

In-depth interviews were used with staff/scheme organisers and lone parents enabling an exploration of detailed personal accounts, experiences and views of the different schemes. With lone parents these interviews facilitated an exploration of how the scheme had affected individual decisions, behaviours and motivations within the context of personal circumstances and previous employment histories. Focus groups were used with some participants to explore experiences of, and attitudes towards, the scheme/programme and its different features. These provided an opportunity to examine key similarities and differences in people’s reactions as well as how and why they arise. All interviews and discussions were tape recorded and transcribed for full analysis. Verbatim quotes are used throughout the report to illustrate key findings and the key characteristics of respondents (i.e. staff member, lone parent or employer) are identified as is the mode of interview (depth or focus group), where appropriate.

**Summary of the design** The research drew on the perceptions and experiences of scheme organisers, lone parents (current and past participants) and employers. In total, 95 lone parents and 14 scheme organisers or staff were interviewed (Figure 1.1). The organisers and staff were interviewed twice, initially separately, and at the end of the project together in a focus group; 40 employers were consulted through telephone and in-depth interviews and in writing.

The lone parent samples were purposively selected, as far as possible, to ensure that a range of personal circumstances (including for example: age, number and ages of children and previous work experiences) and outcomes were covered. In relation to each of the schemes, interviews were conducted with participants, leavers, non-completers and, where possible, those who had chosen not to participate in the scheme. Full details of the design, sample, interviewing and analytic method are provided in the Appendix.
Figure 1.1 Research design and fieldwork: overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scheme</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Scheme A  
Information Booklet | 40 employers (telephone interviews, depth interviews and in writing)  
2 staff/organisers (depth interviews) |
| Scheme B  
Telephone Advice Line | 19 callers (17 lone parents) (telephone interviews)  
2 staff/organisers (depth interviews) |
| Schemes providing training and/or guidance directly to lone parents  
Scheme C | 17 lone parents (depth interviews + focus groups)  
3 staff/organisers (depth interviews) |
| Scheme D | 18 lone parents (depth interviews + focus group)  
2 staff/organisers (depth interviews) |
| Scheme E | 20 lone parents (depth interviews + focus group)  
3 staff/organisers (depth interviews) |
| Scheme F | 23 lone parents (depth interviews + focus group)  
2 staff/organisers (depth/interviews) |
| Total respondents | 95 lone parents,  
40 employers  
14 staff/organisers |

1.3 Report overview  
The report is divided into three parts. Part One describes contextual and background details of the study (Chapter 1), the different approaches used by the schemes (Chapter 2), the lone parents involved in the study and the different barriers they had faced in trying to find work (Chapter 3). Part Two explores each of the innovative schemes in detail, and the evaluation of those different approaches by their users (Chapter 4). Part Three considers factors affecting the impact of the schemes (Chapter 5) and then takes a wider perspective to look at the potential implications of the findings to general good practice (Chapter 6).
This chapter describes the key features of the six schemes awarded contracts to deliver innovative schemes for lone parents.

The six organisations differed in their approaches to enabling lone parents to enter or re-enter the labour market. Four of the six worked directly with lone parents to increase their readiness for work by developing some or all of the following: vocational skills, self-confidence and job search skills. The remaining schemes adopted alternative approaches and tackled a range of the barriers to work; one used a telephone advice line for lone parents and the other developed an information booklet for employers.

All of the schemes were run by voluntary sector organisations, situated in large cities. Two of the five organisations were primarily involved with campaign and information activities around lone parent issues, the other four were located in the training and development sector. The training organisations all had previous experience of working with the unemployed, though not of developing strategies focused solely on lone parents.

The lone parents in the study faced a range of barriers to work, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. These barriers fell into four broad categories: personal issues such as a lack of self-confidence or dilemmas about the tension between working and being the sole carer; practical financial barriers such as a lack of child care; barriers relating to their work readiness in terms of skills, qualifications and experience (labour market barriers); and barriers relating to the perceived attitudes of employers and society at large about lone parents. The schemes each addressed one or more of these barriers and differed in how they chose to overcome them, for example whilst one sought to provide information to employers another aimed to provide benefits advice to lone parents. Similarly, one focused on confidence raising and self-esteem whilst others tried to improve job search or vocational skills. The schemes shared common elements but it was possible to distinguish between them by the different combination of the barriers tackled and the differing strategies used to do so. As a result, each of the schemes had a distinctive approach and these are summarised in Figure 2.1 (which labels each of the approaches specifically to emphasise their differences).
2.2 The schemes: key elements

2.2.1 Information booklet for employers (Scheme A)

"...an initiative to raise awareness among employers and promote good practice to enhance the employment prospects of lone parents" (from project proposal)

Scheme A created an information booklet for employers. The scheme was developed by a campaign organisation for one parent families in partnership with an employers' network. The information booklet covered the following areas:

- information about employing lone parents;
- case illustrations of schemes designed to increase the number of lone parents in employment;
- guidance about how to support lone parents in the workplace;
- information relating to the benefit rights of working lone parents;
- information about the child care needs of lone parent employees and steps employers can take to meet these;
- information about the work of other agencies who can offer guidance and support to employers.

The booklet sought to raise awareness among employers; challenge assumptions about employing lone parents; promote examples of good practice and support the wider adoption of good practice in the employment of lone parents.

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**Figure 2.1 Overview of the scheme approaches**

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<tr>
<th>Scheme</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Target group</th>
<th>Key Barriers addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Information Booklet</td>
<td>Employers</td>
<td>• Employer attitudes/information needs around employing lone parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Telephone Advice Line</td>
<td>Lone Parents (primarily - see Section 2.2.2)</td>
<td>• Financial/benefits/other information needs of lone parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Job Guidance</td>
<td>Lone Parents</td>
<td>• Labour market barriers • Child care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Job Club</td>
<td>Lone Parents</td>
<td>• Labour market barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Tailored Menu</td>
<td>Lone Parents</td>
<td>• Labour market barriers • Low confidence/self-esteem • Child care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Motivational</td>
<td>Lone Parents</td>
<td>• Low confidence/self esteem • Labour market barriers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The booklet was widely distributed to employers in the South-East of England and nationally through various employer networks and to some New Deal for Lone Parent Advisers in the phase one New Deal areas.

2.2.2 Telephone advice line (Scheme B)  

'The overall aim of this ... Innovative Project is to: develop effective methods which help lone parents to successfully make the transition from benefits into work...' (from project proposal)

Scheme B, delivered by a campaign organisation for single parents, made use of its existing telephone advice line (staffed by three workers) to address the information needs of lone parents who were wanting to move into work and off state benefits. The existing advice line already offered wide-ranging advice and referral. It was accessed by both lone parents and others calling in relation to issues about lone parenthood. The areas covered included:

- benefits & financial issues;
- housing issues;
- legal advice: separation/divorce;
- contact, residency, Children Act;
- child support issues;
- parenting help;
- pregnancy, abortion & adoption;
- back to work advice - 'better off in work' calculations;
- advice & referral for education/training;
- support and counselling;
- domestic violence and child abuse.

The aim of the scheme was to use the funding, in partnership with Scheme C, to signpost potential returners to the advice line for 'better-off in work' calculations and facilitate recruitment to Scheme C and the other innovative schemes. 'Better-off in work' calculations provide lone parents with the opportunity to establish what benefits will be available to them once in work and what level of wage they need to ensure that their wage will be adequate to cover their changed outgoing expenses. For example some lone parents may face an increased cost for child care when they return to work.

'We tackle the whole issue of benefits and lone parents claiming income support or returning to work and wanting to claim in work benefits like Family Credit and that's where the ability to do the better-off calculations comes in, because we have this computer programme where we can tell people very easily whether they are actually going to be better off taking a particular job than remaining on income support, or helping to choose between two particular jobs that they may be interested in doing ...' (staff member)

The advice line was open five days a week for five hours a day. All calls were confidential and could be anonymous if the caller wished.
2.2.3 A Job Guidance approach  
(Scheme C)

‘Motivating. Equipping. Empowering. Lone Parents into Work…A programme designed to meet your needs… upon completion of training you will have the opportunity of vocational training to expand on new skills, work experience prior to job placement or, a job (with flexible working options).’ (from promotional materials)

Scheme C, delivered by a training agency in partnership with Scheme B, worked with lone parents providing a six week course of job search skills and careers guidance. The scheme was staffed by two paid workers (recruited for the scheme) with extra support from a volunteer IT trainer and was located within the existing premises of the agency. Physical resources included classrooms and IT suite and a common room. New resources provided from the grant included access to telephones and photocopiers, IT terminals and an information centre, with Internet access.

The scheme, exclusively for lone parents, comprised a one week ‘fast track’ course to provide rapid access to updated CVs, advice and guidance on job seeking and a longer six week course for more comprehensive support into employment. The scheme did not address vocational skills directly although it provided a signposting service for participants who wanted to move on to further training. The courses ran five days per week, in the morning attended by participants with children of school age, in the afternoon by those with younger children. The key elements of the scheme included: job search skills and career guidance provided through group sessions and one-to-one mentoring, access to information technology, confidence-raising & motivational work through group sessions, an employment recruitment register on-site advertising job vacancies, some work placements both on-site and with external employers, post course support for participants. The scheme also provided free child care for under-5’s at a nearby local authority nursery.

2.2.4 A Job Club approach  
(Scheme D)

‘Calling Lone Parents….[the scheme] will provide you with short, sharp training targeted to employer’s needs to enable you to compete successfully in the job market….You will have the opportunity to work in a company, experience all the trials and tribulations of a modern office….At the end of this programme our experienced advisers will help you to find permanent work…’ (from promotional materials)

Scheme D, delivered by an agency offering a range of back to work or self-employment advice and training, worked with lone parents providing a ten week course offering the opportunity to gain credits towards an NVQ in Administration (Level 1 & 2) and receive support and guidance in relation to job seeking and work readiness. The scheme was staffed by a manager (recruited for the scheme) with additional support from the manager of the agency and another existing member of staff. Located in the existing premises, physical resources included: classrooms, a common
room, a job search room with telephone access, an IT suite, library and access to fax and photocopying facilities.

The scheme resembled the Job Club model of help for the unemployed with a focus on job search skills and preparing for work but with additional on-site training towards a vocational qualification. If participants wanted, the scheme could also provide advice and guidance relating to self-employment and business start-up. The key elements of the scheme were: vocational skills up to Level 2 NVQ, access to IT training packages, work experience (both within and outside the organisation), one-to-one guidance and advice on request. The training was structured using timetabled hours and set classes on four days per week. The scheme was exclusively for lone parents although the organisation also offered similar provision for other clients, including self-financing private clients.

2.2.5 A Tailored Menu approach (Scheme E)

‘We are basically providing training for the lone parents … There were a number of elements to the project: we were looking at back to work refresher courses, we were looking at confidence and assertiveness for lone parents with a view of helping them to acquire that extra motivation to be able to say ‘yes we are ready we can go and look for a job’ and hopefully they will be able to get a job at the end of their training.’ (staff member)

Scheme E, delivered by a community development agency, offered a tailored menu approach to lone parent participants. The agency was set up to promote and develop skills in the local African-Caribbean community but was not exclusive, it offered training and support to individuals from a range of ethnic groups. The new scheme was located within the existing premises and staffed by a new member of staff recruited for the scheme, with back-up support from the existing staff team which included: an outreach worker and vocational skills training team. Existing resources included IT facilities, an information centre, access to telephones, fax and photocopying facilities, a common room and an on-site nursery.

The organisation already provided a range of vocational skills training courses leading to qualifications including: RSA CLAIT (Computer Literacy and IT); NVQ Levels 1 & 2 in Administration and Business Administration. On entering the scheme, individual participants were offered one-to-one interviews where their needs were examined and they then selected which vocational skills elements to pursue.

‘It’s like a menu, you can select … what aspect of it you want to do or you could tap into all of it if you so desired.’ (staff member)

The key elements were: vocational skills training, individually tailored provision, a Job Link worker (funded by the contract) provided one-to-one support and guidance with job search skills and Back to Work Refresher courses. The scheme also offered: business/self-employment skills and advice, business plans & business courses. Work placements were offered with outside companies.
and organisations. There was ongoing post-course support available for participants, including one-to-one counselling and access to IT facilities. As a result of the menu approach, the hours each participant attended the scheme were varied as was the overall length of time on the scheme. The scheme also provided free on-site child care in its existing nursery or offered a contribution towards child care costs. The lone parent participants were trained alongside other clients but received exclusive support on a one-to-one basis and were able to make use of the Lone Parent Networking Forum. This forum was set up and run by lone parent participants to provide an arena for mutual support, information exchange, debate and met once monthly. An illustrative example of the topics covered by the forum is given below:

- Health Matters (2 weeks): Sickle Cell; Sexual Health.
- Starting Your Own Business.
- Confidence & Assertiveness.
- Job Search skills.
- Children’s Issues.
- International Women’s Work.
- Finance for Women.
- Information Technology & the Internet.

2.2.6 A Motivational approach
(Scheme F)

‘Thinking About the Future? Need help exploring your options? ---- was designed with you in mind ---- provides a series of workshops and one-to-one advice, designed to empower and support single parents. If you are interested in developing a business idea or need to get back on the job market we can help you explore your options and give you the tools to make informed choices about your future.’ (from promotional materials)

Scheme F was developed by a training agency but run by two new members of staff who were recruited to manage and deliver the project. The project was located in its own premises with classrooms, access to IT, access to telephones and fax facilities and the use of Job Club facilities (provided by the parent organisation) in the same building.

The scheme provided a 12 week course exclusively for lone parents. A key emphasis of the course was to raise the confidence and self-esteem of participants by broadening their horizons through self development.

‘The idea really, is to start off with their self-esteem... you’ve got to show them [lone parents] that they do have capabilities, you have to show them that they do have transferable skills... Our aim is to build them up internally first, let them know what their capabilities are, and to get them to think a little bit long term... it’s taking everything in, it isn’t just saying you need to go out there and get a job. You need to give them good reasons why, so that even if they don’t get a job now, long term they’ll be thinking about coming off unemployment and getting themselves a job, when they’re capable, when they’ve got the education that they need.’ (staff member)
The key elements of the course were: group activities relating to motivation and work preparedness/workplace skills but also personal sessions and after care on leaving the scheme. In addition to the motivational elements, the scheme provided: job search skills, advice and information relating to jobs, further training, self-employment and business start up. Access to IT resources and access to the resources of a Job Club situated in the same premises and run by the parent organisation. The scheme was able to provide occasional child care for day seminars by making use of a local authority mobile crèche.

2.3 Summary

Across the six schemes there were some key differences in relation to target groups, broad aims, modes of delivery and content. However, they also shared similarities. Four of the six shared job search support, vocational skills training elements whilst the remaining two both aimed to meet information needs. The findings from this research indicate that each scheme was addressing different barriers to labour market participation which resulted in six distinctive packages of support, training and/or information for their target groups.
This chapter describes the lone parents who participated in the study and examines the range of barriers to work they had faced prior to participating in the schemes.

3.1 The lone parents participating in the study

The lone parents consulted during the study were diverse in terms of their own ages, the number and ages of their children and their ethnicity. This reflected the diversity of the innovative scheme participants in general. They were, with four exceptions, all women. Aged between 22 and 52, they had between one and five children who were evenly divided between pre-school and school age. As the case studies demonstrate they also had wide ranging backgrounds in relation to qualifications held, educational achievement and previous work experience. All of the lone parents in the study had worked at some point during their lives, they had a range of work experience, academic achievement and professional skills. Not surprisingly therefore they were at varying stages of work readiness when they came into contact with the innovative schemes; whilst some required only minimal skills training or assistance with job search activities and skills, others needed intensive help:

Janet, aged 39, had become a lone parent a year before she joined the innovative scheme. She has one child aged 2 years. Prior to becoming pregnant she had worked for twenty years in the voluntary sector as a community worker in the field of special needs. In addition to this work experience she had a range of academic qualifications, was a qualified chef and an accredited mediator. As a lone parent she had found it impossible to find work, although she had been to several interviews.

Mary, aged 22, left school at 16 without gaining any qualifications. She had two children aged 1 and 2 years old and had not worked since the birth of her first child. Previous to that she had been involved in mainly low skilled, low waged work like packing and factory work. Although wanting to work she faced difficulties both with her confidence levels and with her lack of skills which barred her from the type of jobs that could pay enough to render child care affordable.
Figure 3.1 Profile of lone parents interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lone Parents interviewed</th>
<th>95</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 40</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3+</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages of children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under school age (below 5 years)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School age (5 years +)</td>
<td>42</td>
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<td>Children of both age groups</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Market Status (at time of interview)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed/Self-employed</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Full</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Part-time</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in innovative scheme training</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other training or education</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not currently employed</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Motivation to work The lone parents demonstrated high levels of motivation to work. They described extensive job search activity and/or attempts to improve their skills through training before participating in the innovative schemes. There were two primary concerns behind their motivation to work: to improve living standards and to overcome isolation. Two further factors mentioned included a desire to be a role model for their children and to make better use of their own skills and abilities.

2 This figure is high because age is a sensitive issue to raise in the focus group environment.
3.2.1 Improving living standards

The lone parents were primarily motivated by a desire to increase their own and their children's living standards and to stop claiming state benefits. In doing so they hoped to escape the stereotype of the lone parent as 'benefit scrounger' and to achieve a measure of financial independence.

All of the lone parents interviewed who were currently unemployed were financially reliant on state benefits including different combinations of Income Support, Housing Benefit or assistance with their mortgage payments, Council Tax Benefit and Child Benefit. One of the unemployed lone parents was in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance making her technically ineligible for participation in the schemes. Many had never claimed benefits in their lives before becoming a lone parent, and found the management of a family income based on benefits difficult: '[you] are struggling..., constantly juggling money', 'It's like being in a poverty trap really'. Of those in work, some were claiming Family Credit and others were not.

As with other unemployed groups, financial concerns were paramount for all of the lone parents interviewed. However, this was as true for those in employment as for those not. Given sole responsibility for maintaining the family income, there was a constant fear of loss of income since a constant, predictable income of a high enough level was required to enable the purchase of child care. Many were worried about being able to meet the high costs of child care and some of those interviewed pointed out how they had actually been marginally 'better off' when they were in receipt of benefits as entering work had excluded them from assistance with their mortgage payments and 'passported benefits' such as free school meals and reduced prescription or dental charges. However, the determination of these parents to remain in work, even when they might profit financially by not doing so, demonstrates the high motivation to work found during the study.

3.2.3 Overcoming isolation

Isolation and feelings of separation from the 'real world' are often experienced by the long-term unemployed and the lone parents in this study were no exception. Overcoming this isolation was a key factor for many of those interviewed in their motivation to work. Entering employment was seen as a way to increase their interaction with other adults and to provide an opportunity to broaden horizons beyond their focus on their children. Those who were in work at the time of interview spoke about the contrast in their experiences and feelings to when they were not working and the benefits they had found from returning to work.

Feelings of isolation were sometimes coupled with a strong impression that lone parents were stigmatised by society as a whole. There was concern and anger that all lone parents were 'lumped together' and seen as benefit scroungers, morally unfit and unwilling to work. For some of
those interviewed the recent government and media attention on lone parents, both with the New Deal policy and discussions about reducing lone parent benefits, had served to exacerbate their stigmatisation as they felt singled out from other parents and attacked.

'We ain't scrubbers really. We don't choose to be in this bloody condition it's just the way we end up ... I don't know, they just think we're a lost cause to society, 'we're sponging their money off them and keep having kids after kids and you know the government's paying for all of that' but we're paying for it as well, believe it or not, we're paying for it.' (lone parent, depth interview)

Entering work was seen as a key way of escaping from these stereotypes and becoming less isolated.

There were two other frequently cited factors in their motivation to find employment:

3.2.4 Being a role model
Providing their children with the positive role model of a working parent was seen as very important. It was believed that if they were working this would help to educate their children about the importance of working and reduce any perception that living on state benefits is 'normal'. It was also hoped that providing their children with a role model of a working parent would inspire them and improve their aspirations.

3.2.5 Using and developing skills
Entering employment was also seen to have personal benefits for the individual. In particular, the lone parents described the importance for them of feeling 'useful' again: to use their existing skills and develop new skills, to use their 'brain' beyond dealing exclusively with their children. This broadening of experience was seen to be both personally beneficial and beneficial to their children. Their children would benefit by becoming less reliant on their parent whilst they could help with their children's development by becoming more in touch with the 'outside world'.

3.3 Barriers to employment
In spite of high levels of motivation to work, and previous experiences of work, many of the lone parents interviewed had shared similar difficulties when they tried to find employment. Although many had worked before they became lone parents they had experienced particular barriers when trying to find work after becoming a lone parent that they had not faced previously. They described the difficulties they had encountered as resulting from two key barriers of low self-esteem/low self-confidence and a lack of affordable, child care coupled with a range of factors resulting from their break from the labour market and the attitudes of employers to employing lone parents. They also discussed a tension between the responsibility of care and the motivation to work.
3.3.1 Lack of confidence and self-esteem

Low levels of self-esteem and self-confidence had been a key barrier to finding work for many of the lone parents interviewed. Whilst some did not experience this as a barrier, for many others low self-confidence had prevented them from applying for jobs. In some cases, even sending for the application forms to apply for a job was too difficult. It had also deterred their participation in training courses and other developmental activities. They described becoming increasingly demoralized, as time passed, by their experiences of trying to find work. Feeling shunned by society, they found their levels of confidence decreasing and their aspirations narrowing.

'You are a single parent, you are a Mum, you cannot do anything, you are less than this piece of carpet, you really start to believe it.' (lone parent, depth interview)

The accounts given highlighted the considerable impact that these feelings of isolation and stigmatisation had in diminishing levels of self-esteem and self-confidence. A key theme throughout this report will be the importance of high levels of self-esteem and confidence in enabling lone parents to find and retain employment. The account given by Linda demonstrates the extent to which some of the lone parents' confidence had been undermined during their period of unemployment.

Linda, a 23 year old single mother of a 13 month old daughter, had completed school and gained NVQs in Business Administration, following which she had worked for two years as a solicitor's clerk. Since having her child she had not worked and she described her confidence levels prior to joining the innovative scheme: 'My confidence was so low I didn't think I could do a toilet cleaning job let alone be a legal secretary.'
3.3.2 Lack of affordable, appropriate, accessible child care

Child care concerns were a key barrier for all of the lone parents in the study, particularly where there was little access to support from family or friends. There was concern about the limited availability of local child care, notably the limited number of places available in affordable nurseries. This was important because many of those interviewed were not happy to leave their children with a childminder (unless a family member or friend) either because they were not satisfied with the standard of care their child would receive or because they wanted their child to be cared for in an environment where they could interact and socialize with other children. Child care provision was also perceived to be prohibitively expensive, a factor which restricted their options and narrowed the range of salary levels/nature of work which could be considered when job hunting. Accessibility of available child care was a further factor, both in terms of location and the hours it could provide (for example some with school age children described the difficulties in finding pre and post school care), particularly for the lone parents in London where a job might involve a lengthy journey across the city.

3.3.3 Lack of recent, relevant work experience

A secondary set of barriers related to the impact of sometimes prolonged breaks from the labour market. As with other groups of unemployed people, the lone parents interviewed found it difficult to secure work because they had not had recent relevant work experience. This meant that some lacked appropriate skills (for example, one area of major concern was their lack of up to date information technology and computing skills). Others lacked recent, relevant qualifications in the areas of work available to them and most of those interviewed lacked a recent reference to provide employers with. The lack of this experience and skills often compounded existing low levels of self-confidence and deterred the lone parents from applying for jobs.

3.3.4 Attitudes of employers

The lone parents interviewed were sceptical about the way in which they are viewed by employers. Some for example had lost their jobs on becoming pregnant and so had heightened concerns about the unwillingness of employers to employ lone parents. They were concerned that employers viewed lone parents as unreliable employees who demanded greater concessions than other employees. It was felt that employers did not fully understand the implications of being a single parent and that as a result the opportunities for finding employers with flexibility and understanding were very limited.

3.3.5 Tension between caring responsibilities and work

There was a perceived tension between the parents' desire to work and their ability to do so because of their sole responsibility for the care of their child. Some were angry that it was not viewed as acceptable for a single parent to want to stay at home with their child, unlike married or other two parent families. Others highlighted the tension between wanting to go to work and feeling solely responsible for the child's welfare. For some, with pre-school age children, the responsibility of being the sole
carer meant they would not consider taking full-time work until their children reached school age.

3.4 Summary Although forming quite a heterogeneous group in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, educational qualifications and previous work experience the lone parents interviewed for the research also shared some similar experiences since becoming lone parents. They shared common difficulties in trying to gain employment and access to training; feelings of isolation and loneliness; daily struggles with financial pressures and social attitudes. However, in contrast they also shared a high motivation to work (reflected by their voluntary participation in the schemes) and saw work as an option which would not only help them to improve their living standards but also provide a range of other improvements both to their own and their children's lives.
The companies consulted ranged in size, although most were larger employers with over 50 employees, and were located in the private, public and voluntary sectors of the economy across a range of fields, for example: banking and financial services, health and social care, retail and catering services, education, public services and industry. The following themes arose in the interviews in relation to these employers' experiences of employing lone parents:

**Problems associated with identifying lone parent employees** The difficulty of identifying lone parents in the workplace or during recruitment was pointed out.

- Lone parenthood was seen as both a private matter and a temporary state which could change over time:
  
  'What is a lone parent? The definition is very difficult, dynamic... someone could be a lone parent one year and not the next.' (Employer, banking sector)

- Employers were generally unable to provide precise information about levels of lone parent recruitment and employment because they did not actively monitor their staff for marital status or caring responsibilities. There was concern that formal monitoring would be 'inappropriate' from an equal opportunities perspective. Attempts to identify employees as lone parents might be perceived as 'intrusive' or even 'stigmatising'.

**Equal opportunities and the recruitment of lone parents** Participating employers stated that employees are recruited solely on the basis of their skills and that they, as employers, adhered to equal opportunities recruitment procedures. The personal circumstances of candidates were seen as irrelevant during recruitment and as a result, any attempt to target or identify lone parent applicants was seen as counter to the ethos of equal opportunities. However, it was believed to be important to promote 'diversity' in the workforce and reflect the communities in which companies were based or the public who they provided services for.

If potential employees identified themselves to employers as having particular caring responsibilities and were well suited to the position then employers might be prepared to discuss a range of different working conditions to suit the candidate.

**The advantages of offering flexible working and benefits to lone parent employees** Employment practices in the companies consulted ranged from being very family friendly (offering a number of different flexible working patterns, child care support etc.) to others who offered
little support for working parents. Some of the companies were already known to have an interest in developing *family friendly* policies by virtue of their membership of the employers' network involved in developing this innovative scheme whilst others, who had received the booklet through other channels, were not.

Part-time working, flexi-time, job share and career breaks were the most common flexible working practices offered by the employers. Other flexible working options offered included: term-time working contracts, special parental or carers' leave to cover emergency absence from work and home or tele-working. Child care provision was less widespread, mostly found in the larger companies or public sector institutions in the form of workplace nurseries or subsidised nursery places. More unusual forms of child care provision offered included child care vouchers and flexible packages of employee benefits, referred to as 'cafeteria' style benefits whereby individual employees can exchange or reduce the benefits of company car schemes or private health insurance for assistance with child care costs.

Being seen as *family friendly* was perceived to have distinct advantages for employers. In particular providing flexible working arrangements:

- Promote staff loyalty; leading to increased outputs (especially in the case of job share and reduced hours contracts) and reduced recruitment costs resulting from diminished staff turnover.
- Provide greater scope for 'finding the right person for the job' rather than excluding people with caring or other commitments.
- Provide public relations advantages.

There was concern that it was 'unfair' to offer these flexible working arrangements solely to staff who were sole carers. Rather than these being identified as policies to help or enable lone parents, they should be seen as policies appropriate for *all* working parents, or employees with other caring responsibilities.

**Advantages in employing lone parents, identified by employers**

- **Employee skills** - lone parents were believed to gain skills such as time management and flexibility from their experiences of managing their families.
- **Employee loyalty** - employers believed that if they can offer flexibility to lone parents they are likely to be rewarded by loyalty and commitment which can lead to increased outputs from the individual and reduce costs incurred through the need to replace staff:
  
  'Due to their need for stability and financial security they tend to be more reliable and committed.' (Employer, manufacturing and research)
4.1.2 Evaluation of the Information Booklet

- **Stable workforce** - similarly, because lone parents are solely responsible for their families’ welfare they were thought less likely to be unreliable employees and less prepared to risk their financial security through poor work.

- **Good public relations** - employing a ‘diverse and representative workforce’ was believed to have advantages for the employer from a PR perspective. It was believed to portray the company as responsive to the community it serves and to help encourage recruitment from minority groups (whether they be lone parents or ethnic minority groups).

**Disadvantages in employing lone parents, identified by employers**

- **Absence from work** - it was believed that lone parents with sole responsibility for child care may need to take more unplanned absences from work than other employees, however the difficulties this might lead to were seen as potentially offset by flexible working arrangements and provision of emergency leave entitlements.

- **Inflexibility** - some employers thought that lone parent employees might not be able to provide the level of flexibility needed for the type of work undertaken:

  ‘[Our business] does not discriminate against lone parents and if for example... we were recruiting for a job vacancy we would offer the position to the best candidate. However, the very nature of our business means that we do require employees to be flexible.’ (Employer, retail sector)

**Usefulness and impact** The booklet was received positively as a useful source for information and reference:

- ‘I found the whole booklet extremely useful, it provides excellent information on the whole issue of lone parents’ (Employer, voluntary sector)

- ‘Very useful, informative about the issues but with lots of action points and case studies’ (Employer, private sector)

- ‘An excellent source for sound bites’ ‘An invaluable reference source’ (Employers, manufacturing and research)

- ‘I think the usefulness of it is in some of the information in there for individuals, for the lone parents... it’s not that it’s anything new but it’s useful to have it in one place’ (Employer, service sector)

However, there were two important reservations about the booklet:

- **More suitable for smaller employers who are less familiar with the issues**: The larger employers already felt that they had family friendly policies in place and that the booklet covered much ground that they were familiar with. For these employers the booklet reinforced their existing policies and practices rather than prompted radical change or questioning of their practices. Some argued that unless the booklet was effectively targeted at those employers who did not have existing provision it was ‘preaching to the converted’.
- **Not entirely convinced by the business case argued in the booklet:**
  The booklet aimed to present the 'business case' for employing lone parents and those employers consulted, who were generally larger employers, were not wholly convinced that the arguments presented that case as forcefully as it could have. Some felt that the booklet presented the lone parent perspective rather than the employer perspective, and that the arguments needed to present not only the advantages of lone parent friendly policies but also some of the potential disadvantages so that employers can accurately decide the implications of any actions. For example, one employer described how the guide argued for increased home working but did not identify the potential health and safety implications for employers. Similarly another argued that whilst the NIC Holiday policy was a clear financial advantage for employers they needed to first identify staff as both long term unemployed and claiming benefit to be able to apply for it.

  'I'm not sure that it really answers the question it set out to. It seems to me that it wanted to say 'here you are employers this is why you should employ lone parents' I'm not sure it answers that... If we sent it to our HR managers they'd say that's very interesting but doesn't that apply to other people, why are you singling out those people?... it does not distinguish enough between lone parents and two parents sufficiently...’ (Employer, research and manufacturing)

  'It's a good argument for diversity.. 'this is why you should try to have a diverse workforce because you can get all these good people who you might not otherwise or keep good people who might leave and so have a different way of working, try to be more flexible, try to support people who want to balance their home and work life whatever's at home’. But it doesn't really make a case for lone parents...If I was really critical and I went through it I'd say where is the business case?' (Employer, research and manufacturing)

**Evaluation of content**

The content of the booklet was seen as both 'accessible' and 'appropriate', covering a full range of important issues to be considered when employing lone parents. The most positively received element in the booklet was information on financial issues both for lone parents (i.e. information about benefit regulations particularly concerning Family Credit) and employers (i.e. the 16 hour rule for Family Credit and information about NIC Holidays). The employers felt that this was an area where they 'could do better' and needed relevant up to date information which the booklet was seen to provide.

The case studies were welcomed but were felt to contain insufficient detail. In particular, employers would have liked more detail on how the companies had put new initiatives into place. Similarly, it would have been helpful to list named contacts who had been directly involved in such initiatives whom employers could contact to talk through the advantages and disadvantages of new schemes. Overall, there was a feeling
that the guide did not efficiently set out how employers should act as a result of the guide:

'It should say 'the purpose of this guide is to... and you will find the information which will...' Those two sentences say this is what it is and this is what you do with it. The first one is there and not the second one.'

(Employer, service sector)

Whilst those consulted felt that the content of the booklet was appropriate, they reiterated concerns that most of the proposed policies included were applicable to all workers with caring responsibilities rather than specifically to lone parents.

'It's almost too general rather than being specifically about lone parents ... You could change lone parents headings in virtually all of it to disabilities, family responsibilities or carers or anything else why you should employ them and why you should allow certain advantages to them... There's nothing wrong with that as such but it's not making a case specifically for lone parents.'

(Employer, research and manufacturing)

Improvements suggested by the employers consulted

• Improve the layout: the design of the booklet was felt to hinder its effectiveness. There was criticism of the colours and fonts used and suggestions that the booklet be re-designed to give it a sharper and less distracting appearance.

• More detailed case studies: which not only describe initiatives to help employees but also give succinct information about how to implement policies.

• Executive summary: the addition of a loose leaf executive summary of the key points was suggested which would encourage wider distribution and allow busy employers to obtain an overview of the booklet without reading it in detail.

• Target different employers: the booklet was seen as more suited to small employers rather than large employers and organisations which are already likely to have family friendly policies in use.

• Provision for updating benefits information: the information provided in relation to the benefits available to working parents and current benefit regulations was seen as particularly useful. It was recommended that this information be put into a format (perhaps loose leaf) which would both enable wider distribution and easy updating.

• A more rounded argument: show employers any potential costs or other implications for their business, make the business case rather than the lone parent case.

Overview  The information booklet was welcomed, by the employers interviewed, as a useful reference source on lone parent issues, and with information presented in an accessible form. The specific targeting on 'lone parents' however was questioned: many issues were felt to be applicable to a wider section of the workforce, to any employees with
parenting or caring responsibilities. Information relating to in-work benefits was appreciated and the case studies welcomed (with a call for even more detail). The booklet was felt to be particularly appropriate to smaller employers, who would be less likely to have family-friendly policies (some larger employers felt there was an element of 'preaching to the converted'). Nevertheless, they stressed the difficulty of implementing some of the booklet's suggestions and wanted more information on how to do this in practice. The business case for employing lone parents was not felt to be entirely convincing. Some reservations were also expressed about the booklet's design and layout.

4.2 The telephone advice line
(Scheme B)

4.2.1 Background

The callers interviewed included those who had made previous use of the advice line and others who were first time callers. First time callers had found out about the advice line in a number of different ways: through the Yellow Pages (or other telephone directory), referral from friends, referral from other agencies they had approached initially (including voluntary agencies, solicitors and the other innovative schemes), from Teletext, and from leaflets and posters publicising the organisation. All but two of the callers were lone parents and the reasons for the call spanned a range of issues including: back to work advice, benefit calculations, parenting advice and support, advice relating to the Children's Act, information about child care and housing advice.

Initial expectations

Callers to the advice line expected it to offer an expertise and understanding of single parenthood that other agencies could not offer because it was run by an agency devoted to campaigning around issues of importance to single parents. It was believed this would make the staff responsive and sympathetic to the needs of lone parents:

'I felt they would understand because I am a single parent.' (lone parent, telephone interview)

As a result, callers were hoping for understanding from the advice line workers and appropriate advice. Whilst some hoped that the call would fully answer their queries, others expected to be referred on to other agencies or sign posted to relevant printed information.

4.2.2 Evaluation of the advice line

Accessing the service

The accessibility of the advice offered by this scheme was seen as positive, callers did not have to make appointments and could schedule the call at a convenient time for them. The fact that calls could be made from home contrasted with difficulties they had found in trying to access other agencies, particularly in relation to child care and travel arrangements. However, the calls had to be made at a cost to the caller and for some callers this was problematic as the calls could be lengthy and expensive. Others experienced difficulties with accessing the service. These included: the lines being engaged and opening hours being unsuitable for callers who work standard '9-5' hours.
Information and advice received  Callers felt that the advice line provided a way to access accurate and appropriate information, advice and referrals. Staff were able to see beyond their immediate query and broaden the discussion out to areas that the caller may not have considered as important, or to suggest alternative avenues and action that the caller had not considered. For example, one caller rang for benefits advice relating to the impact of taking a job on her current income from benefits. In addition to providing the ‘better-off’ calculation the advice worker also talked the caller through the likely incidental costs of returning to work (such as clothes, travelling expenses and lunch) which the caller had not considered. Another caller had contacted the line for a referral to someone who could help prevent her being evicted from her home. In addition to providing the referral, the advice line worker had discussed possible steps the caller could take to delay the eviction.

Although the advice and information given by the advice line was seen as effective and useful, callers voiced two concerns:

- **Accuracy of ‘better-off in work calculations’** - there was general satisfaction with the calculations provided to callers, however, a small number of callers were concerned about the accuracy of the calculations they had received. They stressed the importance of accuracy in calculating the costs of returning to work and believed that the advice line should ensure that all calculations were accurate. (In one case where a calculation was found to be wrong on investigation the advice line were praised for the support and time they gave to correct the miscalculation).

- **Provision of locally-specific information & referral** - in some cases callers required more localized information about the areas in which they were living, particularly in relation to available child care. They felt that the information the line could give was not meeting those needs, although they were referred to the local group of the organisation in each case.

Staff response  Callers found the staff on the advice line pleasant, reassuring, understanding and, most importantly, not ‘condescending’ or ‘judgemental’. Callers were dealt with sympathetically and felt that their queries were taken seriously. One caller explained that it was important that she was not ‘being palmed off’ which had been her experience of other agencies, whilst another explained the importance of being heard: ‘she listened to me’. Another summarized her experience of the staff as: ‘very helpful, very pleasant and very efficient’. It was appreciated that the call could be anonymous if the caller wished and was confidential. In spite of this, some felt that they would prefer to have direct face-to-face contact. This was felt to be more appropriate where the query was complex and required the adviser to have sight of relevant documents.
Follow-up  Provision of after care following the calls was regarded as another positive feature of the service offered. Most important was the provision of information sent later through the mail (such as the printed outcome of 'better-off in work' calculations or information leaflets relating to a range of issues) which could be used by the caller either for further information or as evidence to be used when taking further action. For example one caller had requested a benefit calculation because she was not sure that she was receiving her full entitlement. When she received her calculation her suspicions were confirmed and she was able to use the printed evidence to negotiate an increase to her benefits in line with her entitlements.

Impact of the call  The advice and support received from the telephone line had both helped to improve callers’ confidence and their ability to take further action or approach other agencies for support and help. For example, one caller explained how the information and support she had been given by the advice line gave her the confidence to consider challenging an eviction order.

Improvements suggested by callers to the line  In spite of the positive response to the service, callers did suggest two improvements to the telephone line:

• **Improve accessibility:** Reduce or remove the cost of the call by introducing an 0800 or 0345 number. Increase opening hours, provide more lines.

• **Increase adviser contact:** Introduce an element of direct face-to-face contact with advisers by introducing a drop-in advice surgery at the main office or in local offices.

Overview  The telephone advice line met with a very positive response from callers. It was regarded as a valuable service, providing information in a readily-accessible way (with no need to leave home, and the chance to remain anonymous), from an agency trusted as specialising in issues of lone parenthood. Staff answering calls were deemed sympathetic, non-judgemental, and good listeners. Often it was found that they were able to help beyond the scope of the original query, and information given was perceived as accurate. Printed follow-up information sent by post was appreciated. The only criticism was that, as a national service, the advice line lacked the ability to provide detailed local information. Two improvements were suggested: that access be widened even further (in terms of cost/hours/more lines), and that the additional option of meeting an adviser face-to-face in a drop-in advice surgery was offered, especially where the case was complex. Overall, the impact of the telephone line extended beyond the provision of information or advice. It played a role in improving confidence and facilitating further action on the part of the caller.
4.3 The Job Guidance approach (Scheme C)

4.3.1 Background

The evaluation of this scheme involved interviews and group discussions with lone parents who were either currently participating or had previously participated in the scheme. The lone parents interviewed had wide ranging levels of educational achievement and previous occupations. All of those interviewed had experience of paid employment at some point during their lives, often prior to having their children, but differed in the length of time since they had last worked ranging between 2 months to 13 years. Their previous occupations included: secretarial, retail management, health service, mediation and accountancy. They had been recruited to this scheme through a variety of different avenues including: referral from Jobcentres and Benefits Agency offices, referral from local TECs, referral from other innovative schemes, via advertisements and publicity in the media, local nurseries and local health clinics or through recommendation of friends. Only one of those interviewed had knowledge of the training provider prior to joining the scheme.

4.3.2 Evaluation of Scheme C

Joining the scheme and initial expectations

Participants had been attracted to the scheme for three key reasons: promotional materials highlighted the possibility of participants gaining a job on completion and publicised close links with employers, the scheme offered free child care, and was specifically targeting lone parents. They shared a common set of expectations about what participation would lead to:

- a job (and the opportunity to stop claiming state benefits);
- updated vocational skills (in particular the chance to become computer literate/update existing software skills);
- support and guidance for job search activities.

General impressions

The overriding impression of the scheme was that it was informal in structure and did not provide a structured timetable of training and other activities. For many of those interviewed this was felt to lead to ‘a certain amount of chaos’ and meant that daily routines were disorganised. Participants reported sometimes waiting for up to an hour and a half for a planned session to start and felt that there was little guidance for participants about how to progress during their time on the scheme. They believed this meant that provision for individuals was ‘hit and miss’ with those that were more confident able to progress better than those lacking in the confidence to ask questions or ask for help:

‘[The scheme] is very much like - ‘you make use of this centre, if you have questions we’re here but you make use of us like you would a library’.’

(lone parent, depth interview)

This informality was not felt to best prepare participants for the reality of a working environment:

‘The scheme is sometimes a bit informal, some people may not be able to snap into a work situation when they do find a job.’ (lone parent, depth interview)
All of the participants would have preferred a more structured approach although some noted that the participants were so diverse that one structure might not suit everybody.

**Job search skills** There was enthusiasm about how the scheme had enabled participants to develop their job search skills. Most notably in relation to producing a relevant and up to date CV, getting help with application forms and interview techniques. Some reported using a software package which suggested different career routes but noted that there was little or no assistance for them in learning to use this package. They were also positive about the information they had received relating to the benefits available to them and the costs of returning to work. Several had been referred to and made use of the advice line offered by scheme B to obtain ‘better-off in work’ calculations.

**Moving on - links with employers** Responses to the support and guidance given by Scheme C to participants on exiting the scheme were mixed. Promotional materials for the scheme stressed strong links with employers, the development of an employment recruitment register which would hold information about relevant vacancies, and that participation in the scheme would help participants to find work. Participants were generally dissatisfied with this aspect of the scheme. Some reported being unable to make use of the employment recruitment register, others that it did not hold appropriate vacancies, in terms of wage levels and flexible working conditions. Several felt that job search activities had been unsupported or reported feeling that the guidance they had been given had been unconstructive or not appropriate. For example, although one participant was searching for a management level position but did not wish to move into retail management, the scheme arranged an interview for her with a high street retail outlet.

The scheme did have links with employers and these were used to bring in outside speakers or participants were given the opportunity to visit employers. However, the outside speakers and visits used during the scheme were not always offering appropriate avenues or job opportunities for single parents (either because the job opportunities involved low wages or inappropriate hours). For example, one participant described a visit she made to a branch of a large supermarket chain. The group had been told that the store had a crèche which was not true and when the manager explained the jobs available it was felt that the wages were too low. The participant worked out that if she took one of the jobs on offer it would have resulted in her having to claim more Family Credit than she was currently receiving claiming Income Support.

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3 It is important to note that this type of outcome would only occur in exceptional circumstances, usually related to the level of child support already being paid to the lone parent.
Similarly another participant explained how the scheme arranged an outside speaker from a chain of hotels but that the company could not offer any child care or flexibility with working hours which was disappointing.

The scheme offered some post-course support for leavers but not all had made use of this (see Mentoring).

**Other skills - vocational and IT**  The scheme did not offer any specific vocational skills although some of the participants would have welcomed the opportunity to study for a recent and relevant qualification. As seen above, the opportunity to develop or update information technology skills was one of the key reasons lone parents were attracted to the scheme. IT was a popular element but participants felt that the actual level of training and support given for the development of these skills was very poor. The scheme had one IT trainer who was an unpaid volunteer and this was seen as inadequate especially as the participants had varying levels of computer literacy:

> ‘You end up on your own on the computer trying to do something.’ (lone parent, focus group)

The software focused on word processing which was felt to be restrictive as some of the participants had wanted to learn new accountancy and spreadsheet packages. However, even with more extensive software they felt the support was insufficient to facilitate the development of new skills: (See also Resources)

> ‘What I’ve learnt in eight weeks you could fit on the back of a postage stamp.’ (lone parent, depth interview)

**Individual guidance & support**  There were mixed responses to the mentoring element of the scheme designed to provide one-to-one guidance and support both during the scheme and for up to one year after participants left. Some had received regular mentoring sessions and found the staff mentor provided good support and advice. One described the mentor as ‘understanding’, another that they were the ‘the best thing about the place’. Others though had received little or no individual counselling which was disappointing especially for those who had expected the mentor to provide ‘practical, psychological and emotional support’. Of those who had completed the scheme, some had made use of ongoing support through visits and telephone calls and this was seen as positive.
Group activities - overcoming isolation  The ‘opportunity to talk’ and be with other lone parents was an important feature of the scheme. Social and group elements of the scheme helped participants to build up their confidence and to feel less isolated:

'[being there with other lone parents] made you realize that you're not this dreg of society that TV makes you out to be.' (lone parent, depth interview)

One parent described the chance to meet and talk with others in a similar situation to herself as ‘encouraging and uplifting’ whilst another found the social aspect of the scheme ‘a really good confidence boost’.

Staff  Although individual members of staff were perceived as responsive and understanding, participants had overall experienced difficulties in relation to the staffing of the scheme. The difficulties fell into three areas: level of staffing, understanding of lone parenthood, lack of motivation from staff. Firstly, it was strongly felt that the staff were limited in the support they could offer participants in relation to skills training, particularly IT training, and in the time they had available for one-to-one support. Two members of staff had left since the scheme began and this had been disruptive for the participants, particularly when the member of staff responsible for the mentoring element of the scheme left. As well as being disruptive, this left only one paid member of staff for the scheme which participants found was not adequate to deal with all their needs. Even when there had been two paid members of staff, participants recounted experiences of staff being unavailable. This was believed to be a result of scheme staff being needed in meetings or for other tasks associated with other programmes being managed by the training agency.

'What was promised when I first went was that there was a programme manager, an IT tutor, a mentor advisor, I can't remember the exact titles that were given then, and a career guidance recruitment worker. So there should be four full time paid staff. There were two and that's it.' (lone parent, focus group)

The impact of staff shortages not only led to reduced support for the participants but also concerns about whether as a group of clients they were being valued or respected by the agency. In particular for those who were present when the mentor left the agency, there was anger that the position had been replaced by a volunteer rather than another paid staff member. Several participants wondered where the money which had resourced that post had gone to within the organisation and felt that it showed disrespect to their needs. These difficulties were compounded by a feeling that the organisation as a whole did not have a good understanding of issues relating to lone parenthood:

'I don't think they have any idea, I don't think they have any concept whatsoever... the lack of understanding of lone parenthood [within the wider organisation] is a huge issue.' (lone parent, depth interview)
Some of those lone parents interviewed felt that staff and resource shortages were indications that the agency did not place a great value on the scheme for lone parents in comparison to their other activities. For some lone parents this perceived lack of respect added to their already low self-esteem. For those suffering from low self-confidence the lack of structure to the scheme and staffing difficulties meant that participants felt that the staff were not available enough to provide the type of encouragement that some of them needed:

'You have to go there with so much push... it's so easy to give up.' (lone parent, depth interview)

'If you didn't have an attitude [you couldn't get help] ... you had to pull the information out of them.' (lone parent, depth interview)

'All I needed was somebody there to help me but there was nobody.' (lone parent, depth interview)

Scheme organisers had also encouraged a media presence at certain points in the scheme, both to publicise the work of the scheme and to give participants a chance to voice their opinions in public debates about the future of lone parent benefits and the New Deal. One participant had appeared on national television to take part in a chat show whilst others had given comments to the national and local media. This media involvement was generally felt to have been disruptive to the scheme and, although participation was voluntary, some of those who had taken part were unhappy about how they were eventually portrayed by the media.

**Resources** Participants felt that the scheme had a good range of resources available. These included: IT, a reference section, access to telephones and photocopying. However, there were concerns that the computing resources were unreliable and fitted with different software packages which made continuity difficult if they had to move from one computer to another. There was also concern that some of the information provided in the reference section was out of date.

**Practical support** The provision of free child care and travel allowances was welcomed as a very positive feature of the scheme. A number of those interviewed found the provision of either child care or travel expenses critical to their ability to attend the scheme. The crèche facilities were satisfactory although there were some timing problems. The times of crèche sessions did not coincide with the scheme start times meaning that participants with children in the crèche had to miss half an hour at either end of their sessions. Provision of the crèche was regarded as an important 'stepping stone' to work, helping parents to become familiar with leaving their children under the care of someone else.
Future plans by the scheme to develop an initiative with a major high street bank which would provide participants with a loan to help them bridge the gap between coming off benefits and going into work was also welcomed.

Outcomes Participants’ overall responses to the scheme were varied. Some were wholly positive about its impact, whilst others were less so. On the positive side: they felt that they had gained confidence; they were more used to the routine of work; they were more informed about being a lone parent regarding benefits available and child care options; it had broadened their horizons in relation to the jobs they considered; it had helped them to recognise the skills they had and it had made them more able to search for work (with updated CVs, interview techniques etc.). For others the scheme had less of an impact: they had found it chaotic and disorganised, it had lowered their confidence and they felt unprepared to look for work.

Improvements suggested by scheme participants
- **Redesign the content of the scheme with more structure** (but retaining flexibility) and identifying a clear route for progression through the scheme. Participants felt strongly that the scheme needed to provide a clear structure for individuals to adapt to their own needs. Structure was perceived to increase motivation (by setting goals and targets) and enable individuals to plan their time more effectively.
- **Improve the practical organisation of the scheme:** administratively it was felt that the scheme was chaotic and participants felt that there should be improved practical organisation particularly in relation to starting times for sessions, co-ordination with the crèche facility.
- **Provide more consistency in staffing**/more paid, dedicated scheme workers.
- **Develop more effective links with appropriate employers.**
- **Provide more effective individual support and guidance.**

Overview Response to this particular scheme was mixed. Some aspects were appreciated, others not. There was strong appreciation of the provision of free child care and free travel allowances (critical to the attendance of some). The teaching of job search skills (e.g. in relation to CVs, application forms and interview techniques) was found valuable, as was provision of information on state benefits and return-to-work costs, and access to resources such as IT, reference facilities, telephoning and photocopying. The scheme also incorporated a group element which was found beneficial. On the negative side, lone parents thought the scheme was disorganised, lacking structure, with sessions often late in starting; there were problems with uneven staffing due, for example, to staff shortages or changes; IT training was found to be insufficient; and links with employers, as promised in the scheme’s promotional literature, proved unsatisfactory. Overall, this led to varied outcomes for participants. Some participants experienced gains in confidence and broadened
horizons, had become more accustomed to a work routine, and developed IT and job search skills. Others however felt strongly disappointed.

'They offered an awful lot which they didn't come up with... people left, they just felt let down.' (lone parent, depth interview)

'I think they talked a good course I don't think they were able to actually live up to it.' (lone parent, depth interview)

The evaluation of Scheme D involved interviews and group discussions with lone parents who were either currently participating or had previously participated in the scheme. Those interviewed had had a range of previous work experience including: health service professional, local authority driver, legal secretary, social worker, clerk/receptionist, advice worker, mining engineer. Most had not worked for at least one year, some for as long as six years. They had found out about Scheme D from a range of different sources: advertisements in the local press, referral from the Jobscentre or Benefits Agency, from leaflets or posters left in local housing offices, colleges or recommendations from friends. Several of those interviewed had known about the agency because of its central location on a main high street but only one had made previous use of its services.

4.4.2 Evaluation of Scheme D

Joining the scheme and initial expectations Participants had been attracted to the scheme because it was targeted at lone parents and because they believed it would place them in work on completion. Those interviewed had a range of expectations about what participation might lead to:

- information about starting a business;
- information about child care; financial help with child care;
- IT skills and flexible training options;
- 'a good job' 'the chance to get back to work';
- work experience;
- support with job search;
- the chance to improve communication skills;
- an opportunity to build up self-confidence.

General impressions The lone parents who joined Scheme D had varying general impressions of it. Most were impressed by the 'business like' environment and the 'professional' attitude of the staff. For some it represented a 'halfway house' or 'stepping stone' into work. Others, however, were less impressed:

'[the agency was] haphazard, disorganised but primarily designed for those who would like to pay for their courses... it wasn't geared to lone parents... [we were] a second priority.' (lone parent, depth interview)

Similar concerns that the scheme and those delivering it did not fully understand the issues associated with lone parenthood were a major theme in the evaluation and will be returned to below (see Staff).
Job search skills  The support with job search skills offered by the scheme was viewed very positively by participants who felt that they had needed support in this area. These participants had received help with job application forms, designing their CVs, interview skills and techniques and, for those who were interested in starting their own businesses, similar support for developing business projects was rated highly. However, several participants felt that the staff were not proactive enough in their support and motivation of the participants in these activities. In particular they felt that they were not always encouraged to broaden their horizons or take into account existing skills and experience. There was concern that the scheme really only catered for participants with low skills levels and little or no previous work experience:

'It might help those with low aims and objectives, who want to get back into any type of work.' (lone parent, depth interview)

Another who had previously been a social worker agreed:

'[the scheme] is not the place for people like me, it's geared for people with very simple needs.' (lone parent, depth interview)

Moving on - support for next steps  Participants were unaware of any ongoing support on leaving the Scheme. A number of those interviewed had received some work experience on the reception desk within the organisation or had been helped to find work experience (on an unpaid basis) with voluntary agencies. Those who had been placed with other agencies or had undertaken in-house work experience had found the experience profitable, giving them a chance to apply the new skills they had learnt and to build up their confidence and communication skills. However, the in-house work experience was found to be too short, some had just one day of work experience, and the lack of help with child care expenses made taking up the work placements very difficult for some participants.

Other skills - vocational and IT  The scheme provided an opportunity for participants to work towards a formal qualification in office administration at NVQ Levels 1 and 2. The scheme operated a 'roll on, roll off' system of recruitment which meant that people could join at any date. This was seen as disruptive to participants' progression through the NVQ syllabus. As a result of the requirements of the match funding agency participants were compelled to complete at least the first unit of the NVQ at Level 1. This element of compulsion meant, that although

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4 Chapter 5 discusses how the impact of different factors such as changes to recruitment systems or the inability to fund child care provision affected the success of the schemes.

5 Scheme D was match funded under Objective 3 by the European Social Fund.
some were glad of the opportunity to study for a relevant qualification, others found the experience ‘demeaning’: the level of the NVQ was seen as very basic. For example one participant explained that she had had to complete a unit about how to wash-up in an environmentally friendly manner.

The singular focus of the NVQ element, on secretarial and administrative skills, was disliked by participants. There was no option to study for an NVQ in other areas and some participants did not want to follow an office administration career path. Whilst those participants most disgruntled generally had a higher level of education and or recent work experience, the point made by them in relation to the NVQ also echoed a more general concern that the scheme was too generalised and not focused specifically enough on the needs of the individuals attending:

‘[It’s a] blanket approach, they assume everyone knows nothing.’ (lone parent, focus group)

Access to IT was a positive element of the course although participants would have liked more training in how to use software than the self-taught packages offered. There was concern about the access of lone parents to the IT facilities when contrasted with the access of what lone parents referred to as ‘paying customers’ (see Resources).

**Individual guidance & support** Individual support was found to be available if individuals requested it/had had the confidence to request it, and if staff were not too busy. Where such support was received it was often very useful to participants. However, the scheme was felt in many ways to be inflexible to the needs of the individuals participating. The general structured approach provided did not suit all participants. Participants were disappointed that individualised advice and guidance were not a central part of the scheme’s activities and felt that one-to-one advice and guidance was left to participants to pursue.

**Group activities - overcoming isolation** The scheme did not positively encourage any element of group support or social interaction to offset the isolation resulting from lone parenthood. This element of mutual support and encouragement was seen as lacking from the scheme and for some of those interviewed this was a missed opportunity to create a contrast to life as a lone parent:

‘Everybody was doing their own thing...’ (lone parent, depth interview)

‘The whole system is not geared for lone parents to meet each other.’ (lone parent, focus group)

‘[They expected you to] just get on and do it yourself.’ (lone parent, depth interview)
One of the participants explained that they had hoped to have social interaction and support between the lone parents encouraged by the staff because 'it stops you feeling alone' but instead had felt that the staff were resistant to the group bonding and might even have felt threatened by it. There was a feeling that the support offered by the staff was too work orientated with nothing about 'how you're feeling' which was regarded as important and something which participants would have welcomed the opportunity to explore with each other and the staff.

Staff   The staff involved in the scheme were generally perceived as professional and serious about their work. They were described as having a 'nice, down to earth a relaxed approach' and as being 'very friendly' and 'enthusiastic'. However, other participants were less satisfied with the staff feeling that they were in some way 'standoffish' or adopting a rather 'mechanical approach' to dealing with individuals. An overriding disappointment was that the staff had been limited in the support they were able to offer to lone parents because staffing levels were inadequate. As the staff also provided programmes, advice or help to other self-financing clients they faced, sometimes, competing demands from clients not involved on the scheme. Scheme participants felt that these clients were prioritized so reducing staff availability for the lone parents. Staff also demonstrated a lack of understanding of what it was like to be a lone parent. In some cases this led to the participants feeling unrespected or undervalued: '[they treat you] like a nursery child'. In one extreme case a participant felt so bad as a result of the way staff dealt with his queries that he left the scheme early. Another indication of this problem was that participants felt that there was little or no opportunity for negotiation with the staff over difficulties they were facing or practical avenues they wished to pursue but which did not fit into the general structure of the scheme.

Resources   The resources available whilst on the scheme were viewed positively, they included access to: newspapers, IT, an information bank/library, job bulletins, videos, telephones and postage. However, participants complained that their access to IT was limited because they were not 'paying customers' which meant that they were not allowed on certain machines which carried software such as accountancy packages which they had hoped to use. Some had also experienced being asked to free up the computer they were using for 'paying customers' which added to their feelings that their needs were not a top priority for the agency6.

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6 The scheme had two IT suites, one of which was exclusive to lone parents on the scheme.
Practical support  The scheme offered neither travel expenses nor any assistance with child care and this was viewed very negatively by participants. Some had expected provision of a crèche. They explained the difficulties they faced in trying to provide child care during their time on the scheme. One response involved bringing their children with them to the scheme and although these parents felt that the staff had been supportive around them doing this other participants expressed reservations about these arrangements as they had found the presence of children ‘disruptive’ to their work. The lack of child care was seen as a major failing of the scheme.

Outcomes  Participants felt that they had achieved some objectives in attending the scheme particularly in relation to the development of their job search skills and in becoming more used to the everyday routine of work through attending the scheme. Some felt more self-confident whilst others had developed their IT skills.

Improvements suggested by scheme participants

- **Increase individualised tailoring and support:** to enable the scheme to more effectively meet the needs of individual participants particularly in relation to their existing skills, previous work experience and future aspirations.
- **Better staff awareness of the impact of lone parenthood/needs of lone parents.**
- **Provision of practical support measures:** particularly in relation to child care and travel.
- **Removal of compulsory NVQ element, broadening of vocational focus beyond a single career route.**
- **Develop an approach which encourages participants to recognise existing skills and future potential/broadening of horizons.**

Overview  As with Scheme C this scheme also met with a mixed response. There was some appreciation of a businesslike, professional approach offering a stepping stone to work. Help with job search skills (CVs, application forms, interview techniques) and advice on business projects, was valuable to some, as was access to IT resources and a good reference section. Those who took part in work experience through the scheme found this valuable on the whole. Yet criticisms were expressed.

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7 The scheme had hoped to be able to organise child care through the development of mutual support networks, with participants having a child care and attendance rota. However, this did not happen partly because parents were concerned about entrusting their children to relative strangers. The scheme decided against trying to provide on-site child care because they did not feel that they had adequate expertise to do so.
4.5 The Tailored Menu approach (Scheme E)

4.5.1 Background

A key point related to a perceived insensitivity to the diversity of the lone parent population, to individual needs, and in general to issues associated with lone parenthood. As a result, the scheme was experienced by many as inflexible. It was felt to lack attention to individual participants’ needs for advice, support or motivation to broaden individual horizons. The approach was considered too specific and narrow. It placed a particular emphasis on participants who had little or no skills or work experience (all had to take a basic level NVQ in secretarial and administrative skills for example, whatever their background). This did not suit all participants. Other stumbling blocks concerned the lack of practical support with child care, and limited follow up support. Little use was made of the group dynamic beyond teaching, to build confidence. Outcomes were mixed, some participants found the job search skills and business advice useful, others, demoralised by the level and rigidity of the vocational training, were left with unmet needs.

The evaluation of Scheme E included in-depth interviews and group discussions with lone parents who had previously participated in or were currently participating in the scheme. Most of those interviewed had been out of work for more than 2 years ranging from 2 years up to 11. The participants interviewed had a range of previous work experience including clerical work, retail, care work and included a number of graduates. Participants had joined the scheme after: being referred from other agencies including local Jobcentres, Scheme B (the telephone advice line), local enterprise councils; being told about the scheme by friends; seeing advertisements for the scheme in other agencies; being approached by an outreach worker in local shopping centres; hearing advertisements for the scheme on local radio. Most of those interviewed had not heard about the agency before or made use of its services previously.

4.5.2 Evaluation of Scheme E

Joining the scheme and initial expectations Participants were attracted by the scheme offering free child care, the opportunity of work experience, help with finding work, a focus on African Caribbean clients, and a Lone Parents Networking forum which was seen as a chance to meet with others in similar positions. Those interviewed had a range of expectations about what the scheme could offer them:

- advice about setting up your own business or becoming self-employed;
- networking and the chance to find a job;
- development of job search skills and self-confidence;
- skills training leading to qualifications.

General impressions The organisation had a friendly atmosphere which respondents found ‘encouraging’ and ‘motivating’. For participants who were African Caribbean the targeting of the agency at the local African Caribbean community was seen as positive:

‘I liked the fact it’s specifically for African Caribbeans, it gives you confidence.’

(Lone parent, focus group)
However, this focus caused some hesitation about joining the project for potential participants who were not African Caribbean. They were unsure about their eligibility for the scheme and felt that the advertised focus of the agency might be seen as restrictive.

Generally participants felt that the scheme provided a good environment but that it was insufficiently publicised.

Job search skills and support for business start-up/self-employment The support provided for job search and self-employment was received very positively. Respondents were helped with their CVs, application forms, interview techniques and given guidance about potential career directions. Participants were very positive about the use of a job bulletin board which they felt helped them to get the first opportunity to apply for new vacancies in the area. Those aiming to start their own businesses and become self-employed were helped with market research and business plans and could choose to take part in a structured business course. One had received a start up grant from the agency. She described the support she had received from the scheme: “they’ve put me on my feet”. A particularly well received aspect of this support was the individualised nature of the guidance given, it was felt to help participants to set their own goals and to explore different avenues (See also Individual guidance and support).

Moving on - support for next steps One element of the scheme provided the opportunity to go on work placement. Those offered this opportunity were very positive about it: several had gained jobs as a result of the work placements. However, not all participants had been able to take up this option. All of those interviewed felt able to approach the scheme for further advice and support after they had finished their training. However, the actual provision for post-scheme support was patchy with some reporting consistent and useful input from the scheme and others little or no contact after leaving (see also Staff).

Other skills - vocational and IT The scheme offered a range of vocational skills training including IT and administration courses which led to qualifications. The fact that participants could select different elements which were suited to them was valued and the training provided was rated highly. Participants liked being able to study at their own pace and that the environment was ‘not like a classroom’ but more relaxed.

Individual guidance and support The provision of one-to-one guidance and support from the scheme’s Joblink worker/Business Adviser was perceived to be highly effective. One-to-one interviews enabled participants to build up their self-confidence and recognise the skills that they already possessed as well as helping them to identify long term goals. A key feature was that the interviews enabled participants to identify career or business directions that they had not previously thought of, and
provided options for the future. For some, the impact of these individual interviews was great. One lone parent who had not worked for 11 years described how her initial interview had, by making her aware of the range of different options open to her, boosted her self-confidence and increased her motivation: ‘I was on a high, I was buzzing … I can amount to something at the end of the day, instead of thinking I’m on the scrap heap.’

**Group activities - overcoming isolation** The development of a LoneParentsNetworkingForum was a key element in the success of the scheme. Participants felt that this effectively tackled the isolation often felt by lone parents and as a result helped them to develop their own self-confidence and self-esteem. It enabled lone parents to share their experiences of being lone parents, to make use of each other’s different experiences of work. The chance to set their own agenda added to their feelings of ‘being back in control’ and independent. The opportunity to set agendas for the meetings meant that the parents themselves could choose to invite outside speakers whom they needed advice from including the BenefitsAgency. One participant described the forum as ‘exhilarating’ and others saw it as a very motivating element of the scheme.

**Staff** Participants valued the way they were dealt with by scheme staff and found their response to be understanding and effective. One participant described how the staff ‘make you feel wanted’ and that you were important to them. This resulted in participants feeling motivated to find work and encouraged in their training and job search activities. The staff offered participants options and, importantly, fostered the confidence to feel that they could control their own future and for example, refuse a job that they did not feel was suitable for them. There was however some concern that the support provided by staff was too heavily dependent on one member of staff which limited their ability to cope with demands for advice, guidance and counselling both during and after the scheme.

**Resources** The resources offered at the scheme including IT, photocopying, access to telephones, fax machines and literature were all welcomed. There were no complaints about the standard of the resources provided and participants liked the fact that the staff trusted them to use resources without being watched over:

‘You are allowed to use all the facilities you want and that’s great and I’ve used those facilities for myself. I thought it’s great ‘cos they’re so, they trust you. They trust you to go in the room and use it instead of somebody watching over you.’ (lone parent, depth interview)

**Practical support** The provision of free on-site child care or assistance with child minding costs was a key factor in the success of the scheme, enabling many lone parents who otherwise could not have participated to be able to take part. On-site nursery facilities were helpful for participants unaccustomed to leaving their children in the care of others. The practical
resources available in the nursery and the security system for the nursery meant that parents felt relaxed about leaving their children with the staff and more able to concentrate on their work when upstairs on the scheme. Some felt that the provision currently for under 8 year olds only was restrictive and should be expanded. The scheme did not provide travel expenses and because of its large catchment area this was a problem for some participants who were having to travel some distance to participate.

**Outcomes** Lone parents reported a range of positive outcomes resulting from their participation in the scheme. An increase in self-confidence was seen as a key positive outcome from the scheme, leaving participants feeling more confident not only in their vocational abilities but also, importantly, in their ability to actively seek out and obtain the employment that they had chosen. Increased confidence led to more active job seeking and an improved belief in vocational ability meant that some participants felt able to pursue positions which they had previously not considered. Improved skills levels resulting from the vocational training elements of the scheme also improved confidence and opened up new employment avenues for participants to pursue. Finally, the provision of an environment which actively encouraged peer support helped to counteract the isolation some of the participants had felt prior to joining the scheme.

**Improvements suggested by scheme participants**
- **Improve advertising:** to encourage recruitment.
- **Increase staffing:** for more consistent after-support and one-to-one advice.

**Overview** There was an emphatically positive response to this scheme. As well as one-to-one advice and guidance (including business advice), the opportunity to avail of a number of further training options was appreciated, including IT and other skills training on site, and opportunities for work experience. The free on-site child care was appreciated. The commitment and sensitivity of the scheme organiser was highly praised. There was also a successful ‘Lone Parent Network’ group that met regularly, as a vehicle for talks and peer support, which was run by lone parent participants. The focus on African Caribbean clients was appreciated by some, though for others was unimportant. There was some evidence that this focus might deter potential clients of other community groups. The only criticism, little expressed, related to variable post-scheme support due to pressures on staff time, and a slight feeling that the scheme might be under-publicised. There were hugely positive outcomes reported, turning round confidence and motivation, broadening horizons and moving people on towards training or jobs.
a variety of different experiences of work. Previous careers had included: college lecturer, catering, chauffeur, office work, dental nurse & other care work, professional and management careers in retail and administration. They had been recruited to the scheme in a range of different ways including: referral from the Jobcentre, referral by a friend, leaflets advertised in local schools and through outreach work at local events like festivals and children’s fun days.

4.6.2 Evaluation of Scheme F

Joining the scheme and initial expectations Participants had been attracted to the scheme for differing reasons, some because they wanted to find work and thought the scheme could help them, others because the posters and leaflets for the organisation ‘really spoke to me’ and demonstrated a commitment to helping lone parents specifically. They hoped for a range of outcomes resulting from their participation:

- back to work skills;
- careers guidance;
- to overcome the isolation of being a lone parent;
- help with business start up and self-employment.

Job search skills and business start-up The job search skills and interview preparation elements of the scheme were found to be extremely useful and included help with CVs, interview techniques, application forms and letter writing. The content of this advice and guidance was seen as appropriate and useful:

‘[I got] very intensive preparation for interviews, for example how to sit, how to look at an employer, the need to find out about the company and about your own strengths and weaknesses.’ (lone parent, depth interview)

The fact that the help and assistance provided for participants was focused on individual needs was a positive feature as it encouraged participants to broaden their horizons and to think of alternative avenues of work or business they might not have considered before. One participant described how it had ‘opened my mind a little bit more’ another how ‘it made me think yes I could do that, I could do this’. It was seen as important that the scheme focused on what individuals wanted or needed rather than trying to provide everyone with the same thing.

Similarly, the support received was described as ‘empowering’ because the organisers facilitated participants rather than told them what to do and so encouraged participants to develop their own abilities.

Support for next steps Participants were encouraged to continue to use the scheme even after they had left, either for support or access to resources. This feature too was welcomed. Several of those who had left described how the organisers had made an effort to stay in touch with them and contact them to see how they were doing and this was seen as a valuable contact.
Other skills - vocational & IT  The scheme did not offer any vocational training on site but instead referred participants to other local providers. There was an IT facility but this was felt to be out of date and in need of updating. It was also felt that the staff needed to consider providing some form of structured IT training to help those participants who either lacked the confidence or skills to use the computers available.

Individual guidance and support  Individually, the scheme was able to address the needs of different participants and reflect their diversity. This was a central element of the scheme and one of its most successful elements. Participants felt valued as individuals and believed that they were being given appropriate and effective guidance relating directly to their own aspirations.

Group activities - overcoming isolation  Another key element of the scheme was the provision of group based work around self-development, confidence building and self esteem. These sessions were enjoyed by the participants who valued their use in overcoming the isolation they had felt prior to the scheme and in developing their communication skills and self confidence.

Staff  The staff on the scheme were perceived as very supportive and understanding of single parents' problems. They enabled individuals first to identify and then to work towards their goals. The two organisers were themselves lone parents and this was highly valued by participants, most notably because the participants saw them as role models, examples of where they could get to if they put the effort in now to get back into work. They found the organisers 'encouraging', 'able to put you at your ease'. One participant felt that 'they weren't condemning me' which was very important for her as she had felt very stigmatised when asking for help in the past. Another agreed:

'They give you support, that's one of the best things, and they give you confidence. You don't feel they're just doing their jobs. They do actually care. You don't feel so down - there are other people in the same boat as me.' (lone parent, focus group)

Staff were available when the lone parents needed them and this regular one-to-one contact was highly rated as a valuable element of the scheme which helped participants to feel valued and welcomed. Overall the positive response to the attitudes and actions of the staff was a key factor in the success of the scheme.

Resources  Physical resources available included a job club facility (newspapers, job bulletins), computers (see above), a video, the use of telephones and a fax machine. Participants were generally satisfied with these resources.
Practical support  Practical support offered to participants was limited, in particular respondents noted a lack of regular child care. Although the scheme provided a mobile crèche on days when there were full day sessions, there was no regular child care provided and this meant that some participants had to frequently miss sessions or bring their children with them to the scheme. Although the organisers tried to support parents if they had to bring their children with them it was perceived to be distracting both for the parents and for other participants.

Participants were offered free tea and coffee and provided with lunch which was very much appreciated, not just in respect of reducing the financial costs of attendance but also because it made them feel that they were important to the organisation.

Outcomes  Outcomes were described in terms of increased confidence and self esteem, broadened career horizons and ambitions which were now seen as realistic and feasible, as well as the acquiring of skills useful for job search or in work.

Improvements suggested by scheme participants

• Provide more practical support measures: particularly in relation to consistent child care provision.
• Introduce formal support for IT and computer training.

Overview  The scheme met with an emphatically positive response from participants. This was due largely to its focus on the individual, offering tailored options, without necessarily plunging in directly and solely to job-related issues but starting first to foster confidence and motivation and to work towards individual goals. The additional element of group support was also very much valued, as was the module on 'self development'. All this was additional to teaching of job search skills, intensive preparation for job interviews (including role plays using video equipment), and business advice. The provision of a mobile crèche on site was appreciated when available. Staff were valued as very supportive and sensitive to lone parents’ needs - both on the scheme and after, when they kept in touch with individual participants - and very enabling. There was some criticism of rather dated IT equipment (no formal IT training was available on site but participants were referred elsewhere for this as necessary).

4.7 Summary  Each of the innovative schemes had varying levels of success from the users’ perspective with some being widely welcomed and appreciated whilst others were less successful. They each faced different barriers to meeting their objectives and produced different outcomes as a result. Where schemes were perceived as successful, outcomes were felt to be sustainable and appropriate, where they were seen as less successful users/participants were unsure about the impact of the scheme and outcomes were viewed less positively.
The factors affecting the impact of the four schemes that were directly involved with helping lone parents into work (Schemes C–F) are described in this chapter under the following categories: factors related to specific schemes; those relating to external factors; continuing barriers to work for lone parents after leaving schemes; and contractual issues. This chapter examines the different factors identified by scheme staff and managers which positively or negatively affected the success of the schemes and discusses outcomes from the schemes.

5.1 Scheme related factors influencing impact

The resources a scheme has to offer, its location, content and approach can obviously all affect its overall success.

5.1.1 Availability of child care

The availability of child care was a key factor in the success of schemes. It affected not only levels of recruitment (non-provision effectively excluded potential recruits who required child care) but also affected the retention of recruits (who were less likely to leave the scheme early or to have unplanned absences from the course if they had reliable child care) and the way participants felt about being on the course. The scheme organisers (both of schemes providing and not providing assistance with child care) believed that child care was a critical issue which underlined the success of any scheme:

'The issue of child care underpins everything. If you’re talking about helping people with their confidence and self-esteem there’s no way you’re going to have any self esteem or self confidence if you’re worried about your child.'

(scheme organiser, Scheme F)

5.1.2 Difficulties with recruitment

Unlike those operating the New Deal for Lone Parents the scheme organisers did not have access to a database of lone parents. None of the schemes met their recruitment targets. However, all of the agencies had been aware when they tendered for the scheme that they would be expected to locate lone parents to attract to their schemes. Recruitment was a major difficulty for all of the schemes, despite vigorous recruitment methods which included: proactive outreach work within local communities including stalls in local shopping centres and targeting of local health clinics, advertisements and leafleting. Low numbers of lone parent participants affected success not only in terms of their ability to meet outcome targets but also in having a ripple effect on the way schemes were organised. For example, reduced levels of recruitment affected start dates leading to some disarray for recruits on when courses might begin. In one example: Scheme D planned to have set start and finish dates for its intake but had to implement a roll on roll off approach to recruitment because of reduced numbers and this had a disruptive effect on existing participants. Similarly, much of Scheme F’s content was based on group
work but reduced recruitment meant that groups were not large enough initially to carry out their intended function.

The physical location of schemes in relation to their target group also affected recruitment. All of the schemes were located in inner city areas and as such shared similar problems around the recruitment and retention of participants who were often experiencing extreme disadvantage. However, the schemes faced different issues related to their specific location. For Scheme D, there were benefits to being located on a main high street near to public transport, whilst for Scheme E there were problems of recruiting from a geographically large catchment area in terms of both identifying lone parents in such a wide area and then encouraging them to travel to the agency for the scheme.

5.1.3 Responding to diversity & individual needs

As the preceding chapters have shown, the lone parents who had participated in the schemes formed a very diverse group and arrived on the schemes with varying levels of 'job readiness'. A key factor in whether participants found the scheme to be useful, and in whether schemes helped to move participants further towards entering work, was how well schemes were able to respond to the diversity of their client group. One organiser explained their experience of dealing with diversity:

'The other thing that turned on its head was there was an assumption, and based on some research but probably with the younger lone parents, that there were huge gaps in their education or certainly they had previously worked in low-paid jobs, low or no-skilled jobs and in fact we found that our lone parents have educated themselves, many to degree level.' (scheme organiser, Scheme C)

The diversity of participants was challenging for the schemes. A key feature in the successful schemes was their capacity to listen to individual participants, identify their needs and goals and then deliver actions to meet those needs and enable the participant to progress towards meeting their goals.

'I think one-to-one advice and guidance is paramount.' (scheme organiser, Scheme C)

'You have to be as flexible as possible by talking to the individual parent... it's like taking a holistic approach.' (scheme organiser, Scheme E)

5.1.4 Providing support

The degree to which participants felt supported and respected by the schemes was another key factor in their success. Research findings\(^8\) from Phase One of the New Deal for Lone Parents have underlined the importance of the 'effective adviser' in the response of participants to the New Deal for Lone Parents and this was also found to be true for the innovative schemes.

\(^8\) See: New Deal for Lone Parents: Learning from the Prototype Areas, DSS (1999).
The schemes experienced as most successful had staff who were seen to be empathetic to the needs and experiences of lone parents and an environment which fostered self confidence, discussion and respect for participants. Feelings of isolation and low self-esteem experienced by lone parents prior to starting schemes were carried with them onto the schemes. The schemes that succeeded were those which addressed these issues. Doing this successfully was found to affect participants' feelings about being on the schemes but also affected outcomes because it helped to identify an appropriate direction for individual participants to aim for.

‘For some it's like children in a candy store, they've realised that all these options are out there... People start with very low expectations which change by the time they finish the course they've got other ideas about what they want to do... The danger [is] shuffling people into jobs which they don't want to do.’ (scheme organiser, Scheme F)

An illustrative example demonstrates this point. Sharon who participated in Scheme F was given extensive one-to-one counselling during her time on the scheme. She had wanted ideally to become a dancer but through a discussion of her abilities and ambitions was guided instead towards a career in dance therapy and is now enrolled on a course which will lead her into a career in that field. In contrast Pearl who participated in Scheme C, had very little guidance or advice. She had a managerial background and was keen to re-enter the work force at a similar level. However, she did not want to go into retail management. The scheme arranged an interview for her with a high street retail outlet and she was offered a management position. However, at the time of interview she was very unhappy in that job and did not expect to be able to sustain her employment. In a similar way, the research found that dealing with each individual on a one-to-one basis bolstered self esteem and confidence.

5.1.5 Resources

The resources available to schemes both through the use of existing resources and new resources funded by the contracts were critical to their success. As Section 5.1.4 above has illustrated participants gained a great deal by feeling respected and valued by the scheme and this was echoed by the responses to the provision of resources both physical (such as access to IT, information sources, common rooms, telephones, fax machines & photocopiers) and in relation to staffing levels. All of the organisations involved had emerged out of existing training agencies and as such had access to some existing resources. However, Schemes D & E were particularly well resourced already either having a variety of existing practical resources (in the case of Scheme D) or (as in the case of Scheme E) established training course provision and child care facilities in existence. In addition to helping lone parents to feel valued the resources available to a project affected their experiences of the training and support offered as in the case of Scheme C where participants felt that the IT provision was limited and out of date.
5.1.6 Exit direction and post-scheme support

A further key factor in the success or failure of the schemes was their ability to appropriately support and guide participants on exiting the scheme. It is important to note that whilst the schemes may have definite end dates the support and advice needed by participants continues after the end of their formal involvement with the scheme. Ongoing support was a feature of all the successful schemes. All of the schemes found that some of the participants needed ongoing support after leaving the scheme. In that way, some participants do not exit from schemes immediately, especially where the participant has a long-term strategy for re-joining the labour market:

'We have no exit programme, we take people from the cradle to the grave… you can finish one course but you’re welcome to come into the building anytime, Monday to Friday, 9-5pm, typing, computers, to talk to somebody, just to say hello. We don’t say the course is finished - goodbye.' (scheme organiser, Scheme E)

5.2 External factors

The buoyancy of the local job market affected the impact or success of schemes. One scheme in particular was operating within a very depressed labour market with little opportunity for employment in anything but low skilled, low paid positions. In contrast, another scheme was fortunate to be located in an area where there was money available for people wishing to start up their own businesses. The range of jobs available within the local labour market will affect outcomes because it will affect the nature and salary range of jobs participants are able to aim for, particularly in relation to child care costs and availability.

5.3 Contractual Factors

Three factors related to the nature of the contracts awarded to the innovative schemes were felt to have impacted upon their ability to succeed. Firstly, several of the organisers reported having their initial costings for the scheme reduced from their original projections presented in their proposals. These reductions were accepted by organisers when they were awarded contracts to deliver the schemes but some had had to make changes to their original plans as a result. In the case of Scheme C, match funding was sought from another funding body meaning that the scheme had to incorporate an NVQ element which had not been originally planned. For others it meant that they were less able to provide all the resources they had intended to equip the scheme with.

Secondly, all of the contractors were concerned about the brief contract length. The contracts were awarded on a one year basis with the possibility of a further two year extension depending on performance. All organisers described the difficulties of getting new schemes started and producing outputs in such a short time, especially with such a hidden target group and the ‘learning curve’ they had experienced:
One of the problems was there was no blueprint for this sort of set-up so what we've had to do is actually learn on the job, learn from the clients, link up with lots of different organisations so we have a safety net referral system and that's been extremely time-consuming. It's been a learning curve and it has taken a lot of time as well as trying to devote a lot of time to the clients, trying to find out their needs and developing what we offer them around their needs.' (scheme organiser, Scheme F)

Evidence from the later stages of the schemes' initial contracts (six months after start up) suggested that there was some validity to the organisers' claims that they would begin to produce improved outcomes once the schemes had evolved into fully functioning projects.

Finally, the organisers felt that there was a tension between their contractual obligations to produce discernible outcomes and the needs of their client group which demanded a flexible, client led approach. They felt that the targets they had been set in respect of placement of lone parents into employment was, in some cases, the needs of their clients. Their experience suggested that not all lone parents were able, or willing, to enter employment immediately upon leaving the scheme. The reasons for this are discussed further in Section 5.5.

5.4 Continuing barriers to work

In spite of the best efforts of schemes, some of the barriers discussed in Part One of the report will remain even after participants have completed schemes. Most notable of these barriers are:

- **The ability to access affordable and appropriate child care:** which will be dependent on both the local provision of suitable child care and the level of salary available to the lone parent on entering work.

- **Financial risks:** the loss of benefits on entering work (the 'month gap': loss of free school meals etc.) the level of mortgage repayments.

5.5 Outcomes

The success of the four schemes involved in back to work training and support (Schemes C-F) was contractually defined as the 'successful placement of participants into work of over 16 hours per week for a period of 8 weeks on exiting the scheme or shortly thereafter'. Each scheme indicated the level of expected positive outcomes in their proposals and all of the schemes found difficulty in meeting their initial targets. This section considers the reasons for that difficulty and examines the type of outcomes resulting from the schemes.

5.5.1 Progression to work

Many of the lone parents interviewed for this research in effect adopted a *stepping stone* strategy for their progression towards the labour market. The speed of that progression and the number of steps required before a lone parent becomes a full-time, self-supporting worker obviously varies with each individual. Reasons for this variance are complex and interwoven with many different issues affecting outcomes. However, data from the interviews with lone parents identified three main factors which,
in combination and alongside a range of other factors, might account for such variations:

• **The age of the child/lack of local child care facilities**
Difficulties in accessing child care both for children under 5 and those who require pre and post school care influence the choices lone parents make about entering or re-entering the workforce. Parents of pre-school children will often choose to work part-time rather than full-time either to overcome the child care barrier or because they feel that they should be the primary carer for their child during these early years. Similarly they may adopt a long term strategy for returning to the workforce which coincides with their child’s progression into full-time education. Others with school age children still feel a strong responsibility to be there for their children:

‘I prefer to be with them and not at work if I can help it. I’d rather do the work in between the school hours and then come back and give them all the time. A mother should make sure they’re going the right way in life and doing their homework and everything. That’s the sort of person I want myself to be to lead them in the right direction of life and respect as well, others, instead of, like if I’m working late and you don’t know what the children are up to.’ (lone parent, group discussion)

• **Length of time out of the labour market**
The length of time a lone parent has been out of the labour market influences both the type of strategy they adopt and the number of steps needed before they return to the workforce. Length of unemployment affects both their levels of self-confidence and the relevance of their previous work experience in terms of their skills, qualifications and references.

• **Financial considerations**
A major concern for lone parents is the financial consideration of whether they will become ‘better-off’ if they return to work. This can affect decisions about remaining on benefit, taking only part-time work or planning a longer term progression towards work which involves developing new or updated skills which will lead to the opportunity to apply for jobs with higher salary bands.

Lone parents can use a number of different stepping stones towards an eventual goal of full time employment and no reliance on state benefits. The main stepping stones which can be used before reaching the labour market are:

• refresher courses - for vocational and job search skills;
• vocational skills courses - to develop new skills (often related to information technology or an identified need for basic skills training);
• other educational courses (often related to desire to change career course);
• voluntary work or other unpaid work experience;
• building up self-confidence/motivation building (which may result from using all or some of the above).
In addition to these stepping stones some lone parents clearly see part-time work (supplemented by Family Credit) as a key stepping stone to full-time work, the length of time this stage is maintained is variable for the reasons noted above in Section 5.5.1. The diversity of lone parents as a group explains the variety of different pathways any individual may take through these stepping stones. The following case studies illustrate the different choices and stepping stones that two lone parents in the study took.

**Figure 5.1 Lone parents’ progression towards the labour market (i)**

The diagram above summarises Jane’s story of how she was planning to progress into a full-time job. Unemployed for a year and a half with a child of 17 months she wanted to return to work. Previously employed as a qualified nurse and psychotherapist she also had a first degree. She was confident in her skills levels and that her recent work experience would be adequate for a new employer. She did, however, need some help with her CV and with interview skills as she had been facing some difficulties in getting interviews for work. She joined Scheme C and received help with both of these, however whilst on Scheme C she also took advantage of the chance to update some of her IT software skills. She left the course planning to find a part-time job and start a part-time MA. She expects to go into full-time work at some point in the future but certainly not until her child is over 2 because she feels that she should be the main carer until then.

**Figure 5.2 Lone parents’ progression towards the labour market (ii)**

The diagram above summarises Catherine’s story of how she progressed into a full-time job. Unemployed since the birth of her child two years ago she had been a lone parent from 6 months after the birth. She wanted to return to work and being bilingual had hoped to find work which made use of her linguistic abilities. Qualified in business and administration skills to NVQ level 2 she found herself demoralised after a number of
unsuccessful interviews. She joined Scheme F and received help with her CV, job search and importantly for her helped to boost her confidence and self-esteem through group activities. After very intensive help with her interview skills she succeeded in finding a work experience placement. As a result of this placement she was offered a full-time job as a secretarial/administrative assistant.

The lone parents in the study had either immediate, intermediate or long term strategies for finding work:

- **Immediate**: this strategy involved accessing short-term support, usually in the form of advice on job search skills like interviews and access to IT to update skills and CVs. The lone parents who were following this strategy tended to have worked up until fairly recently and as a result were almost job ready needing only minimal support and guidance. They chose either to search for part-time or full-time work depending upon both their access to child care and the ages of their children.

- **Intermediate**: this strategy had a longer duration and involved some form of formal education or training to develop new skills before the individual would consider searching for work. The lone parents in the study who were following this strategy tended to have been out of the labour market for longer than those in the first group or were seeking a new career direction. Unlike the first group they were more likely to be lacking in confidence and needing more support. The decision to seek further training was usually made on the basis of identified skills shortages rather than because of child care or caring barriers to entering work.

- **Long term**: these lone parents had developed plans for getting back into work which would take anything up to three years to get them into employment. Along the way they might take in motivation and self-confidence building, some new skills training and work experience. In the study they often took part-time work with a view to becoming full-time in the future. This group were mainly those with young pre-school children who either did not wish to return to full-time work or were unable to return to full-time work because of child care barriers until their child/children were of school age. Although, there were no lone parents involved in the study who had never worked, it could be suggested that those in that situation might also adopt this strategy.

The above suggests that the contractual definition of a successful outcome for the innovative schemes was limited with such a diverse client group. Organisers felt that it did not fully encompass the range of strategies a lone parent might be using for returning to work. They believed that the definition of successful outcomes should encompass a range of different types of outcomes, and most importantly, should accept the concept of 'progression towards work' (or a move from one stepping stone to the next).
as a successful outcome in terms of bringing individuals closer to the labour market:

'For me, a positive outcome is seeing the client move forward, ... in whatever direction. I think it's too rigid to say a job is an outcome. I mean it is an outcome, but not the only outcome. For us in terms of contractually, yes, it's getting somebody into a job, or it's getting someone off benefits and into a positive outcome, into a job, or into self-employment. But for me personally, as a trainer and involved in this, it's seeing a client develop, the confidence levels rise, for them to achieve a reachable target for themselves, and to build up those pebbles ... We've had people successfully go on to training courses, people successfully getting part-time work because that fits their needs... If it's moving a client forward and they're developing their skills and making themselves more job ready, surely that's the direction we want to be going in.' (staff member, Scheme D)

Moving on The lone parents included in the study had either moved on to, or were seeking, the following destinations after completing their scheme:

- **Employment** - both full and part time.
- **Self-employment** or business start up.
- **Training or education**.
- **Found work but had to give up** because they were worse off financially.
- **Other** (such as suffering from illness or disability at time of interview).

5.6 Summary This chapter has outlined the range of different factors which affected the ability of the different schemes to succeed, both from the participants' perspective and the organisers'. It suggests that a complexity of factors can influence the success of a scheme but also highlights those factors which were critical to schemes either failing or succeeding, for example: the provision of adequate child care support, the approach of schemes to the impact of lone parenthood. Some factors though are beyond the control of the scheme such as the health of the local labour market and some barriers, such as child care or financial risk which were insuperable for lone parents before joining the scheme, remain once they have left.
6 TAKING A WIDER PERSPECTIVE: THE INNOVATIVE SCHEMES AND GOOD PRACTICE

Preceding chapters have examined the innovative schemes based on the experiences and views of the lone parents who used their services. Each scheme has been seen to have its own distinctive strengths and weaknesses in the approach it takes to help lone parents into employment. This chapter shifts the focus from the specifics of each individual scheme to a wider perspective. A number of key themes and issues have emerged and, by taking an overview of the data from all the schemes, these can be viewed as tentative indicators to what might constitute good practice in the development and delivery of projects for lone parents. They suggest which elements of the approach, content and delivery were most critical to success and which, if left unaddressed, could become major stumbling blocks to successful outcomes.

6.1 The approach

The four schemes directly involved in preparing lone parents for work adopted very distinct approaches. However, when viewed as a whole, the data suggests that any approach to helping lone parents should aim to be:

- **Holistic - addressing a range of different needs and barriers**
  A successful scheme needs to build in an understanding that the needs of the participants will differ and that to succeed a scheme needs to address the range of difficulties that individual is encountering. Chapter 3 identified barriers that lone parents might face when wanting to return to work. Some of these they share in common with other groups of unemployed people (for example, outdated skills), some are peculiar to lone parents as a group (the need for child care). However, each lone parent will face their own different and individual set of barriers. For example whilst one lone parent might be trying to overcome their lack of recent experience and loss of confidence, another might require advice around arranging child care and the financial transition of returning to work from claiming benefits. The findings suggest that schemes need to take a holistic approach and tackle the whole range of barriers facing lone parents, which might encompass: emotional barriers (low self-esteem), financial (fears around returning to work and losing the security of benefits) and external (to do with available jobs, wages, child care). Schemes need to recognize how lone parenthood can affect individuals’ perceptions of their abilities and self-esteem. Low self-esteem or confidence can be challenged by arranging activities which encourage participants to consider broader horizons and explore a range of potential careers and jobs.

- **Client-led**
  Integral to a holistic approach is the recognition of individual diversity and individual needs. In order to effectively respond to individual
diversity, schemes need to be flexible and able to respond to the diverse needs of individual participants. For example whilst one participant might need intensive basic skills training, another may only need guidance with job search activities. Highly structured schemes offering little in the way of individual options will not be flexible enough to cater for the range of needs individuals will have. Lone parents as a group are highly diverse and that diversity both needs to be recognised and responded to. In addition, flexibility can also be seen in the way in which schemes are delivered. Flexibility is also needed in relation to the hours of structured sessions (to respond to child care needs) and to the pace at which individuals progress through the scheme to allow for unplanned absences (due to caring responsibilities).

- **Empowering: building confidence and self-esteem, broadening horizons**
  The considerable impact that lone parenthood has on some individuals' confidence and self-esteem is evident from the data presented. A key element of successful schemes in the study was their ability to foster an environment where these participants felt empowered, valued and respected with resulting gains in confidence and self-esteem. In addition to changes resulting from structured sessions around self-development, the successful schemes were able to engender an atmosphere which enabled participants to recognise their own abilities and develop responsibility for their own progression through the scheme, with support from either the staff or other participants. In a similar way these schemes encouraged participants to broaden their horizons and consider a range of different types of employment or alternative career paths.

- **Integrated with other agencies**
  Inter-agency co-operation is critical to producing successful outcomes. Good inter-agency links can help with recruitment and publicity for schemes, but the most important role inter-agency co-operation provides is the support it can offer to individual participants. Effective links mean that participants can move smoothly between projects and service providers helping them to access exactly what they need as an individual to progress towards employed status. For example, if the scheme they are participating in does not provide the level of training in IT or basic literacy skills that is required then the participant can be referred for that help. Similarly, effective links with established government agencies such as the Employment Service and Benefits Agency can provide critical information and routes into available work for participants. Finally, effective links with employers can facilitate the use of work placements and work experience schemes which provide participants with valuable experience, a recent reference and sometimes a route into a permanent position.
6.2 Scheme content Each of the four schemes (C-F) contained a different balance of activities and provision for their participants. Some of these elements were viewed particularly positively and where that element was provided successfully it had a key impact on overall satisfaction levels with that scheme. The research indicated that it would be expedient to consider each of the following elements when developing a programme for lone parents:

- child care;
- motivation & self-confidence building;
- job search guidance, advice & experience;
- resources;
- vocational skills training & updating or appropriate sign-posting;
- exit direction and on-going support;
- staff qualities.

6.2.1 Affordable, reliable child care

Recognition of the child care responsibilities and needs of lone parents is paramount to the success of any scheme. Providing child care or support with child care costs practically enables lone parents to participate in the scheme. However, a carefully thought out child care strategy provides more than this practical assistance. A scheme providing a range of ways for parents to arrange child care encourages participants to begin to consider what child care they might need to, or want to, arrange for when they become employed. It provides a safe environment for participants to discuss their feelings about child care and where choice is offered (for example between using an on-site nursery or receiving financial support for a child minder) can also allow parents to experiment with child care arrangements, finding the most suitable arrangement for them prior to starting work. Similarly, it helps participants to become accustomed to leaving their children in the care of another person and as such provides them with experience of the working routine. A consideration of the child care needs of participants helps to foster an environment where participants feel valued and respected and participants are more likely to be able to apply themselves fully to the scheme if they are at ease with the child care arrangements in place.

6.2.2 Confidence building

The importance of activities and actions by staff on the schemes which fostered and developed the confidence and self-esteem of lone parents was evident in their own accounts of the schemes. These elements are a key feature to be included in future schemes. Whilst confidence was developed through the extension of job search skills, interview techniques and vocational skills it also required, in some cases, specific attention. For the successful schemes, confidence building took place both through individual advice and counselling and via group sessions:

- **Individual advice & counselling** was seen to build confidence by placing an emphasis on the individual, making them feel listened to and respected and by helping them to develop their own strategies for returning to work, tailored to meet their needs and aspirations.
• **Group work** was also seen as critical to the success or failure of schemes. A built in element of group work and mutual support added to the participants' experiences of schemes by encouraging the use of the group as a forum to build self-confidence and self-esteem. However, as discussed above the individual support provided by schemes is also central to success and therefore, the group element should not replace or displace a focus on individual guidance and support but rather act as a complement.

6.2.3 **Job search guidance and advice**

Critical to any successful scheme which aims to place participants in work is the development of individual's job search skills and interview techniques. Providing participants with the resources (the use of telephones, free newspapers, vacancy bulletins, use of IT resources and computers for example) to carry out job search and the confidence in their abilities to do so need to be central. However, taking into account suggestions made in Section 6.1 job search advice and guidance for lone parents should be individualised, tailored to what each participant needs and should focus initially on identifying the career path that they might follow. Specifically, for lone parents, schemes should have a clear understanding of the impact that entering work may have on family finances and be able to provide information and advice relating to child care options and family friendly policies/working contracts which might alleviate some of the difficulties previously associated with working.

6.2.4 **Work experience and placements**

For some lone parents help with job search will not be adequate. In common with other unemployed groups lone parents who have been absent from the labour market for long periods of time suffer from a lack of recent, relevant work experience both in terms of their own confidence and the confidence of potential employers in their abilities. In these situations the ability of schemes to provide participants with relevant work experience placements can be important in allowing participants to try out working life without the pressure, both financial and personal, of risking the relative financial security of benefits when taking up a job. The opportunity for work experience placements allows participants to test the working environment and routine, experiment with child care and build up confidence in their abilities to adapt to the working life. Practically it also supplies participants with an opportunity to include recent work experience on their CVs and provide a recent reference for potential employers.

6.2.5 **Vocational skills training/ Signposting at an appropriate level**

Many lone parents who have been unemployed for any significant length of time feel that they need to develop their vocational skills, particularly in relation to administrative procedures and information technology. Therefore, schemes need to be able to provide help with this. However, as noted previously the diversity of the client group makes it difficult for any single scheme to develop training at a level suitable for all participants. Indeed providing training at one level only may be discouraging to participants with greater needs or patronising for those already beyond
the skills level offered. Therefore, schemes need to be able to effectively sign-post those participants to other organisations and agencies offering training at the level required.

6.2.6 Exit guidance & ongoing support

When schemes have the placement of participants in work or self-employment as their eventual goal the adequacy of exit guidance is critical to the outcome of schemes. The study found that the schemes which offered intensive exit guidance and on-going support were most successful. As Chapter 5 discussed, some participants had long term strategies for getting back to work and these participants, like others who leave but do not immediately find work, will need on-going support and encouragement from staff on the schemes. This support might range from help with application forms, access to IT or personal emotional support.

6.2.7 Staff Qualities

A final element found to be critical in the innovative schemes was the personal qualities of the staff of the scheme. Staff members had a great impact on the experiences of participants. Where staff were motivated, empathetic and caring, participants felt valued, motivated and understood. Where this did not happen participants were liable to feel under valued, de-motivated and could suffer reduced confidence.

6.3 The Innovative Schemes & the New Deal for Lone Parents

SCPR undertook an extensive research study at the same time as the research into the innovative schemes to evaluate the impact of Phase One of the New Deal for Lone Parents prior to its national implementation. This enabled the research team to compare some elements of the two programmes.

Awareness of the NDLP varied among the innovative scheme participants. During the interviews they were given a brief outline of its elements and asked to comment on the schemes in comparison. Scheme organisers had a high awareness of the New Deal for Lone Parents. Compared to the NDLP, the most effective innovative schemes were thought to be:

- better able to provide intensive support, for example offering lone parents more time, a wider agenda, and the ability to include a group element;
- more likely to enable participants to achieve lasting jobs, even if in doing so the process took longer. Some concern was expressed that the New Deal for Lone Parents would solely address job needs to the exclusion of other factors which could remain as barriers to long term job prospects, such as low self-confidence.

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9 New Deal for Lone Parents: Learning from the Prototype Areas, DSS, (1999).
Problems with recruitment were more acute for the schemes than for Phase One of the NDLP. Yet as scheme participants were self-referred, they were a more motivated group than some of those targeted by the NDLP. The innovative scheme participants were more equivalent to those who volunteered to participate in Phase One of the NDLP. These participants sought out New Deal provision rather than waited to respond to invitations from New Deal advisors.

It was notable that proportionately more of the scheme participants, than among the participants of Phase One of the NDLP, had higher level educational qualifications (degree level or equivalent).

The role and ability of New Deal personal advisers was found to be central to participants’ experiences of NDLP\(^{10}\), researchers noted an equivalent ‘organiser effect’ in the innovative schemes. Those who had participated in the innovative schemes found the role and ability of the scheme organisers critical to the success of the scheme.

Finally, it was believed by both the lone parents and scheme organisers, that the schemes could perform a useful role alongside the New Deal for Lone Parents. In particular, by providing access to:

- vocational skills training, leading to marketable qualifications;
- guidance and support in the development of personal transferable skills, such as communication skills; and
- a supportive environment, bringing lone parents together and tackling feelings of isolation.

6.4 Conclusion Successful schemes need to combine an effective approach with appropriate content. The diversity of lone parents as a group and a clear understanding of the needs of lone parents should be demonstrated in the delivery and design of schemes. The needs of lone parents are complex with many different barriers to be overcome and a diverse range of aspirations and needs to be met. As a result, there can be no single prescriptive menu for good practice in relation to such schemes. Evidence from the innovative schemes suggests rather that there are a number of interwoven key themes which should be considered when developing new programmes, these are shown in Figure 6.1.

\(^{10}\) New Deal for Lone Parents: Learning from the Prototype Areas, DSS, (1999).
Figure 6.1 Key elements in schemes to overcome barriers to work for lone parents

An approach that is . . .

| HOLISTIC + CLIENT-LED + EMPOWERING + INTEGRATED WITH OTHER AGENCIES |

Providing...

- child care options
- motivation & self-confidence
- job search guidance, advice
- work experience
- resources
- vocational skills training & updating or appropriate sign-posting
- exit direction and on going support
- motivated and empathetic staff
Fieldwork

Interviews and discussions were conducted using topic guides designed in collaboration with the DSS and with reference to the issues being explored in the evaluation of the New Deal for Lone Parents. The guides list key themes sub-topics to be explored. The interviews and discussions were conducted using responsive questioning and probing to ensure that all relevant issues were fully explored. All the interviews and discussions were tape recorded for subsequent transcription. This is essential for the form of analysis used (see below) and allows full concentration to be given to exploratory questioning.

Focus groups with scheme participants were arranged at a convenient venue; individual interviews were conducted mainly in the lone parents’ homes. All lone parents interviewed were given £15 as a token of thanks for their time in taking part in the research.

Analytical Methods

The qualitative data was analysed using ‘Framework’, a thematic analysis technique developed by SCPR’s Qualitative Research Unit and used in all our studies. The method proceeds as follows:

First, the key topics and issues which emerge from the data are identified through familiarisation with transcripts. A series of thematic charts are then devised, and data from each discussion is summarised and transposed by hand under each key topic. The context of the information is retained and the page of the transcript from which it comes noted, so that it is possible to return to a transcript to explore a point in more detail or to extract text for verbatim quotation.

The experiences and attitudes of all respondents can then be explored within a common analytical framework which is grounded in and driven by respondents’ own accounts. This helps to highlight in a systematic way the full range of issues and views articulated.
### Table 1: Summary of Respondents

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<tr>
<td>Other scheme users</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
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### Table 2: Training Schemes Sample

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<th>Completers</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Non-completers</th>
<th>Non-Participants</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>Lone Parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>/early leavers</td>
<td></td>
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<th>Third party callers</th>
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### Table 4: Employers Sample

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<th>Total no. of employers consulted</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>A</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dear ..............,

I am writing to ask for your help with a research study. The research study will help us to assess our programmes of training and employment advice at ....................... and perhaps give us some more ideas. It will focus on programmes that might benefit lone parents.

Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR), an independent research institute, are carrying out the research. They are interested to hear the views both of people who have made use of services at ....................... and of others who have not. As you are currently using our scheme we would like to know if you would be prepared to help us by participating in the research. SCPR will be at our offices on ....................... and would like to invite you to take part in a discussion group between .......... and ........... . It will be an opportunity for you to discuss the scheme with other participants and to tell us your views about what services and support are needed by parents who are trying to access further training/education, find employment or start-up in self-employment.

Any information you provide will be treated in confidence and no information will be passed on to anyone else or published in a form which could identify you. SCPR will provide lunch after the group and pay you £15 in appreciation of your time and help if you take part. This will not affect your entitlement to benefits in any way.

I do hope you will take part in this study. Everyone’s experiences and view about our scheme are important and we need your help to find out whether the scheme is useful. If you have any further questions about the research, or do not wish to take part, please call me, ................... on ..................

We do hope you will enjoy taking part in the study.

Thank you for your help.

Yours sincerely,
Dear .............,

I am writing to ask for your help with a research study. The research study will help us to assess our programmes of training and employment advice at ...................... and perhaps give us some more ideas. It will focus on programmes that might benefit lone parents.

Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR), an independent research institute, are carrying out the research. They are interested to hear the views both of people who have made use of services at ...................... and of others who have not. As you have taken part in the scheme in the past/am currently using our scheme we would like to know if you would be prepared to help us by participating in the research. A researcher may contact you after ...................... to arrange a convenient time to come and speak to you personally. The interview itself will take no longer than an hour.

Any information you provide will be treated in confidence and no information will be passed on to anyone else or published in a form which could identify you. SCPR will provide lunch after the group and pay you £15 in appreciation of your time and help if you take part. This will not affect your entitlement to benefits in any way.

I do hope you will take part in this study. Everyone’s experiences and view about our scheme are important and we need your help to find out whether the scheme is useful. If you have any further questions about the research, or do not wish to take part, please call me, .................. on .................. 

We do hope you will enjoy taking part in the study.

Thank you for your help.

Yours sincerely,
Employer contact letter

Re: “Lone Parents into the Workplace - The Business Case”

Dear........................................,

We are writing to ask for your help with a research study. Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR), an independent research institute, has been asked by the Department of Social Security to carry out research on projects that aim to encourage single parents into the workplace. One element of this research is an evaluation of employers' responses to the information pack “Lone Parents into the Workplace - The Business Case” prepared by .........................

As one of the employers who has recently received this information pack, we would like to know if you might help us by participating in the research. This would involve a telephone interview with you which would take no longer than 15-20 minutes, at a time convenient to you. Any information you provide will be treated in confidence and no information will be passed on to anyone else or published in a form which could identify you.

We do hope you will take part in this study as the views of employers about the usefulness of such projects are critical. If you do not wish to participate in the research could you please contact us on 0171 250 1866 before ........... , otherwise we will telephone you shortly after that date. If you have any other questions about the research, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Thank you for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Kandy Woodfield
Helen Finch
Qualitative Research Unit
Key issues to be explored:

- background, organisation & daily operation of scheme;
- evaluation of the scheme so far;
- perceptions of LP experiences & response to scheme;
- perceptions of employers’ response to scheme.

Introduction

- Introduce team and SCPR (stress independence).
- Describe project: aims and structure (commissioned by DSS, exploring different approaches to helping LPs back into work, not evaluating them, rather their approach).
- Tape and confidentiality.

1. Background & History of Scheme

- The application:
  - history of grant application;
  - motivation to apply (specific local need or led by grant opportunity);
  - existing provision for LPs in area;
  - expectations of outcome of application/any other applications for funds made.

- Context:
  - local area - unemployment profile, types of employment available.

- Initial implementation - getting going:
  - process of bid handling - any problems/difficulties encountered;
  - how the scheme was set up - any particular problems or difficulties and how these were overcome.

2. Overview of the Scheme

- Key activities: current structure, different pathways (overview of what scheme offers to LPs).

- Aims/objectives (where does the scheme leave LPs in relation to the labour market).

- Organisation of scheme:
  - staff numbers, roles, how staff were recruited;
  - any changes made from initial proposal, if so explore reasons;
  - existing links with employers, employers’ responses to LPs;
  - links with other organisations providing services to LPs.
- Recruitment:
  - recruitment/access to the scheme/use of outreach to recruit;
  - take up of places/any refusals (if applicable to recruitment method);
  - how many cohorts since start up date, total numbers.

- Participants:
  - profile of participants (e.g. skills, employment, benefits);
  - programme choice, if any;
  - experiences/perceptions of LP response to the scheme;
  - drop outs from scheme.

- Support measures for LPs on the scheme:
  - childcare/financial;
  - other;
  - post-scheme support.

- Training/education/other components.
  * Explore specific content of scheme (which elements of the following are included):
  - basic skills education/vocational training/higher skills training/qualifications/work placements/guidance, support and counselling offered.

3. Initial Outcomes and Evaluations of Scheme Success

- Success measured how:
  - perceived outcomes so far (e.g. skills/attitudes/employment);
  - difficulties so far;
  - take up rates;
  - response of participants;
  - response of employers;
  - what evaluation measures taken by scheme - what records kept in addition to DSS proforma.

4. Knowledge/Views about the 'New Deal for Lone Parents'

- Awareness of and knowledge about NDLP:
  - how organisers feel about NDLP.
Read project summary prior to focus group and probe about specific elements of the project, as relevant

Objectives:
• to explore experiences of the scheme;
• to explore views about the effectiveness of the schemes;
• to examine ways in which the schemes could be improved;
• to examine outcomes resulting from the scheme (particularly in relation to changing attitudes towards employment/further training, job search activity).

1. Introduction to the study & SCPR

Introduce SCPR. SCPR have been asked to talk to people on four different training & education projects for single parents about their experiences of and views about the projects in which they are participating. Specifically, we would like to know how well you think your project is helping you to get new skills and whether you feel it will increase your opportunities to go onto further training or to get a job:
• stress confidentiality;
• ask for permission to use the tape recorder;
• remind people to speak one at a time and to the whole group.

2. Background Information (go round group)
• Where from/ household composition/age/number and ages of children.
• Age left school/any qualifications/skills/training prior to coming on the project.

3. Joining the Project
• Why decided to take part/motivation to join the project.
  Probe for: wanting to go back to work (money, challenge, company), wanting to get more skills but not re-enter work immediately, other reasons.
• Initial expectations of the project.
• How found out about the project e.g. leaflet, letter, in person, outreach, advertising.
• Past experiences of other projects/how affected motivation to take part in this one.
4. Experiences of the Project

- positive aspects (spontaneous list);
- negative aspects (spontaneous list);

Experiences of/views about key elements of the project.
Probe for specific elements listed in project information such as:
- advice and guidance and counselling (vocational);
- job search skills;
- nature of vocational training received (at what level?);
- training with computers;
- motivational/self-development skills;
- resources available (access to IT/books/guidance materials);
- types of help received and how useful (Probe for the following);
- child care help;
- travel and study costs;
- grants;
- other counselling/advice (e.g. social/personal problems/benefits advice and calculations/housing advice).

- Nature/degree of choice within the project:
  - different pathways;
  - if had a choice, how selected their options;
  - freely available or limited/guided strongly;
  - views about the range of options;
  - would these have been their choices if they could design pathways themselves.

- Work experience obtained, if any (e.g., work tasters, placements, apprenticeships, shadowing) - discuss usefulness of experience.

5. Views about Project Effectiveness

- What has changed for them because of the project? Get a spontaneous list, then probe: What has the project helped you to be able to do better...:
  - job related skills;
  - motivation;
  - confidence/assertiveness;
  - interpersonal skills;
  - job search skills (i.e., CV preparation, interview skills);
  - work experience;
  - recent references.

- Perceptions of how well the project suits their individual needs:
  - how flexible (i.e., length of time for completion, support for personal needs, fitting in around child care) both generally and on an individual basis (i.e. could it be tailored to their needs?).

- Perceptions of how well individual elements of the project fit together:
  - did it seem like a coherent ‘package’ or separate bits;
  - how well did different elements help them to progress to higher levels of skills/experience/personal development.
• Perceptions of which elements of the project were most useful/effective.
• Views about whether the project has met their initial expectations; if not, why not?
• Experiences of problems/difficulties with the project, response of staff and trainers to these difficulties.
• Suggestions for the innovative scheme: discuss…:
  - useful components missing from scheme;
  - components which were not necessary or useful;
  - if they could change anything about the project, what would it be/why?
  - whether they would recommend this project to others in a similar position/why/why not;
  - any further suggestions to be passed on to the scheme organisers?

6. Next Steps
• Expectations/plans for what they will do on completion of the project. (Probe whether view expected outcomes as positive or negative and why):
  - whether they aim to go on to further education/training;
  - whether wanted further training or not;
  - what type of training;
  - whether further training is expected to lead to employment/whether desired;
  - whether they aim to go into employment/self-employment;
  - what type of job they expect to get (sector/level);
  - whether this is the kind of job they want; why/why not;
  - whether they have received appropriate support to enable self-employment.
• Views about how well they've been prepared for going on to the next step:
  - whether the project has helped them feel confident about getting a job/entering further training;
  - in what ways/why? (probe for whether project offers careers advice/guidance/job search/post-project support);
• Factors still affecting their ability to enter work (financial impact/child care/skills gaps).

7. Before Joining the Project
• Thinking back to before you started the project, discuss…:
  - extent of motivation/desire to work;
  - probe for conditions under which they would be willing to work;
  - past experiences of attempting to find work prior to the project;
  - any particular barriers prior to the project (probe for child care; impact of working on financial income, skills/knowledge gap);
  - past experiences of work (type of work/employers/difficulties encountered);
  - perceptions of the caring role;
  - benefit history (IS, ever claimed JSA - circumstances around that).
8. Closing – general issues
   • Awareness of and views about the New Deal for Lone Parents.
   • Factors which they think prevent single parents entering employment.
   • Factors which might encourage single parents to enter employment.

Thank you for your help
Read project summary prior to interview and probe about specific elements of the project, as relevant

Objectives:
• to explore experiences of the scheme;
• to explore views about the effectiveness of the schemes;
• to examine ways in which the schemes could be improved;
• to examine outcomes resulting from the scheme (particularly in relation to changing attitudes towards employment/further training, job search activity).

1. Introduction to the study & SCPR

Introduce SCPR. SCPR have been asked to talk to people who are participating/have participated in four different training & education projects for single parents about their experiences of and views about the projects in which they are participating. Specifically, we would like to know how well you think your project is helping you (If leaver, did help you...) to get new skills and whether you feel it will/has increased your opportunities to go onto further training or to get a job:
• stress confidentiality;
• ask for permission to use the tape recorder.

2. Background Information
• Age, age left school/any qualifications/skills/training prior to coming on the project.
• Household composition.
• Number and ages of children.

3. Joining the Project
• Why decided to take part/motivation to join the project.
  Probe for: wanting to go back to work (money, challenge, company), wanting to get more skills but not re-enter work immediately, other reasons.
• How found out about the project - leaflet, letter, in person, outreach, advertising.
• Initial expectations of the project.
• Past experiences of other projects/how affected motivation to take part in this one.
4. Experiences of the Project

For early leavers only:

• You left the project early, can you tell me why? Take them through:
  - their reasons for/circumstances surrounding their leaving the project early;
  - the impact of their early departure;
  - what would have enabled them to stay on the project;
  - what would have encouraged them to stay on the project.

For all:
  - positive aspects (spontaneous list);
  - negative aspects (spontaneous list).

• Experiences of/views about key elements of the project.
  Probe for specific elements listed in project information such as:
  - advice and guidance and counselling (vocational);
  - job search skills;
  - nature of vocational training received (at what level?);
  - training with computers;
  - motivational/self-development skills;
  - resources available (access to IT/books/guidance materials);
  - types of help received and how useful (Probe for the following);
  - child care help;
  - travel and study costs;
  - grants;
  - other counselling/advice (e.g. social/personal problems/benefits advice and calculations/housing advice).

• Nature/degree of choice within the project:
  - different pathways;
  - if had a choice, how selected their options;
  - freely available or limited/guided strongly;
  - views about the range of options;
  - would these have been their choices if they could design pathways themselves.

• Work experience obtained, if any (e.g., work tasters, placements, apprenticeships, shadowing) - discuss usefulness of experience.

5. Views about Project Effectiveness

• What has changed for them because of the project? Get a spontaneous list, then probe: What has the project helped you to be able to do better...job related skills:
  - motivation;
  - confidence/assertiveness;
  - interpersonal skills;
  - job search skills (i.e., CV preparation, interview skills);
  - work experience;
  - recent references.
• Perceptions of how well the project suits their individual needs:
  - how flexible (i.e., length of time for completion, support for personal needs, fitting in around child care) on an individual basis (i.e. could it be tailored to their needs?)
• Perceptions of how well individual elements of the project fit together:
  - did it seem like a coherent ‘package’ or separate bits;
  - how well did different elements help them to progress to higher levels of skills/experience/personal development.
• Perceptions of which elements of the project were most useful/effective.
• Views about whether the project has met their initial expectations; if not, why not?
• Experiences of problems/difficulties with the project, response of staff and trainers to these difficulties.
• Suggestions for the innovative scheme, discuss:
  - components missing from scheme;
  - components which were not necessary or useful;
  - if they could change anything about the project, what would it be/why;
  - whether would recommend this project to other LPs/why/why not;
  - any further suggestions to be passed on to the scheme organisers?

Go to 7. if respondent is a leaver or early leaver

6. **Next Steps (for current participants only)**

• Expectations/plans for what they will do on completion of the project.
  
  (*Probe whether view expected outcomes as positive or negative and why*)
  - whether they aim to go on to further education/training;
  - whether wanted further training or not;
  - what type of training;
  - whether further training is expected to lead to employment/whether desired;
  - whether have received appropriate support to enable self-employment;
  - whether they aim to go into employment/self-employment;
  - what type of job they expect to get (sector/level);
  - whether this is the kind of job they want; why/why not.

• Views about how well they’ve been prepared for going on to the next step:
  - whether the project has helped them feel confident about getting a job/entering further training in what ways/why? (*probe for whether project offers careers advice/guidance/job search/post-project support*).

• Factors still affecting their ability to enter work (financial impact/child care/skills gaps).
7. **Before Joining the Project**
   - Thinking back to before you started the project, discuss extent of motivation/desire to work.
   
   *Probe for conditions under which they were willing to work previously.*
   - Past experiences of attempting to find work prior to the project:
     - any particular barriers prior to the project (probe for child care; impact of working on financial income, skills/knowledge gap);
     - strategies for finding work;
     - experiences of working.
   - Perceptions of the caring role.
   - Financial circumstances (benefit history (JSA/JS), maintenance, debts, other).
   - Available support (formal child care, family/friends, informal – other LPs).
   - Circumstances surrounding becoming an LP.
   
   *Probe for changes to any of the above since leaving the project for leavers.*

   Go to 9. If lone parent is current participant.

8. **Leaving the Project** *(for leavers and early leavers only)*
   - Describe what happened on leaving the project:
     - moved into work/training or not;
     - after care and support;
     - views about their own situation now (are they ‘better off’, in what sense/ways);
     - whether the outcome is what they wanted or not.
   - Experiences of work/self-employment – where applicable.
   - Factors still affecting their ability to enter work (financial impact/child care/skills gaps).

9. **Closing – general issues**
   - Awareness of and views about the New Deal for Lone Parents.
   - Factors which they think prevent single parents entering employment factors which might encourage single parents to enter employment.

   **Thank you for your help**
Interviews with Employers

**Introduction**

Good morning/afternoon my name is ................. And I am calling from SCPR, we sent you a letter recently regarding a piece of research which we are carrying out for the DSS looking at different ways of helping single parents into the work force (check that they have received the letter). I wonder if it would be possible for you to spare me about twenty minutes now to answer some questions?

*If no* - could I arrange a time to call back and speak to you. (complete call record sheet)

*If yes* - first of all could I check that you remember receiving the information booklet *Lone Parents into the Workplace: The Business Case*?

(If yes continue to 1.)

(If no - check whether there is another person in the company who might have received it, take details)

1. **Introduction to the study & SCPR**

Introduce SCPR. We have been asked by the DSS to talk to employers about the best ways of enabling employers to employ single parents, about their experiences of employing single parents and their views about the information pack *Lone Parents into the Workplace: The Business Case*.

- stress confidentiality.

2. **Background Profile**

- Respondent - position in company/responsibilities/length of time with company.

- Company profile - type of business/location/size/number of employees/organisational structure (head office or devolved)/public or private sector/how long established/TU presence.

*Be flexible with the placement of the following factual questions - can be asked at the most appropriate point.*

- Profile of employment offered - type of jobs/skills required/type of contracts whether permanent, temporary, short term, flexitime, part time, job share etc.

- Profile of employees - age/gender/ethnicity/local or commuters/salary ranges.

- Current involvement in schemes with unemployed – probe for schemes run by TECs, Employment Service etc.
3. Employing Single Parents

• Do they employ single parents? Do they know if they employ single parents i.e. what monitoring methods are there in place both for staff on the payroll & applicants during recruitment.

If they have employed/do employ single parents:

• Their experiences:
  - in what positions/wage levels/do they offer any in-work training;
  - advantages, (probe for stable work force, time management, favourable company image, skills, NIC holiday breaks...);
  - needs (probe for flexible working times, child care, benefit advice/financial issues...);
  - difficulties (probe retaining staff, absence from work, child care, the need for flexible working times).

• Steps taken to counter any difficulties/respond to needs.
  Probe for practical steps for example: introducing flexitime, child care or child care subsidies, job share, unpaid leave....

• Explore where decisions relating to practical steps taken are made (local/national).

If they have no experience of employing single parents:

• Spontaneous list of steps which could be taken by employers to encourage or retain single parent employees - Probe for practical steps for example: introducing flexitime, child care or child care subsidies, job share, unpaid leave....

4. The Information Booklet

• Initial response to the information pack.
  Probe for:
  - views about practical steps suggested;
  - the practicality of introducing those steps;
  - the potential usefulness of suggestions to them;
  - were they convinced by the argument.

• Any plans to take practical steps following reading the pack.

• Particular barriers which exist to prevent them taking action.

• What might encourage the company to take action/what types of incentives?

• What other information would they like/would be useful to them?

5. Schemes to help single parents into the workplace

• Awareness of any schemes helping single parents into the workplace. Probe for training/financial/employer based/government initiated.

• What types of schemes they think might encourage single parents into the workplace.
6. Closing

Thank the employer for their time and ask them whether they would be prepared to be contacted at a later date to participate in a one to one interview, lasting about an hour looking at similar issues but in more depth?

*If yes, take name, confirm contact details & give date after which they might be contacted. Complete call record sheet.*
1. Introduction to the study & SCPR

Introduce SCPR. SCPR are researching five innovative schemes, funded by the DSS, which are aiming to help single parents into the workplace through training, counselling and work experience. We have also been asked to talk to employers about the best ways of enabling employers to employ single parents and about their experiences of employing single parents. During the second part of the interview we would like to talk to you about your views of the information pack Lone Parents into the Workplace: The Business Case.

* stress confidentiality;
* explain tape recorder.

2. Background Profile

(only probe for background information not obtained by telephone interview)

* Respondent – position in company/responsibilities/length of time with company.
* Company profile – type of business/location,size/number of employees/how long established/TU presence/public or private sector/organisational structure (head office or devolved).
* Profile of employment offered – type of jobs/skills required/type of contracts whether permanent, temporary, short term, flexitime, part time, job share etc.
* Profile of employees – age/gender/ethnicity/local or commuters/salary ranges.
* Current involvement in schemes with unemployed – probe for schemes run by TECS, Employment Service etc.

3. Attitudes to Single Parents/Employing Single Parents

* What is a single parent? Probe for understanding of who employer pictures when they use the phrase ... do they consider single parents when they think about the unemployed or potential workers? Probe for where attitudes come from......
* Perceived advantages/disadvantages in employing single parents Spontaneous list then probe for possible problems or benefits – use discussion to move onto their experience of employing single parents.

4. Employing Single Parents

* Do they employ single parents? Do they know if they employ single parents i.e. what monitoring methods are there in place both for staff on the payroll & applicants during recruitment.
If they have employed/do employ single parents:

- Their experiences:
  - in what positions/wage levels/do they offer any in-work training;
  - advantages (probe for stable work force, time management, favourable company image skills, NIC holiday breaks...);
  - needs (probe for flexible working times, child care, benefit advice/financial issues...);
  - difficulties (probe retaining staff, absence from work, child care, the need for flexible working times).

- Steps taken to counter any difficulties/respond to needs.
  Probe for practical steps for example: introducing flexitime, child care or child care subsidies, job share, unpaid leave....

- Where are decisions made about introduction of practical steps.

If they have no experience of employing single parents:

- Spontaneous list of steps which could be taken by employers to encourage or retain single parent employees - Probe for practical steps for example: introducing flexitime, child care or child care subsidies, job share, unpaid leave....

5. Schemes to help single parents into the workplace

Awareness of any schemes helping single parents into the workplace. Probe for training/financial/employer based/government initiated. Views about these schemes....

- What types of schemes they think might encourage single parents into the workplace.

6. The Information Booklet

- Initial response to the information pack.
- Take respondent through each section and probe for the following:
  - views about practical steps suggested;
  - any experience of operating steps suggested in the pack;
  - the practicality of introducing those steps;
  - the potential usefulness of suggestions to them;
  - were they convinced by the argument.

- Any plans to take practical steps following reading the pack.
- Particular barriers which exist to prevent them taking action.
- What might encourage the company to take action/what types of incentives?
7. NDLP

- Knowledge about the NDLP.
- Initial views about/attitudes towards government policy relating to single parents.
- How involved are/should employers be in the NDLP.
- In what ways could/should employers be involved.

Thank you for your help.
Key Objective: To explore the use of the advice line by lone parents, particularly in relation to advice relating to opportunities for entering employment/training and advice relating to issues resulting from the decision to re-enter employment.

Good morning/afternoon my name is ......................... And I work for an independent research institute called Social & Community Planning Research. Your name and telephone number were passed to me by ........... after you agreed to help with our research. Can I start by thanking you for agreeing to speak to me today, and checking that it is possible for me to speak to you now for about twenty minutes? If no - arrange a suitable time for call back (enter date/time)

If yes - Go to 1.

1. Introduction to the research & SCPR
   • Introduce SCPR, stress confidentiality/impartiality.
   • We are currently carrying out some research (only mention DSS if asked who is funding the research - stress SCPR impartiality) which is exploring five different schemes/advice centres which are used by single parents. We are trying to find out about the different approaches used and what the people who use them think about the service they have received. The Advice Line run by ........... is one of the schemes included in the research so I would like to hear your views about your experience of using the service.

2. Background to the call
   • Explore the background to the call:
     - how the caller heard about the advice line, probe for advertisement/leaflet/website/referral from other agency
     - previous use of the advice line (note no. of times used), reasons for previous use;
     - alternative sources they could or would have used if the line had not been available & whether used any other sources before probe for BA/Job centre/other advice lines/support groups/solicitor.

3. Reasons for the call
   • Nature of the information or advice needed/circumstances surrounding the need for that information:
     - probe for - Children Act issues (contact/absent parents) child support/maintenance/CSA housing issues/other support-training/education advice employment advice/back to work advice better off in work calculation childcare issues
   • Initial expectations of what the advice line could do for them
4. Nature of information/advice received
   • Note key advice/information given.
     Probe for: verbal advice/signposting & referral to other agencies/information to be posted to them/other i.e. emotional support.
   • If education/employment/training advice.
     Probe for information given about innovative schemes (if appropriate depending on caller location); NDLP.
   • If better off in work calculation.
     Probe for whether caller was aware that .......... offered this service/where they might have got that information from if not .................

5. Views about the advice line
   • Spontaneous list of what was positive/negative about the information/advice/support given; probe for reasons why good/bad.
   • Did help given meet initial expectations; if not, why not?
   • Comparison of the advice line with other sources of information used by caller probe for use of other advice lines, comparison with face-to-face advice etc. importance of anonymity, accessibility.
   • Any problems getting through to the advice line.

6. After the call
   • Impact of the advice/information given probe for changes to previous plans/actions/views.
   • Action to be taken resulting from advice given.
   • If better off in work calculation/back to work advice/employment or training issue discussed how has the advice given affected their future plans to enter employment/further training etc.
   • If innovative schemes/NDLP advice given what are their future plans about accessing those services?

7. Suggestions for developing/improving the advice line
   • Possible improvements to the service, suggestions for development/advice or information needed but not offered currently.

8. Socio-demographic details
   • Gender/age/age and number of children/ethnicity/status - currently working or not working/ever worked, and when.

9. Closing
   • Views about government plans for single parents (NDLP/benefit cuts etc.)

Thank caller for participating.
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