

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 511

The effects of benefit sanctions on lone parents' employment decisions and moves into employment

Vicki Goodwin

A report of research carried out by the Centre for Public Policy, University of Northumbria on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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Abbreviations

CPP	Centre for Public Policy
BPC	Benefit Processing Centre
DLA	Disability Living Allowance
FTA	Failed to Attend
IB	Incapacity Benefit
IS	Income Support
ISCS	Income Support Computer System
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
LPA	Lone Parent Adviser
LMS	Labour Market System
ND	New Deal
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
PA	Personal Adviser
PMAD	Performance Management and Analysis Division
WFI(s)	Work Focused Interview(s)

Summary

Introduction

In 2001, the mandatory Work Focused Interview (WFI) was introduced for certain lone parent customers and, by 2004, had been rolled out to include all lone parents on Income Support (IS). The WFI provision is supported by the sanctions regime, and failure to take part in a WFI without good cause could result in a sanction being applied to the customer's benefit. The sanction is a reduction in the lone parent's benefit equivalent to 20 per cent of the IS personal allowance rate for a single person aged 25 or above.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) contracted the Centre for Public Policy at Northumbria University, Newcastle to undertake a project of qualitative research focused upon the effect benefit sanctions have upon the labour market behaviour of lone parents. This research has been carried out in three districts in the United Kingdom (UK) and has involved both lone parent benefit recipients and Jobcentre Plus staff.

This report presents the research findings, provides a context for those findings and suggests areas that may warrant further consideration.

Project aims

The primary aim of this project was to explore the effects of benefit sanctions on lone parents' employment decisions and moves into employment. In pursuit of this there were some overarching research objectives to be considered:

- To explore the personal circumstances of lone parents and how they manage their finances.
- To determine awareness of the sanctioning process amongst lone parents who have experienced sanctions.
- To explore the experiences of lone parents living with benefit sanctions.
- To ascertain if, after receiving a sanction, lone parents are more likely to consider moving off benefit, or actually move off benefit.

Particularly pertinent to the research has been a detailed consideration of the personal circumstances of a small number of lone parents; these circumstances are pivotal in understanding more about the context within which these customers have missed a WFI and have become involved in the sanctions regime.

Only a small percentage of lone parents claiming IS incur a sanction, and it is probable that these individuals display different characteristics as a group than the entire lone parent group.

This research looks at 40 lone parent customers, all of whom are understood to have been referred for sanction or have had a sanction imposed. It must also be noted that whilst this study provides rich and detailed data in regard to the lone parents that were involved in the research, these findings cannot be considered as being representative of all lone parent customers of Jobcentre Plus. Much can be learned about the lone parents in this study but without a significantly larger research project more cannot be said about the impact of the sanctions regime on other groups of lone parents.

Methodology

The methods employed in this research initially involved the development of a sample of lone parents across three districts. This was created through the application of a purposive approach to yield a sample that represented a range of customer circumstances and characteristics.

The fieldwork consisted of 40 semi-structured telephone interviews with lone parents. If the participant was agreeable these led on to semi-structured face-to-face interviews (31 in total). Additionally, information from Jobcentre Plus staff was gathered during three focus groups which were conducted utilising a semi-structured topic guide. The interviews and the focus groups were all recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. The data that was gathered was qualitative in nature and was analysed using the recognised framework method of analysis.

Key findings

The research findings are discussed in detail in the main report. These findings relate both to the lone parent customers and their experiences of WFIs and sanctions and the staff experiences and views of the same.

The lone parents in the sample were found to be a heterogeneous group, encompassing individuals who shared only a few characteristics (see Chapter 2). An area of commonality amongst the lone parents was the existence of debt, with many reporting difficult financial circumstances (see Chapter 2). Further analysis of the data revealed that many of the lone parents in this study were not aware of exactly how much benefit they should receive in each payment. Amongst the lone parents there was, generally, a desire to work, although most cited a number of barriers to this becoming a reality (see Section 2.2).

These findings were supported by the data gathered during the focus groups; Jobcentre Plus staff considered that lone parent customers have multiple loans and debts, and may not have a high awareness of the amount of benefit they should receive (see Section 2.3).

The WFI was generally regarded by the customers as being useful (see Section 3.3), with the 'better-off' calculations being popular among those lone parents in this study. The negative aspects of the WFI that were reported tended to centre around the perception that the questions asked during the WFI were the same over time, although the customer's circumstances had not changed; these customers therefore felt that although the first WFI could be useful, the repeating aspect of the WFI meant that the usefulness of the interview declined dramatically with each repeat (see Section 3.3.2).

Some Jobcentre Plus staff in this study raised significant concerns in relation to the WFI title. This, and the written communications to lone parents were themes that reoccurred during the three focus groups with staff. The 'Work-Focused' element of the WFI title was considered most problematic and a disincentive to attendance (see Section 3.3.4 and Section 6.3).

Attendance at the WFI, clearly a key area to examine here, was found to be affected by a number of factors. The most common causes of a lone parent failing to attend were centred on caring responsibilities, ill health and the customer simply forgetting. The data collected in this study during interviews with the lone parents concurred strongly with the findings from the Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups. There was no evidence of lone parents making an active decision to not attend a WFI.

Overall, only four of the lone parents interviewed said that people should not have to attend the WFI. The other lone parents were split between the belief that attendance should be mandatory and that attendance should depend on circumstances (see Section 3.3.3). When discussing this issue several lone parents said the WFI should be in place as it helped detect people who were 'lazy' or people who were committing fraud.

The sanction regime was fully understood by Jobcentre Plus staff who were found to be entirely familiar with the processes and procedures involved. Staff also comprehended the level of discretion that Personal Advisers (PAs) have in terms of applying a sanction (see Section 4.3.1). Lone parent customers did not tend to have knowledge specifically of the sanction regime, but almost all were aware that if they failed to attend a WFI, this could result in a benefit reduction. During the qualitative fieldwork it was noted that the word 'sanction' was not applied by the majority of lone parents who instead tended to use the terms 'benefit reduction' or 'benefit cut' (see Section 4.3).

Linked to the sanctions regime was the issue of compliance officers. The role of compliance officers was considered pivotal by the Jobcentre Plus staff; both in terms of gathering information and making sure customers were aware

of sanctions (see Sections 4.2 and 4.2.1). However, none of the lone parents in this study reported having had a home visit from a compliance officer (see Section 4.2.2).

The remit of this research has been to ascertain if the imposition of a sanction has an effect on job-seeking behaviour. The findings in this study, based on the data gathered from both the lone parents and the Jobcentre Plus staff, suggest that imposing a sanction had only a negligible effect on customers' labour market decisions. The questions posed in pursuit of the research aims drew very little data that could illustrate that sanctions promote job-seeking behaviour, although a very small number of customers said that the risk of, or the implementation of, a sanction 'may' have made a difference (see Section 4.5).

In relation to sanctions, a further important factor in this research was to understand a little more about those who have incurred a sanction and those who have continued to live with a sanction. Chapter Five examines this group of customers in detail. These lone parents, in comparison to the wider sample in this study, demonstrated higher levels of ill health, both of themselves and of their children (see Section 5.2). Additionally, a greater prevalence of debt was noted alongside a general disinclination to check benefit payments, even when the amount received was believed to be incorrect (see Section 5.2).

Explanations as to the reasons for a reduced benefit payment tended to revolve around social fund loans. Reactions to the reduced amount involved reducing spending on basic provisions, or borrowing money (see Section 5.3). These findings are supported, in the main, by the data gathered from Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups (see Section 5.5).

Chapter Six details some factors not considered in the previous chapters, but raised specifically by Jobcentre Plus staff. These include the letters used in relation to the WFI and to sanctions, the WFI title, and the impact of Direct Payments.

In this study it has been noted that some of lone parents have described challenging home environments. These were most notable amongst the group who have continued to live with a sanction. Considering these raised further issues about the role of compliance officers, waivers and deferrals as well as the application of the 'vulnerable group' category. These are considered in Chapter Eight.

Conclusions

The discussions in Chapter Seven revisit the summary conclusions made at the close of each of the previous chapters. Some of these concluding findings are noted in brief ahead.

In this study, lone parents, as a group, were heterogeneous in nature, sharing only some common characteristics.

The lone parent customers in this study had a general understanding of the risk to benefit associated with failing to attend a WFI. The data illustrated that failing to

attend a WFI tended to be for reasons linked to health, caring responsibilities or general levels of disorganisation (forgetting the appointment).

This research suggested that incurring a sanction does cause some lone parents stress. However, the majority of lone parents in this study reported being unaware of a sanction until they noticed a reduced benefit payment.

There was no evidence gathered in this study to suggest that customers who continued to live with a sanction had made an active decision to do so, instead they appeared to be unaware of their reduced rate of benefit.

In response to the key research question of this project, this study has found that amongst the lone parents in this sample, the sanction regime has had negligible effects upon labour market behaviour. This finding is based upon data from both the lone parent customers and Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups.

1 Introduction and research design

This work has been commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to consider the impact of sanctions on lone parents' labour market behaviour. This report details this research, from the initial methodological design to the conclusions that can be drawn from analysis of the data and onto emergent issues for consideration. The study, which is a qualitative evaluation of the impact of benefit sanctions on lone parents' employment decisions and moves into employment, has been conducted by a team from the Centre for Public Policy, at the University of Northumbria in Newcastle.

It is a mandatory requirement for lone parents to attend a Work Focused Interview (WFI) when making an initial claim for Income Support (IS), at the six month point of the claim, at 12 months and every six months thereafter. Lone parents with a youngest child aged 14 and over, or aged 11 and over in New Deal Plus areas, are required to attend quarterly WFIs. The purpose of the WFI is to provide advice and support to the lone parent in encouraging a return to work, and participation in NDLP.

Failure to attend or participate in a WFI, without good cause, results in a benefit sanction (removal of up to 20 per cent of the personal element of IS).

The majority (over 95%) of lone parents on IS do attend their WFIs and do not experience a benefit sanction. However, the number of IS lone parent sanctions increased from 12,000 in 2003/04 to 39,000 in 2005/06. When expressed as a proportion of booked WFIs these numbers represent rates of 2.1 per cent and 4.4 per cent respectively. The number of lone parent sanctions dropped slightly in 2006/07 to 37,000. However, the rate increased to 4.6 per cent. This rise in the number of sanctions coincided with a tightening of the sanctioning regime for lone parents and an increase in the frequency of WFIs.

Under the current IS regime one in 20 lone parents subject to the WFI regime are sanctioned each year. Of those sanctioned, more than half go on to attend a WFI within six months.

When a lone parent fails to attend an interview for the first time, they are given an opportunity to rearrange the WFI, following contact from Jobcentre Plus. Where the WFI is rearranged and the lone parent again fails to attend, they need to demonstrate good cause for non-attendance. A sanction is imposed as a last resort where the lone parent fails to make contact and does not show good cause for non-attendance.

To date there has been only limited evidence available on lone parents and benefits sanctions. In 2006 DWP published a working paper¹ which considered the effects of the sanctioning regime on lone parents. The research provided evidence on lone parents, as part of a full review of the sanctions regime. Using qualitative techniques the study specifically explored:

- awareness and understanding of the sanctioning regime;
- experiences of the sanctions process; and
- impact of sanctions on lone parents and their families.

Of particular significance in this research was the finding that there was a discernable lack of awareness of the sanction among lone parents who had been sanctioned. Few lone parents in the study identified themselves as living with sanctions; others lacked an understanding of the sanction they had received and were unclear as to whether they had complied or not (and were thus receiving their full benefit payment). Many lone parents in this study did not display knowledge regarding the length of their sanction or the percentage of benefit they had lost. Additionally, lone parents in the study were adamant that they had not been sanctioned, contrary to benefit records. Further, possibly due to this lack of awareness, lone parents rarely mentioned any impacts arising from being sanctioned.

1.1 Research aims

The aims of this research were broadly to explore the effects of benefit sanctions on the decisions that lone parents referred for a sanction make about employment.

This project was designed to look qualitatively at a small number of lone parents who had experienced sanctions and what effect this experience had upon their labour market behaviour. Such a specific focus entailed that the sample only needed to contain those who had experience of the sanction regime, as a comparator of those without this experience was not required.

In-depth qualitative data was collected from a small sample; this sample size ensured that data could be collected relatively quickly. This study was not designed to quantify the impact of sanctions but instead allow a rich, detailed examination of the experiences of a small sample of lone parents who had been referred for a sanction.

¹ Joyce, L. and Whiting, K. (2006) Sanctions: Qualitative summary report on lone parent customers. DWP Working Paper No 27.

The findings of this study should not be considered as being representative of all lone parent customers of Jobcentre Plus; whilst this study provides a great deal of knowledge in relation to the lone parents involved in this research, the research is not concerned with the impact of the sanctions regime on other groups of lone parents.

In pursuit of finding out more about the impact of sanctions upon the lone parents in this study, four overarching objectives for the research were identified:

- To explore the personal circumstances of lone parents and how they manage their finances.
- To determine awareness of the sanctioning process amongst lone parents who have experienced sanctions.
- To explore the experiences of lone parents living with benefit sanctions.
- To ascertain if, after receiving a sanction, lone parents are more likely to consider moving off benefit, or actually move off benefit.

In pursuit of the research objectives a detailed examination of lone parent customers' personal circumstances, as reported by them, has been undertaken, with a particular focus upon those who had received a sanction. This information was considered alongside data regarding the lone parents' labour market decisions and benefit claims. Additionally, the views and experiences of Jobcentre Plus staff were gathered during the focus groups.

1.2 Research methodology

The qualitative approach is applied here, this approach is utilised frequently in social research and is a form of systematic enquiry with recognised benefits. Qualitative research generates rich, descriptive data, to help explain and understand experiences and attitudes of participants.

A key benefit of the qualitative approach is that its application is a very good way of understanding social behaviour and is particularly useful in capturing diversity, which is particularly useful in this study.

This research, although based upon a small sample of individuals, has captured data that has given an insight into the social reality for the lone parents in this study. Further, the data has allowed an exploration of the multiple social processes involved in individuals' actions, with particular reference to the way that they may, or may not, interact with the sanctions regime.

This programme of qualitative research involved:

- Analysis of DWP data in order to create a sample.
- Analysis of supporting information and guidance documents from DWP.
- Semi-structured telephone interviews with lone parents.

- Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with lone parents.
- Focus groups with Jobcentre Plus staff.

1.3 Data sampling

The fieldwork was carried out in three Jobcentre Plus districts; for the purposes of preserving anonymity of the focus group participants these districts are referred to in this report as District One, District Two and District Three. Each of these districts generated sufficient sanctions to yield a sample of lone parents and they represented a range of sanction referral rates.

1.3.1 Development of the lone parent sample

The sample was developed from administrative data provided by DWP. The data listed lone parents on IS who, according to benefit records, had been referred for a sanction. A sample of 1,000 cases was selected, split equally between the three districts chosen for the research. Although all the lone parents in the sample were recorded as having been referred for a sanction, the data was less clear regarding sanction start and end dates, so it was difficult to determine when sanctions had been applied, and for how long. The detailed development of the sample is discussed in Appendix B.

1.3.2 The final sample

During the sampling and fieldwork, from the initial sample of 1,000 drawn from the DWP administrative data, the research team in CPP ultimately had contact with 463 individual lone parents; this work resulted in 31 face-to-face interviews and 40 telephone interviews.

During the development of the sample and the fieldwork, categories were assigned to the lone parent sample in this study. These categories, and the number of achieved interviews in each, were:

A: Off benefits but had previously entered the sanction system (7)

B: Sanctioned but reinstated (8)

C: Living with a sanction (14)

D: Referred but no sanction (11)

A purposive approach was used to create a sample somewhat balanced across the categories of lone parents; in order to capture a range of customer circumstances and experiences.

Initial contact with the lone parents was made via letter. This letter was followed by a telephone call during which more details about the research were given and arrangements made to initiate the fieldwork were discussed. At this point, if the lone parent was agreeable, a telephone interview was undertaken. At the

conclusion of the telephone interview the lone parent was asked if they would take part in a face-to-face interview and, if willing, this was arranged and undertaken at a later date.

During the interviews a topic guide was used and all interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

1.3.3 Data analysis

The transcripts of the recorded interviews with the lone parents and focus groups with Jobcentre Plus staff were analysed using the recognised framework approach, developed specifically to manage qualitative data and analysis. The development of this involved the construction of an analytical framework which, when populated with data, resulted in each cell of the framework containing data pertaining to both the participants and a theme. Such an approach entailed that the data was ordered and contextualised within the participants' own accounts and responded to the research objectives.

A further positive aspect of applying this method was that it enabled a full-range of attitudes and behaviours to be examined; the framework captured data corresponding to issues outside the original research objectives but which could be considered relevant to the study. When the framework was fully populated then the data was interrogated and interpreted. This process is discussed in detail in Appendix H.

1.4 Structure of the report

This report consists of seven further chapters:

- Chapter 2 introduces the data gathered from the lone parents in this study. This data helps to provide the context for the following chapters.
- Chapter 3 discusses findings in relation to the WFI; this is done utilising data gathered from the lone parents and from the Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups.
- Chapter 4 uses data from the Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups and the lone parents to examine the sanction regime in more detail.
- Chapter 5 considers the experience of sanctions with a particular focus upon those individuals believed to have had a sanction most recently.
- Chapter 6 explores the issues that have emerged from the focus groups with Jobcentre Plus staff that have not been considered in the previous chapters.
- Chapter 7 draws together all the summary conclusions and discusses them further.
- Chapter 8 considers the conclusions in terms of emergent issues that may benefit from further consideration.

2 Characteristics of lone parents in the study

Summary

- The lone parents in this study were far from being a homogenous group.
- There existed a number of domestic challenges for the lone parent group. These included caring responsibilities and ill health.
- Most lone parents in the study wanted to work, at some time.
- Financial difficulties were widespread amongst the sample.
- Some of those interviewed had experienced health problems, including mental health issues.

A key aim of this research was to investigate the effect that the imposition of a benefit sanction had upon the labour market behaviour of lone parents. In order to provide a comprehensive piece of research it was important that the context of the lone parents in this study was considered.

All the lone parents in the initial sample provided by Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) were recorded as having been referred for a sanction. Some lone parents had received a sanction, while in other cases the situation had been resolved prior to the application of a sanction. For some lone parents the sanctions process had been more protracted and may not have been resolved at the time of interview.

An area of interest in this study was to understand more about the factors involved when an individual incurs a sanction and, additionally, why the same process of sanctioning can result in diverse responses on the part of the lone parent customers. Elucidating these issues involved a detailed consideration of domestic and financial circumstances of the lone parents in this study; the resulting data provided a rich context which has served to frame further discussions.

2.1 The domestic circumstances of the lone parents in this study

These findings relate to the lone parents across the three districts involved in the research project.

Most of the lone parent interviewees were in the 25 – 44 year-old age group, while nine interviewees were under 25 and four people were over 45 years.

The majority of the sample reported their ethnicity as white, while five interviewees reported their ethnicity as black and one person reported their ethnicity as 'other'.

The largest proportion of lone parents in this study lived in social housing, with the second most significant housing provision being the private rental market.

Most of the lone parents in this sample were the only adult living in their home. However, a small number reported living with other adults present; these being parents or siblings.

Whilst there was, of course, variation across the interviewees, the largest number of individuals had one child, closely followed by the number with two children. None of the lone parents in this study had more than four children. Most of the children were school age, with the majority being pre-teenage.

The majority of the lone parents in this study reported good health in relation to themselves and their children. However, a number of the sample did report poor health. The health concerns reported to the research team ranged from what could be described as minor ill-health to life-threatening conditions.

It is noteworthy that a number of those reporting ill health were clustered in one lone parent category, that of Category C (those living with a sanction). This is something considered in more detail later in the report.

2.2 Employment history and attitudes to employment

The data collected from the lone parents illustrated a wide divergence in the length of time since employment. Most lone parents in this study had been unemployed for between one and five years. The next largest group was made up of those people unemployed for over 10 years. Additionally, there were five lone parents in the sample that had never worked.

Only a very small number of lone parents reported having been in employment in the last year and this group included those who had commenced work and left the benefits system just prior to the research.

The data gathered in this study demonstrated that the lone parents, overall, had a positive attitude to employment; many lone parents reported a desire to return to work, or to commence work, at some time.

'I would like to be something that I could benefit [from] and my kids could benefit...learn some new experiences.'

(LP 12)

'I love working...its beneficial; it's nice to bring in your own money for them [children] rather than depending on something'

(LP 4)

'I would like to [return to work] I'm sure you'll probably laugh here but I would love to be a solicitor. I'd have to go to college and do my exams again...'

(LP 19)

Some respondents considered that employment would be an option in the near future, but only a very small number of lone parents in the sample said they were actively looking for work. The majority of the sample considered employment as a longer-term goal.

Most plans in terms of employment were tempered by issues of childcare and/or health concerns, with the prospect of employment being considered unlikely until the issues were resolved.

The majority of the lone parents in this study noted their role as a single parent as being the most significant barrier in relation to both when they could commence employment and the level of employment (in terms of time) that could be undertaken.

Several lone parents discussed the cost of childcare as being prohibitive whilst others raised concerns about the availability of childcare. A small number also stated that they were dissatisfied with the quality of childcare provision in the local area.

Strategies towards future employment noted amongst the lone parents in this study included further education courses, which several of this sample were engaged in. One individual had also just enrolled onto a higher education social work course.

Data analysis showed that, additionally, there were some lone parents in this study resolute that they had made an active decision to stay at home while their children were young and that they were not interested in looking for employment until the children were older.

In terms of New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) very few of the customers interviewed said they had any knowledge of NDLP (only four of the sample) and none of the lone parents in this study believed they were engaged in NDLP.

2.3 The financial situation

The reported levels of financial stability of the lone parents in this study again varied widely. However, debt was very common; most of the participants reported debt of some sort. Further, many of the lone parents were unsure as to the amount of benefit payment they should receive.

The debt ranged from social fund loans, which almost all the individuals in this sample reported having, to debts with doorstep lenders which a small number of the lone parents had incurred. The level of report debt varied considerably too; some lone parents had debts of a few hundred pounds but one customer had been left with £50,000 of debt following the breakdown of her marriage. At least one of the lone parents was under an Individual Voluntary Arrangement due to debts becoming unmanageable and others reported the involvement of debt collection agencies and bailiffs.

The level of financial acumen amongst the lone parents in this sample was also diverse; some were able to recount their income and outgoings precisely, as well as exact frequency of payments. This group often had Christmas clubs and appeared, from our data, more likely than the wider sample to budget and save towards a significant outlay, like new shoes or an outing for their children.

Other lone parents had great difficulty in identifying their income and outgoings and were unclear about the frequency of payments. When considered alongside the wider sample this latter group tended to more frequently report debt, and appeared to be less effective in managing the debt. Some of these lone parents reported repeatedly missing direct debit payments, incurring bank charges. Many said they had initially owed relatively modest amounts but then, due to missed payments, had incurred significant additional costs when debt collection agencies and bailiffs became involved.

Only one individual reported not knowing which benefit(s) they were in receipt of, the rest of the lone parents in this study said they knew which benefits they were receiving.

However, in terms of actual payments in monetary terms, a significant proportion of the customers interviewed in this study did not know the exact amount they should receive in benefit payments. The actual question put by the research team was: 'Do you know the amount you are due each time your benefit is paid?'; 19 respondents said 'yes', two said 'no' and 16 gave responses like 'vaguely', 'roughly', 'sort of'.

Additionally, a large proportion of the lone parents in this study reported benefit fluctuations. The extent and frequency of these fluctuations are not known and this finding could have been, potentially, linked to the lack of knowledge in terms of the amount of benefit they received.

2.4 Focus group findings

Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups appeared to have an accurate understanding of the lone parent group as a whole, based on the data gathered from lone parents in this study and from the Jobcentre Plus staff. However, there were factors raised by the staff in the focus groups that did not emerge in discussions with the lone parents. These, in brief, are detailed ahead.

General

There was a perception among the focus group participants that finding and maintaining a job could be more challenging for a lone parent due to the caring responsibilities.

It was noted that the lone parent group, as a whole, tended to have lower literacy abilities than general customers.

Health

Many Jobcentre Plus staff involved in the focus groups observed that the lone parent client group tended to experience greater instances of mental health issues than the general customer group. This was believed to be most commonly depression.

'There's a lot we see either mentally ill or depressed, some of them to the extent that they can't open their mail, they find difficulty getting on the bus... Really a lot live very isolated lives and the thought of actually coming into Jobcentre or lifting up the phone is too much for quite a lot of them.'

(ST, District Two)

Other health factors were also noted by staff in the focus groups.

Financial

The prevalence of multiple social fund loans amongst lone parents was raised on several occasions in each of the focus groups.

Jobcentre Plus staff suggested that lone parents customers as a whole had a low awareness as to what money they were in receipt of each week and that many of these customers did not know the amount of benefit they should receive.

There were also suggestions made by the Jobcentre Plus staff that the financial situation had been made more complicated with the advent of direct payments; that the direct payment can make financial management more difficult for the lone parents.

2.5 Conclusions

The data presented here demonstrates that the lone parents in this study comprised a group that was mainly heterogeneous in nature, but one which experienced certain challenges and difficulties at, what could be, a higher prevalence than other societal groups.

The data regarding the lone parents' domestic lives illustrated that those in this sample represented a wide range of circumstances; age, number of children, length of time unemployed etc. However, within the group there were discernable common factors, including health issues and financial difficulties. The financial circumstances reported by many lone parents in this study concurred with data gathered from the focus groups and related to the:

- financial ability of the lone parents;
- lack of knowledge in terms of how much benefit they received; and
- existence of multiple debts.

These factors together created a situation where the financial stability of the lone parent family, arguably, could be significantly compromised.

The evidence that has been considered here suggests that many individuals in this study had complex and demanding lives. This brief introduction to the lone parents' lives in this study has been important as the circumstances presented here contextualise the discussions in the following chapters.

3 The Work Focused Interview

Summary

- Most lone parents in this study found the Work Focused Interview (WFI) useful.
- Many lone parents identified positive aspects to the WFI.
- There was something of a negative perception among some of the lone parents in this study that the WFI regime was a waste of time, as their circumstances had not changed since their previous appointment.
- A range of factors affected attendance at the WFI.
- Among the lone parents there was a high level of awareness that benefits could be affected if the customer failed to attend a WFI.

3.1 The theoretical process of the Work Focused Interview

In 2001, the mandatory WFI was introduced for all lone parent customers making a new or repeat claim to Income Support (IS). Initially, the WFI only applied to those customers whose youngest child was aged at least five years and three months. In the same year, customers already in receipt of IS ('stock' cases) were invited to attend a mandatory WFI, but on a phased basis according to both the length of the IS claim and the age of the youngest child. In 2003, the WFI was extended to repeat and new claim customers with the youngest child aged between birth and three years. The following year the WFI also took in all 'stock' claimants.

WFIs were introduced to encourage more lone parents to take up sustainable employment, and to ensure that lone parents in receipt of IS were aware of the help and support available to them, helping to enable them to make informed choices about the future for themselves and their children.

When a customer initiates a claim for IS, Jobcentre Plus informs them of the mandatory nature of the WFI, the associated risk to benefits of non-compliance and of the sanction regime. The customer is then invited to their initial WFI by letter; this too sets out the consequences of non-attendance.

When a customer fails to attend a WFI the Personal Adviser (PA) will attempt to contact the customer by telephone, complete a 'Failed to Attend' form and issue a 'good cause letter'. This letter informs the customer that they have five working days to show good cause for their non-compliance, the letter states that if this was not forthcoming then a sanction will be applied.

3.2 Focus group findings – when a customer fails to attend

The data collected during the focus groups with Jobcentre Plus staff made it apparent that advisers used a significant level of personal discretion when reacting to a missed WFI appointment. This discretion also affected the responses of the PAs following a missed WFI.

In common, across the focus groups, was a response to a missed WFI which involved re-booking the interview. However, whilst some staff said they would re-book the interview once, other staff reported re-booking up to three times, dependent upon circumstances. There was a discernable difference between districts; staff from District Three were far less inclined to re-book on more than one occasion than the other two districts.

Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups noted that some claimants may have a pattern of failing to attend and would be given fewer opportunities in terms of re-booking. For other individuals, where the missed WFI was out of character, Jobcentre Plus staff were more likely to be lenient.

However, all the participants agreed that failing to attend the WFI would, at some point, result in the lone parent being sanctioned.

The data gathered also showed that if a lone parent attended the Jobcentre outside their agreed appointment the Jobcentre Plus adviser would usually try and fit them in. When this issue was discussed during the focus groups, the urge to see the lone parent immediately was in terms of both being helpful to the customer and in relation to hitting targets.

Further, the data from the focus groups of Jobcentre Plus staff, demonstrated that the ability to waive or defer appointments was very much at the discretion of the staff.

3.3 Overall attitudes to the Work Focused Interview

This section considers the data gathered in this study in relation to the attitudes of the lone parents in terms of the WFI.

A majority of the lone parents in this study reported that they found the WFI useful, although they had, at some point, failed to attend the interview.

The lone parents noted a wide range of aims and activities of the WFI (in descending order of frequency):

- Getting work.
- Carrying out the 'better off in work' calculations.
- Checking lone parent circumstances have not changed.
- Benefit entitlement.
- Childcare advice.
- Engaging people in study.
- Giving details of jobs.
- To get lone parents off benefit.
- General advice (including debt advice).

The most frequently noted of these, 'getting work', was raised by the majority of respondents.

3.3.1 Positive aspects of the Work Focused Interview

The most positive aspect of the WFI, as observed in the data gathered during the interviews with lone parents, concerned the provision of financial information. This aspect, for the most part, was discussed in terms of 'print-outs', these included calculations about benefit entitlement and salary possibilities.

The print-outs were mentioned by several of the lone parents in this research and some of these customers said that during the WFI they had found it difficult to engage with the information on the print-out, mainly due to the presence of their children, but that having the information to take home had given them the opportunity to consider it further and more fully.

However, a small number of lone parents in this study had found the financial information quite complicated when they had looked at it alone:

'...trying to listen to them and the bairns running around, and they print it off for you and then when you go home it is quite confusing in the way they print it off and you actually feel you need to go back and speak to them again.'

(LP 5)

Of the lone parents that remembered receiving a print-out to take home, several said it had enabled them to consider in more detail the benefits of joining the workforce. This was regarded as being a positive aspect of the provision of the print-out.

'The last one I feel was probably a bit better; it was more looking towards going back to work and explaining what I could be entitled to.'

(LP 37)

Another lone parent customer explained that she found the print-outs very useful after the LPA showed her on the print-out how to calculate how much money she could receive if she was to commence work.

'She was helpful when she was doing the financial translation for me and that was quite helpful because that was exactly what would be in my pocket. It definitely sort of proved to me I would be better off financially working.'

(LP 18)

A further positive aspect to the WFI was that the WFI appointment does encourage individuals to go to the Jobcentre – very few lone parents in this study attended the Jobcentre except for when they were required to do so to attend a WFI.

3.3.2 Negative aspects of the Work Focused Interview

The negative responses to questions in relation to the WFI were due, generally, to a common perception that the purpose of the WFI was, in the main, to get the lone parent customer into employment.

'It don't make no sense having these interviews 'cos I don't see why people should be trying to force you into work the way that they do, you know trying to take your benefits away.'

(LP 12)

Some lone parents in this study considered the repeated nature of the WFI a waste of time as they remained in the same circumstances that had prevented them from working at the time of previous WFIs:

'They just ask the same questions. They see it on record that I've got a health problem, they ask if I'm going to go back to work and the answer is no is because of health problems, now they've got this in black and white, so I don't know why they keep recalling me in to ask the same questions.'

(LP 3)

Several of the lone parents in this study considered the repeated WFIs unnecessary as the same questions were posed at each appointment. This issue could be of particular pertinence if the lone parent felt unable to work due to specific circumstances that were long-term in nature.

'...they will say basically try and get any job that you possibly can, I don't want to do that because I have a profession. I could go out and get a job tomorrow, I have a great CV but I chose to be here...they don't know my background... I didn't wake up one morning and think I'm 30, I'm going to go and get pregnant and live on benefits for the rest of my life...'

(LP 40)

3.3.3 Attendance at the Work Focused Interview

Many of the respondents in this study cited difficulties in attending the WFI and, according to the administrative data provided by DWP, the entire sample had, at some time, missed a WFI. However, during the interviews with lone parents, the majority said they had attended the last WFI they were requested to attend.

The attitudes towards the WFI were, in the main, positive. However, opinions regarding whether lone parents should have to attend a WFI were mixed; half of those interviewed said that they should have to attend and half said attendance should depend on circumstances. Only four people from the sample of 40 in this study said categorically that customers should not have to attend the WFI.

The lone parents who did consider that lone parent customers should have to attend a WFI cited reasons such as making 'lazy' people get work and catching claimants defrauding the system:

'Well, I don't think people with kids or people that have problems should but I think people who are just lazing about, being lazy on the dole, I think they should attend.'

(LP 8)

However, some of the same group also considered that people should not be forced to attend by the threat of withdrawal of benefit:

'...they shouldn't give you threats about your benefit being cut.'

(LP 26)

The small group of individuals in this research that considered that attendance should not be mandatory raised a variety of factors to support this contention. These factors can be understood, generally, as circumstances that would make WFI attendance very complex but were similar issues to those raised in discussions with lone parents who said that attendance should be dependent upon circumstances:

'I understand there are people who do fraud but there is people out there who don't and I don't think they should be on your case, after all, they should come to the home...in my case I have a child with a disability...if he needs me I've got to go, I don't really get time to make appointments.'

(LP 14)

Many of the customers in this study noted that attending WFIs with their children was difficult and considered that this should be factored into decisions about the mandatory nature of the WFI:

'I think for single mums it would be better, more realistic and more supportive if they came to your home.'

(LP18)

Overall, during the research with the lone parents when discussing the WFI, difficulties of childcare were frequently raised. The lone parents in this study felt the WFI was less useful and more stressful when the customer was trying to control a child, or children, whilst answering the questions. Additionally, accessing childcare to look after the children while the lone parent attended a WFI was said to be difficult.

3.3.4 Focus group findings

The data demonstrated that for the Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups the purpose of the WFI was to identify and assess barriers to employment as well as gathering information on the lone parents' circumstances.

However, an issue frequently noted by Jobcentre Plus staff was that the WFI title was considered to be a disincentive to attendance; staff felt that many lone parents assume from the title that they would be forced into employment. This issue is considered in more detail later in this report (see Section 8.1).

'As far as they are concerned Work Focus means that you are asking them to come to work.'

(District Three)

The staff also had concerns with regard to the way the WFI was communicated to lone parents, in that the letters used in correspondence could be improved. Again, this issue is considered later in this report (see Section 8.1).

3.4 Comprehension of risk related to failing to attend

The lone parent customers in this study demonstrated a widespread acknowledgement of the potential risk to benefit if the WFI was not attended; all but four of the respondents said they were aware of this risk. The data demonstrated that this awareness had come, in the main, from letters or from being told verbally by Jobcentre Plus staff.

Most of the lone parents in this study reported to researchers that they had definitely attended their most recent WFI. When questioned about the motivation for WFI attendance, the majority of these lone parents said they had attended the WFI as they did not want to have their benefits reduced.

Associated data gathered in this study also demonstrated that the majority of lone parent participants considered the potential risk to benefit would make customers more likely to attend the WFI.

3.4.1 Focus group findings

In relation to when and how lone parent customers were informed of the risk to benefits, there was clarity and consensus amongst the Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups.

The data gathered also showed that aside from the letters sent out in relation to the WFI many PAs attempted to make telephone contact with lone parent customers. This telephone contact was instigated either prior to a WFI, to remind the customer about the appointment, or just after the customer failed to attend the WFI, as an attempt to get them to attend the office as soon as possible. If the PA did make contact with the customer, they would again remind the customer of the risk to their benefit.

There was additional discussion amongst some of the focus group participants which raised other issues in terms of the risk to benefit. Several Jobcentre Plus staff in one district suggested that while the risk to benefit was known by the lone parent customers there was a belief that a benefit reduction would not be implemented; in short, the theoretical risk was not believed to be an actual risk.

'...they understand the theory but I'm not convinced they think we'll actually carry it out.'

(District Two)

'I think they feel because they're a lone parent and all this thing with child poverty...that we won't actually do it...you know 'my child will starve' kind of thing.'

(AT, District Two)

3.5 Reasons for non-attendance

This section details the findings in relation to the reasons given by lone parent customers, in this study, for non-attendance at the WFI. A wide-range of issues were noted by the lone-parents and, later, by the Jobcentre Plus staff during the focus groups.

Lone parents in this study who could recall failing to attend at least one WFI offered a range of explanations. These can be summarised into the following themes:

- Ill health/ill health of child.
- Forgot to attend.
- Did not receive the letter.
- Clashed with another appointment.

Of these explanations, the two most prevalent in the data collected in this study related to health concerns and forgetting the appointment. In this study no respondent suggested that they had made an active decision to not attend the WFI. Instead, the prevailing issue tended to be that other factors had created a barrier to the attendance or that they had forgotten, mainly due, by their own admission, to being disorganised.

3.5.1 Focus group findings: Non-attendance

Explanations offered to Jobcentre Plus staff included those given above by the lone parents in the study and:

- problems with bus times (not fitting in with interview times);
- family bereavement;
- domestic emergency; and
- caring responsibilities.

Reasons that had not been explicitly offered to staff, but believed to be a factor by the staff in the focus groups:

- Lone parents failing to view the WFI as a priority.
- Customers ignoring the letters/putting them aside.
- Customer literacy problems.
- The lone parent 'not looking for work' and failing to understand the significance of the WFI.
- Language barriers.

3.6 Conclusions

In relation to WFI attendance, there was no evidence gathered in this study to suggest that the small proportion of WFI appointments that were missed were deliberately ignored or that the customers made an active decision to not attend. Rather, the findings indicated that when a WFI was missed it was usually due to the customer forgetting about it or as a result of a combination of other factors – commonly involving illness and/or childcare issues.

These findings are based on the data gathered in this study from the lone parents, which were broadly supported by the evidence collected during the focus groups with Jobcentre Plus staff.

However, it was notable that some staff in the focus groups suggested that the WFI process itself did have benefits in terms of simply getting lone parents into Jobcentres. Additionally, staff considered that some of those individuals would benefit from the work that was done in the WFI, in terms of 'sowing seeds' of possibilities in relation to the job market. There were also a small number of cases

cited by the Jobcentre Plus staff of lone parent customers who had undertaken WFIs and had gone on to gain employment.

There was strong evidence that lone parents found the 'better off calculations' very useful. Several interviewees noted that having these had made them think more positively about entering the labour market and aided them in calculations about potential financial situations. However, some customers found the calculations and the print-outs challenging to navigate without the assistance of the PA.

The focus group participants raised additional suggestions as to why the WFI might be missed. These reasons included one which could serve as a broader background to some of the other observations; the Jobcentre Plus staff, in this study, considered that lone parent customers viewed the WFI as being of low priority.

Some staff in the focus groups also raised concerns in relation to the title of the interview, which they felt created a disincentive to customer attendance, and the written communication with lone parents.

Whilst these factors were seen as being strongly implicated in WFI non-attendance and were discussed at length by the staff in the focus groups, they were not mentioned by the lone parents in this study as being a problem in relation to attendance. These issues are discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

4 Awareness and understanding of the sanctions regime

Summary

- The sanctions regime, as a process, was fully understood by the Jobcentre Plus staff in this research.
- Evidence from the research shows that the sanctions regime appears to be implemented correctly in most cases.
- Compliance officers were considered to have a pivotal role in the process;
- The lone parents in this study, whilst aware of the potential risk to benefit of failing to attend a Work Focused Interview (WFI), do not, overall, have an awareness of the sanctioning regime.
- The lone parents interviewed as part of this research felt that the imposition of a sanction had a negligible effect on labour market behaviour.

4.1 The sanctions regime

Since April 2004, all lone parents claiming Income Support (IS) with a youngest child aged under 16 years have been required to take part in a series of mandatory WFIs. Failure to take part in a WFI without good cause can result in a sanction being applied to the customer's benefit. The decision regarding a failure to attend/participate in a mandatory interview is made by the Personal Adviser (PA), who will apply a sanction unless there is good cause shown for failing to attend. This decision is final and cannot be overturned unless the customer is successful in applying for a reconsideration or, if that fails, an appeal.

If the adviser accepts that good cause has been shown for failing to attend/take part in a WFI, the action taken will depend upon the individual circumstances of

each case. The first deliberation must consider whether a WFI is/was appropriate. If not then deferral or waiver action should be considered and actioned. However, if a WFI was still required it could be re-arranged.

If good cause was accepted after a decision to sanction benefit has already been made (say on appeal/reconsideration), the WFI cannot be re-arranged as the interview cycle will have been closed. In this situation the next appropriate WFI in the cycle should be booked.

When a failure to attend occurs and a good cause is not immediately offered, this should be marked on Labour Market System (LMS) and the customer be given the opportunity to discuss the missed WFI and to show good cause. If the customer then fails to provide or show good cause, a decision must be made and recorded on LMS and a formal notification issued. Following this, the customer should be contacted by letter, indicating that they have failed to attend or participate in a WFI and the impact this has had on their claim to benefit. The letter advises them to contact the office if they think the decision is wrong and sets out the customer's rights to appeal.

The Benefit Processing Team must be notified, using standard forms which confirm that the customer has failed to attend a mandatory WFI. On receipt of this form benefit processing must arrange for the customer's benefit to be sanctioned.

IS should be reduced from the first day of the benefit week following the date that the decision was made. The sanction is a reduction in the lone parent's benefit equivalent to 20 per cent of the IS personal allowance rate for a single person over the age of 25. It is not always possible to reduce a customer's benefit by the full amount of the sanction. Where, for example, the amount of IS paid to the lone parent is less than the sanction rate. If this is the case, a sanction is imposed, but the amount is calculated to leave the lone parent with a minimum of ten pence IS benefit. The sanction cannot be taken from any benefit other than IS. If a case already contains a 20 per cent reduction due to a previous failure to attend decision and a further decision is made, another reduction, equivalent to 20 per cent of the IS personal allowance rate for a single person aged 25 or over, will be made.

Benefit processing should refer all cases where they have implemented a sanction to Customer Compliance Officers for a home visit. This could identify any particular difficulties the customer is experiencing or, possibly, give indications of fraudulent activity.

The sanction will be lifted from benefit once the customer has attended and participated in a WFI; the decision regarding this rests with the PA. The sanction will be lifted from the first day of the benefit week in which the requirement to take part in the trigger interview was met. Once a lone parent has met the requirement to take part in a WFI, a standard form is completed and sent to the appropriate benefit processing team.

4.2 The role of compliance

At the time of this study Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) guidance made it clear that there were different ways in which compliance officers could become involved with a lone parent:

- If the lone parent was in a 'vulnerable group' (had learning disabilities or a mental health condition) and failed to attend the WFI then a home visit would be considered by the adviser. If the PA decided this was appropriate they would refer the case to compliance.

During the visit the compliance officer would make the claimant aware of the requirements of the WFI (attendance) and would identify why the person did not attend the WFI – this could include identifying that the person has language, literacy or learning difficulties. If the compliance officer considered the claimant's circumstances were such that the WFI should be waived or deferred then they would contact the PA.

Compliance follow their own notification processes and decisions about waivers, deferrals and good causes for failing to attend would be made by the PA in consultation with the compliance officer.

However, in relation to a customer who failed to attend a WFI and was not considered to be part of the vulnerable group there was no requirement for the PA to consider a home visit.

- Benefit processing should have referred every incidence of applying a sanction to the compliance officers so that they could undertake a home visit. This was to identify how the customer was able to live on reduced benefits and could also identify any change of circumstances, misunderstandings and fraud etc.

There was additional guidance regarding when home visits by a PA should be considered. The guidance stated that when there was evidence that the customer failed to attend a WFI due to issues about coming into the office the adviser should consider visiting the customer themselves to conduct the WFI at the customer's home (or other suitable venue). The issues listed included: disability, substantial difficulties in arranging childcare or other care cover, poor/non-existent public transport, and where attendance might have endangered the lone parent's health.

4.2.1 Focus group findings: compliance

The data from the Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups indicated that they considered compliance officers to be a significant part of the sanctioning process. Staff saw compliance officers as having a dual role, in that they could make the lone parent aware of the situation, verbally, as well as observing the customers' situation to report back to the PA.

The staff outlined the circumstances in which compliance officers would be involved and offered views as to the usefulness of the system.

District One

These staff considered that the compliance officer had an important role in informing the lone parent that they had been sanctioned and booking a new WFI appointment. Additionally, they could observe if the lone parent might have someone living with them. It was understood by this group that the compliance officer would go to a lone parent's home address once a sanction was initiated.

'There are some people we do sanctions on...there has to be a reason. That's why compliance gets involved...to find out if someone is living with them.'

'I think it's a good idea that a visiting officer goes out...you do get some who are not very knowledgeable, or bright, to understand why the sanction has been applied. They think they can't get the sanction lifted unless they go out looking for work.'

'They get the home visit completed, but I get very few who come in because of compliance...but I think it does affect a small portion of the people that has the sanction applied, they don't fully understand the reason, because perhaps they don't have good literacy skills when they have read the letters, so I think it does help them...'

District Two

Jobcentre Plus staff in this group also regarded compliance officers as being integral part to the process, but raised some difficulties in relation to getting the compliance officers to visit customers. They noted that when a sanction was being imposed, IS was notified and they then 'automatically' made compliance officers aware of the situation on the same day. A compliance officer was then supposed to see the lone parent as soon as possible but certainly within a fortnight.

These staff participants noted that compliance officers could generally:

'Go out and see them [the customer] within a fortnight...they've already discussed their reason for not attending with the compliance officer....they might then pass that on to us.'

And that this visit can open up communication between the PA and the customer.

The staff in this group said that they understood that compliance officers had formerly had a target of 'actually seeing' the lone parents and 'getting their benefit reinstated' but that this target was no longer in force. The associated problem, the Jobcentre Plus staff suggested, was that when compliance officers became busy lone parent sanctions were 'no longer high up on the agenda' and that they had encountered problems in getting compliance officers out of the office.

'They're [lone parents] not really a priority at all, because you [compliance] get nothing from it.'

'They [compliance] don't get a hit as they say, so that's a bit of an issue now because they can wait a wee while before the compliance officer goes out to see them.'

The discussions in relation to compliance officers within this group of Jobcentre Plus staff illustrated that the role was considered pivotal, both in terms of ensuring the lone parent customers knew about the sanction, and in terms of letting the Jobcentre know about any significant difficulties the individual could be experiencing. However, this group of Jobcentre Plus staff as a whole expressed grave doubts as to whether the compliance officer system was working as it should, or as it had previously.

District Three

These Jobcentre Plus staff discussed the differences between the role of compliance officers for customers who had been in the system for an extended period and more recent claimants. From this discussion it appeared that 'stock customers', pre-dating 2003, had to be informed verbally prior to a sanction being implemented and so home visits were an essential part of that process. The visiting officer would go to the claimant's home two or three times and in the event of non-contact the benefit would be completely suspended. This, the focus group participants said, had a considerable positive impact on the numbers of individuals attending the office.

However, further discussions indicated that the compliance officers, even in the case of lone parents not in the 'vulnerable group', were sent out following a missed WFI prior to the imposition of a sanction:

'they will leave a letter and say you have five days to respond to it and if you don't...'

'...we have to now, still refer them now to visits which is now compliance... so we are having to work with them.'

'If they are in a vulnerable group, then I have had many cases where visits/compliance have gone round and they have said you are not going to get this person in, then we can waive it.'

However, if following this process the customer had not been in contact then the sanction was imposed and another letter was posted out. Following that letter, informing the lone parent that they had missed a WFI, Jobcentre Plus would not attempt to contact the customer until the next review date (usually six months).

Summary

It was apparent from the data collected during the focus groups with Jobcentre Plus staff that compliance officers were considered an important part of the

process. The compliance staff were understood to have a key role in either avoiding the imposition of a sanction or the curtailing of a sanction as soon as possible.

Staff participants discussed the benefits of the compliance officer involvement, particularly so in terms of them gathering additional information about a claimant's home life and any difficulties they may be having (this issue is linked to the issue of waivers and deferrals, which is discussed later in this report).

Further, participants in all three focus groups were clear about when and how compliance officers would become involved in a case and the potential reasons for their involvement.

4.2.2 Compliance and the customer

As the significance of the role of compliance officers was strongly flagged by Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups and the DWP had in place clear guidance relating to the use of compliance officers, it was important to consider this data alongside that gathered from the customer base.

The lone parents surveyed in this study were asked about compliance officer visits, but the question was framed differently in case 'compliance officer' was a term the lone parent did not recall or understand. The question posed by the research team was: 'Did anyone from the Jobcentre come to your home to talk about a benefit reduction or a risk of benefit reduction?' The data collected and analysed showed that among the lone parents in this study only one person reported a home visit by Jobcentre Plus staff, and this, she said, had been a visit by a PA, instigated following the involvement of social services.

The data gathered in relation to this question, from the lone parents, was subjected to secondary analysis to ensure the accuracy of this finding; particularly as it appeared to be somewhat at odds with both the focus group findings and DWP data. However, it was clear that only one lone parent (as detailed previously) in this study recalled any Jobcentre Plus staff undertaking a home visit.

4.3 The level of comprehension of the sanctions regime

During the qualitative fieldwork in this study when the lone parents were questioned about sanctions, it became quickly apparent that most did not understand or recognise the word 'sanction'. The research team decided that to ensure clarity in the responses it was advisable to adopt the term 'benefit reduction' rather than 'sanction' during the questioning on this topic.

The data collected from the lone parent customers in this study illustrated that they had low levels of awareness of having been at risk of a sanction or of being sanctioned. Secondary analysis of the fieldwork data, demonstrated that there was, overall, little understanding about the sanctions process amongst the lone parents in this study.

Further, many lone parents involved in this study reported having no awareness of a sanction until they received their benefit payment and noted that the payment had been reduced.

Related to this, some customers reported that they did not receive a letter notifying them of the sanction until after their benefit had been reduced. Other lone parents in this study said they received no written communication in relation to a sanction.

4.3.1 Focus group findings

Overall, the Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups felt that the majority of lone parents had some knowledge of the risk to benefits and the possible reduction, but did not fully comprehend the sanctioning process from the written communication. However, staff believed that most lone parents had a greater level of understanding of the process when it had been explained verbally to them.

The staff also considered that while the theoretical risk was understood by many customers some lone parents considered it unlikely that a sanction would be implemented.

Some members of the Jobcentre Plus staff in this study also felt that the lone parents needed to be 're-educated', so they would have a fuller comprehension that a sanction was likely to be an outcome of a failure to attend:

'I think in a way, there's a re-education of clients as well and I think we're starting to do that as we're becoming slightly firmer...we're actually having to say to them well you will have to come in for this interview and, as things are changing and the Government is putting out new legislation and new rules and tightening up...then the lone parents are becoming aware that well I can't actually just say well I'm not coming in and I'll come in in a few months or whatever. They are becoming aware that there is a compulsion on them to come in and participate. So hopefully that will just increase until it's accepted, but obviously that could take a while.'

(District One)

Within the framework of DWP guidance it was apparent that there was a level of adviser discretion, relating to when to apply a sanction. However, there was an associated 'grey area' in terms of acceptance of reasons for failing to attend; this was discussed frequently during the focus groups:

'...the problem is when you get into these kind of areas, it starts to get too grey this area....treating folk differently? And what we're saying is right, the onus, right we can defer it, these are the circumstances, but then the circumstances can differ a little bit and, before you know where you are, depending on who your adviser is, depends on whether you'll be sanctioned or not, that's my opinion of the whole thing. ...It's your interpretation of certain circumstances.'

(District Two)

Further discussions around this issue highlighted those lone parents changing offices could experience different responses to a failure to attend. Jobcentre Plus staff from one office said they had restricted the number of staff making the decision to refer to sanction, as an attempt to avoid the 'grey area'.

However, it was clear that a sanction would be invoked following a failure to attend or a series of missed WFIs; these procedures and processes appeared common across the staff in the focus groups.

When a sanction was imposed, the sanction would be implemented by the Benefit Processing Centre (BPC), however, one Jobcentre Plus staff participant noted that the BPC had previously made mistakes. This participant, and others, noted that whilst a form should be issued by the BPC to acknowledge that a sanction has been imposed, frequently this did not happen. Further data from the staff involved in the focus groups also highlighted instances when the PA had told a lone parent customer that they were to be sanctioned but this had not occurred as it had not been acted upon by the BPC.

4.4 Attitudes towards sanctions

Analysis of the data gathered during the fieldwork with the lone parents demonstrated somewhat mixed attitudes towards sanctions or, more generally, the practice of reducing benefits (which was how the majority of the customers understood the regime).

The data collected in this study illustrated that there was, generally, an acceptance of the sanction regime and many lone parents believed that in order to get people to attend the Jobcentre, the regime was reasonable.

However, many of the lone parents in this study also suggested that the WFI should not be mandatory but, should instead be considered according to circumstances, and that the sanction regime should be based around the same rationale.

A small group of lone parents in this study, who had been sanctioned due to, what they perceived to be circumstances outside their control, considered it 'unfair' that a customer could not recoup the money that had been deducted.

4.4.1 Focus group findings

In relation to the attitudes of lone parents following a sanction, there were no wide-ranging discussions amongst the Jobcentre Plus staff on this subject. The few observations on this point centred around the customer being 'disappointed' when they realised that they would not get back the benefit that had been removed under the sanction.

4.5 The impact of the sanctions regime upon labour market behaviour

One of the key questions in this research was whether the risk of a sanction affected decisions lone parent customers made in relation to employment.

The data from the lone parents in this study showed that the risk of a benefit reduction caused by a failure to attend a WFI did encourage people to attend the WFI appointment.

However, when the lone parent customers in this study were asked 'does the risk of reduced benefits encourage people to leave benefits and find work?', almost equal numbers answered 'yes' and 'no' (with the remainder of the sample split between 'don't know' or 'it does not alter people's behaviour').

Further questioning resulted in data demonstrating that none of the lone parent customers in this study answered affirmatively when asked the following two questions:

- Has the risk or experience of a benefit reduction changed how you feel about working or training?
- Has the experience motivated you to look for work?

However, it should be noted that a very small number of individuals indicated that the risk or experience of a sanction 'may' or 'might' have made them think about work a little more, although none of these individuals had gone on to gain employment.

Jobcentre Plus staff were also asked about the impact of sanctions on lone parents' labour market behaviour, utilising the following two questions:

- Do you think that sanctions alter the attitudes and behaviours of lone parents?
- Do you think there is evidence of lone parents showing increased work related activities or movement towards labour market participation as a result of being involved in the sanctions process?

The staff involved in the focus group in District One said that the sanction had 'no direct link' and no 'direct relation' to employment. One staff member went on to say:

'I wouldn't say that imposing sanctions encourages people to come off benefits and go into work. It is not a tool, it is not a motivational tool, it is just to get bums on seats.'

(District One)

One further member of staff in District One suggested that a 'small percentage' of lone parents might think about work as a result of a sanction, but that most of those would have been 'actively thinking about it anyway.'

Some of these Jobcentre Plus staff also expressed the view that the only change in attitude and behaviour that the sanction invoked was that the lone parent could become more difficult to deal with.

Jobcentre Plus staff in District Two said that they considered that sanctions had no impact on the lone parents' views of employment. These staff went on to offer the opinion that unless the lone parent is actually looking for work at the time of the sanction then:

'The sanction does nothing to change any mind-set at all...'

(District Two)

Staff in District Three discussed the changes in attitudes in regard to how the lone parent customers behaved following a sanction. This was generally understood to be a negative effect.

The same staff said that the sanctions regime did not encourage movement towards the labour market. They went on to state that the best tool for moving the lone parents towards the labour market was the financial 'print-out' provided during the WFI.

4.6 The impact of sanctions upon those individuals who had ceased to claim benefits

When the DWP administrative data was received, there were, in total, only a small proportion of individuals identified as being 'Off Benefit'. In response to this, all individuals identified as being of this category (Category A) were actively selected when creating the research sample. These individuals are of particular relevance to the study as these are lone parents understood to have left benefit and, potentially, entered employment. It is significant to this study to understand more about the decisions this group have made in relation to their labour market activities, and to ascertain if the sanctions regime had a part in those decisions.

However, the individuals identified as being in this category by DWP data proved to be very challenging to make contact with. The same methods were adopted in trying to contact these individuals as the wider sample; however, the research team did not usually achieve telephone contact. It could be surmised that this may be because, at least some of these lone parents could be at work during the day. As a result of the small potential sample and the contact difficulties, only seven of the final sample made up Category A.

During the interviews with these lone parent customers it became apparent that the administrative data provided by DWP did not appear to be entirely accurate, particularly in relation to the status of these lone parents. Four of the seven in the sample confirmed that they were not in receipt of benefits and had commenced employment. However, two other lone parents in the sample were in receipt of benefit at the time of the interviews and reported that it had been between one and five years since they were last employed and therefore not in receipt of benefits. One further interviewee was adamant that she had never worked or

ceased to claim benefits and remained in receipt of benefit at the time of the interview.

Further analysis of the responses given by these seven individuals showed no discernable differences between them and the individuals that made up the wider sample of lone parent customers in this study.

Those lone parents in Category A all considered that the risk or application of a sanction did not affect labour market behaviour, either theoretically or in their own experience. Additionally, none of those individuals that had gained employment named the sanction regime as being a factor in that decision.

Further analysis did show that for those individuals in Category A that had gained employment there had been some element of change at a personal level, for example, a child starting school or the start of a new relationship.

4.7 Conclusions

This chapter has outlined the sanctions regime, the role of compliance officers within the regime and the possible impact of sanctions on labour market behaviour of lone parent customers.

The sanctions regime was clearly well-defined in the DWP guidance and fully comprehended by the Jobcentre Plus staff involved in this study. During the focus groups with staff there was no doubt or lack of clarity about the processes and procedures involved in the sanctioning process. There were, however, some concerns raised in relation to the 'grey area' of PA discretion to apply waivers and deferrals and in accepting 'good cause' for failing to attend instances. This anxiety seemed to locate around the issue that what one PA may accept as a good reason for failing to attend a WFI, may not be considered thus by a different PA.

Considering the role of compliance officers prompted some interesting findings; it was apparent that Jobcentre Plus staff involved in this study fully understood when and how compliance officers could become involved in a case. Additionally, compliance officers were believed to be pivotal in the sanctioning process, with potential benefits for both the lone parent and the DWP. However, it was apparent that the guidance from DWP and the expectations of Jobcentre Plus staff did not concur with the situation as reported by lone parents in this study – who did not appear to have been in contact with compliance officers. This issue is revisited later in this document.

In terms of the labour market behaviour effects of the sanctioning regime, for the lone parents in this study, the effects could be reasonably summarised as negligible. This finding was based on evidence from the interviews with lone parents and the focus groups with Jobcentre Plus staff. However, questions on this same theme posed at a general level, rather than at a personal level, drew responses that were mixed. This difference, between personal experience and the experience the customers assume other people could have, was interesting and may reflect more about the views and assumptions that the lone parents in this study held about themselves and their own situations.

5 Individuals who had experienced a sanction

Summary

- Amongst the lone parents interviewed there was no evidence that suggested that non-compliance was an active decision.
- Lone parents in the sample in this study were observed to generally have a low awareness of having been sanctioned.
- Most lone parents in this study re-engaged with Jobcentre Plus when they noticed they had received a lower benefit payment than usual.
- In this study, lone parents who had been sanctioned exhibited greater levels of ill-health than the sample as a whole.
- The lone parents in this study who remained on a sanction appeared to do so as a result of complex and challenging domestic circumstances and financial disorganisation.
- Those lone parents in this study who continued to live with a sanction were likely to have higher levels of debt, greater ill-health and were less likely to check the accuracy of benefit payments.

5.1 Introduction to the individuals in Category B and C

This chapter discusses the findings relating to those lone parents who had experienced a sanction, according to Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative data. The chapter looks in detail at individuals in Category B (customers who had been sanctioned and then had their benefit reinstated) and Category C (customers understood, from the administrative data, to be living on a sanction).

These lone parents were of particular interest in this study as they had had a sanction applied to their benefit (rather than simply having been referred for a sanction), but had not left benefit (at the time that the sample was drawn from the administrative records).

5.1.1 Characteristics of the two groups

When compared to the entire sample in this study, which included those lone parents who had been referred only and those who had left benefit, there were indications of some shared characteristics across these two groups (Category B and C), although it must be noted that they represented a relatively small sample of individuals. The data demonstrated that the customers in categories B and C were more likely to have been receiving benefits for a longer period of time and had been out of work for longer when compared to the whole sample.

However, aside from the length of time as a benefit recipient, the individuals in Category B appeared to share more characteristics with the wider sample rather than those individuals in Category C. The customers in Category C displayed other characteristics which will be discussed later.

5.1.2 Awareness of sanction regime

Overall, across the whole sample of lone parent customers in this study, it appeared that most understood that there was a risk to benefit associated with the Work Focused Interview (WFI). Most also understood that this risk could become a reality if the WFI was not attended.

However, the lone parents in this study were not familiar with the specific processes of the sanction regime or the financial implications of any deductions. Additionally, it was found that most individuals said that they would get in touch with the Jobcentre about a reduction, if it were noticed.

There were no discernable differences between the general level of knowledge of the sanction regime across the whole sample and the level of knowledge of the sub-sample of Category B and C individuals.

5.1.3 Reasons for failing to attend

The lone parent customers in the sub-sample of Category B and C reported similar factors affecting attendance as the whole lone parent sample in this study. These included health issues affecting themselves or their children, caring responsibilities, non-receipt of the relevant letters or having forgotten about the WFI appointment.

5.2 Category C individuals – those understood to be living with a sanction

Individuals in Category C were those lone parent customers understood, from DWP administrative data, to be living on a sanction. When the data regarding those individuals within Category C was considered it became apparent during the initial analysis that there appeared to be some commonalities across this group. The data was subjected to a secondary analysis which served to confirm these differences and enabled the implications of them to be considered further.

5.2.1 Characteristics

The customers in this study understood to be living with a sanction displayed some differences in behaviour to the sample of lone parent customers as a whole.

There were indications in the data that the customers in Category C were more likely to have been on benefit for longer than the rest of the sample. Concomitantly, they have also been unemployed for a lengthier period of time than those in the other categories.

When compared to the other categories of lone parent in this study, proportionately more Category C lone parents had never worked.

The Category C customers in this study were less likely to check their benefit entitlement. Generally, across the whole sample of lone parents in this study there was a disinclination to check the amount of benefit being received; this tendency was significantly more pronounced in individuals in Category C. Critically, in the Category C lone parents, this remained the case even if the customer considered the amount they had been paid was incorrect. This behaviour is of significance when considering lone parent awareness of a sanction.

However, the most notable difference relating to the Category C group, compared to the data on the wider sample, was that these individuals more frequently reported poor health of themselves or 'others' in their households (most generally their children). In response to this finding secondary analysis was undertaken to consider the health issues in more detail. The results demonstrated a complex picture of challenging health concerns.

5.2.2 Awareness of sanction

In this study, the lone parent customers in Category C demonstrated varying levels of awareness of having been sanctioned. Some lone parents in this small sample categorically stated that they had never received a sanction or had ever been at risk of a sanction. Others thought they may have been at risk of a sanction at some time, but were unclear or unsure if a sanction had actually been imposed.

The lack of clarity that many of these customers exhibited when discussing sanctions and financial circumstances entails that any further considerations regarding awareness and coping mechanisms should be regarded as being indicative discussions rather than absolute findings.

5.2.3 Financial awareness

In common with the wider sample, the data collected from the lone parents in Category C indicated a generally poor level of knowledge in relation to their financial situation. However, as a proportion, more of this group reported knowing their benefit payment only 'roughly' or 'vaguely', than in those in the other categories.

In this study, the two most notable financial observations relating to customers in Category C was that they:

- had a higher prevalence of debt than those in the other groups; and
- were less likely to check benefit entitlement than the lone parents in the wider sample.

5.2.4 Health issues

This section considers in more detail the most notable and significant difference between the individuals in Category C and the wider sample – the frequency and severity of ill health. Those lone parents reporting their own ill health catalogued concerns that included:

- back injuries;
- depression; and
- anxiety attacks.

However, this customer group reported more prevalent and significant health problems in relation to their children. These included:

- heart conditions;
- severe asthma;
- behavioural difficulties;
- epilepsy; and
- cerebral palsy.

There was a notable link between these health conditions and the attendance patterns of this group of lone parents. Of the Category C individuals reporting health conditions in their children, almost all noted a challenge in attending WFIs. Many lone parents in this small group reported being unable to leave their children or, unwilling to leave them, without the specialist care they were accustomed to providing.

Additionally, this group of lone parents said that due to the health conditions of themselves or their children, it may not be practical, or appropriate, to attend a Jobcentre Plus office.

Some of the lone parents in Category C, in this study, told researchers they had suggested a home visit, but only one person reported having had a home visit and said that this visit had followed the intervention of her social worker.

5.3 Those individuals *aware* of the sanction

In this study, when considering the data relating to the Category C lone parents, it was found that there were more of these individuals unaware of a sanction, than were aware of one. However, it should be noted that there were only very small numbers of individuals in this sub-sample.

The findings detailed in the following section relate to those individuals in Category C that indicated during the interview an awareness of having been sanctioned. Of these, a small number were able to say when the sanction had been applied and how long it remained, the remainder were not able to give precise information.

5.3.1 Factors leading to the sanction

In this study it has been found that there often appeared to be a number of factors involved in the process that culminated in the application of a sanction. The issues raised by lone parents in the wider sample centred around health issues or caring responsibilities and a reported non-receipt of letters. The circumstances reported specifically by the Category C individuals, aware of failing to attend a WFI, are considered ahead in more detail:

- LP 5 and LP 34 both missed appointments while their young children were in hospital. Both went for further appointments and their benefit payments returned to normal levels.
- LP 11 reported being repeatedly sanctioned; she looked after a severely disabled adult son who could not be left in the care of others but who was also extremely difficult to get into the Jobcentre.
- LP 16 reported forgetting one appointment and acknowledged that her benefit had been sanctioned as a result. She said she had attended the next WFI.
- Two lone parents, LP13 and LP8, had moved home and said that they had not received the WFI letter. LP8 was sanctioned for four months; she said she did not notice initially as cash gifts paid into her bank account when her baby was born obscured the shortfall in benefits. Both these lone parents attended a WFI when they realised they had missed a WFI appointment.
- LP 4 said she had been into the Jobcentre to request an office change. However, the office was unchanged, she had not attended the WFI and her benefits were reduced. Following further contact with Jobcentre Plus her benefits had been reinstated and her designated office had been changed.

5.3.2 Financial coping strategies

None of the lone parents in the Category C group were able to offer an exact amount in terms of the benefit reduction and generally seemed unsure about the level of benefit reduction. However, several of the lone parents in this study reported a complete stoppage of Income Support (IS) payments when the sanction had been imposed.

The financial coping strategies of the lone parents who found their benefit payments reduced usually involved reducing spending. The spending that was reported to be affected often related to the purchase of basic provisions, such as food, phone, electricity, gas, nappies, taking their child to playgroup, paying other bills, Christmas club payment.

Some individuals also said that they would borrow money, usually from friends or family, but that this would tend to be relatively small amounts and would be available for a short period of time only. Several also suggested that their response would be to apply for a further social fund loan.

5.3.3 Emotional impact of the sanction

Several lone parents, in this study, reported that the sanction, or reduction of benefit, had caused emotional stress. The data analysis demonstrated that this stress was experienced in terms of anxiety and the feeling of not being able to cope with the reduced money. Additionally, some of the lone parents also said they had experienced emotional difficulties related to a feeling of not being able to provide what they thought a parent should for their children.

5.3.4 Reaction to the sanction

Those in the Category C sample, aware of the sanction, had all been in contact with Jobcentre Plus and had rearranged their WFI appointments. At the time of interview all the lone parents interviewed in this category believed that the sanction was no longer in force. However, it should be noted that for some of the lone parents the issues that contributed to them being sanctioned were not likely to be resolved quickly and could, in the future, result in further instances of failing to attend.

5.3.5 Case Study One: LP 11 – Sally

Sally was a 46-year-old woman who had been through a series of sanctions and reinstatements of benefit. She had four children, two were adult - one of them lived at home and had disabilities, she also had twin 13-year-old daughters, one of whom also had disabilities. Her husband left the family home eight years ago.

She was a full-time carer for her adult son who had severe disabilities. She said she would like to take up employment but that due to the difficulty in accessing qualified care staff to look after her son, employment remained a challenging prospect. Sally had, however, undertaken some evening classes.

Sally's son suffered from extensive brain damage, cerebral palsy, paraplegia, curvature of the spine and severe epilepsy. She found getting herself and her son into the Jobcentre extremely challenging; she was unable to park near to the Jobcentre but had to use the car due to her son's conditions. Additionally, Sally's son suffered multiple fits each day and she worried about this happening in the Jobcentre. Sally also had difficulty accessing the Jobcentre office with her son's wheelchair.

Sally reported that she was unable to get specialist care for her son except via social services and that they could not respond and arrange the care with short notice, or, at times, at all. Sally said she had telephoned the Jobcentre to discuss these issues on numerous occasions, and had requested a home visit several times. She felt that she had repeatedly made the Jobcentre aware of her difficulties in attending the WFI in the office. However, Sally said that she kept being marked as a failed to attend which then caused a re-entry to the sanctioning process.

Sally reported that on three occasions following the imposition of a sanction someone from the Jobcentre had attended her home to complete a questionnaire regarding her reasons for non-attendance at the WFI. On a further occasion, following the reinstatement of benefit, Sally reported that she had a telephone interview.

Sally had appealed the decision each time she was sanctioned, with the assistance of social services, and her benefit levels had always been reinstated. Sally reported that social services had been very helpful and that her social worker had contacted the PA at the Jobcentre to explain the difficulties in providing cover and to give an account of Sally's home circumstances.

Sally was financially astute and was able to discuss her finances with exactitude. She checked her benefit each time it was paid and was able to identify the different benefit components and their monetary levels to the penny. She described how, when the sanction was imposed, that on at least one occasion her IS payment had been completely stopped. Unusually, in this group, Sally had no debt.

When she had been sanctioned Sally said she would cut back on spending:

'...I just made do with what I had in my cupboard, which wasn't very good and I didn't have enough to go right over, but... if the worst comes to worst then it's cereals. I don't want it to sound as if I'm neglecting my children; I make sure I've always got bread and I've always got eggs, at least they've got something.'

Sally felt that reduced levels of benefit particularly affected her son who had special requirements in terms of diet.

At times Sally had borrowed a small amount of money from her parents (who were in their eighties). Sally reported that when she made the Jobcentre aware of this, staff had suggested:

'...in the past you relied on your parents, can't you go back to your parents for that help?'

At the time of the interview for this study Sally had recently received a WFI appointment letter and had been in contact with the Jobcentre:

'They said I've got an interview to do, and she [PA] said I know your circumstances so we're giving you two weeks. I have told Social Services and they said that we'll just go through the same thing yet again.'

Sally reported that she had been through this process five or six times and described the situation as 'absolutely ridiculous' and Jobcentre staff as 'rude and uncaring'.

'I would like them to acknowledge me as a person and not just me as 'she hasn't turned up'. Take circumstances into account, I'm not a statistic, I'm not one of these people in bed because they can't be bothered to go for their interview. I'm not sitting there with a cigarette in my hand and a drink in the other hand...everything I have goes on my children or my home...I've got nothing to hide.'

5.4 Those individuals *unaware* of a sanction

Some Category C lone parents reported no awareness of having been sanctioned. This was a very small number however.

In order to consider this further, the research team undertook a detailed exploration of the lone parents' situations, framing questions in a variety of ways to avoid an apparent lack of awareness on the part of the lone parent being due to a miscomprehension of the question. Some themes were also revisited during the interviews, to clarify that the initial posing of the question had not been misunderstood.

5.4.1 Possible causes for the lack of acknowledgement

Detailed analysis of the data pertaining to this group of individuals demonstrated that the factor common to all the lone parents in this group, but one, was ill health, either of themselves or of their children.

In this study there was also evidence that virtually all the individuals in this group had debt, including multiple social fund loans. Secondary analysis of the data also suggested that most of this group did not know exactly how much benefit they should receive. Further, some believed that the amount that had received was incorrect, but they had not checked the amount with Jobcentre Plus and demonstrated a strong disinclination to do so.

These issues were common to most Category C individuals, but more prevalent among those without an awareness of a sanction, which, in this study, was a small number of individuals.

5.4.2 Reduced benefit payments

In terms of their benefit payments, this group did report benefit fluctuations and most had noticed, or believed, that their benefit was less than it should be. However, most of this small group categorically stated that they had never been informed that they had been at risk of, or had had, their benefits reduced.

The explanations given in relation to any fluctuation or shortfall most commonly linked the shortfall in benefit to the repayment of social fund loans. Other explanations for the reduced amount included: a reaction to the lone parent refusing to give their child's father's name to the CSA and a clash of benefits resulting in a reduction.

'They [the benefits] are reduced. Income Support at the moment, they are taking £30 off because they want me to pass over the bairn's dads name... that is breaking the bank full stop.'

(LP 30)

Another customer, LP 14, said the reduction in her IS had been due to Carers' Allowance being paid to her in relation to her son. Aside from that instance she said she had no knowledge of any risk or reduction to benefit.

One lone parent reported a complicated situation which involved her going into labour with her child during her WFI, the appointment was then halted by the Personal Advisor. This individual stated that the PA told her that she would get another letter inviting her to a WFI when the child was three months old, but this lone parent said she has heard nothing since. With regards to her financial situation, she reported:

'I'm supposed to be on £57.00 or £59.00...I'm on £27.00, they keep reducing my money, they keep writing letters... I have been on that for about two or three months...they are just bang out of order.'

(LP 12)

It was apparent from the rest of the interview that this lone parent had either not acknowledged or understood the letters regarding her benefit levels. Additionally, it was clear that this individual did not consider that some action on her part was required to resolve the situation.

One further interviewee said she had 'never' been at risk of, or had, her benefit reduced, and believed that any reduction was due to social fund loan repayments.

5.4.3 Case Study Two: Kelly - LP 3

Kelly had never worked, was the mother of three children and had been a lone parent since before the birth of the first child. She acknowledged fluctuations in her benefit but said that she had never had her benefit reduced.

Kelly's domestic circumstances were difficult; she suffered from depression, anxiety attacks, and memory loss and was taking various medications in relation to these issues. As a recovering drug-misuser she was also prescribed methadone.

Kelly had been in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) until the birth of her youngest daughter, at which time she said she developed post-natal depression but was taken off DLA. At the time of this interview she was appealing against that decision.

Of Kelly's three children, only the two youngest lived with her, her eldest child, she reported, was violent and out of control and had been taken into social services care. Kelly had no contact with any members of her family.

During the interview it was apparent that Kelly was experiencing some difficulties. At times Kelly had trouble responding to questions appropriately and would, on occasion, lose the thread of what was being discussed or wander off topic.

Debt was a significant issue for Kelly, she had multiple debts and reported frequently running out of money, entailing that she would try to borrow from neighbours. This debt had also resulted in her borrowing from doorstep lenders; she owed money to such lenders at the time of this interview. Kelly said that if she was short of money she would borrow from any of these sources again or would try to access a further social fund loan.

The benefit payment that Kelly was in receipt of, she said, left her short of money frequently and she often found that she was unable to cover basic provisions and said that she 'goes without' to ensure her children were fed. Her financial ability appeared to be low; she was not able to discuss her finances in any detail.

Kelly stated that she had attended the WFI every time she had been asked to, but later went on to say that she suffered memory losses. Any reduction in payment that Kelly may have suspected, she put down to repayment of loans but she also seemed quite confused by this process:

'...sometimes it doesn't make sense to be honest. For instance, I know its not exact figures I'm saying, I've had the loan for £27 and they have taken £29, if you owe someone £27 how can you take £29, that's the bit I don't understand...'

Kelly went on to say that she had asked about her payment levels previously and her understanding was that they were in relation to loans.

In terms of her relationship with the Jobcentre and the staff, she said she had found some staff helpful and others less so. One significant issue, she felt, was that she had a history of drug-misuse:

'...I feel they just see me as a junkie and I'm not that, I'm getting my life together...they speak just how we are speaking, they go into the computer, they see that and their whole attitudes change, and you know why, because I take a prescription.'

She said she found this response a disincentive to attending the Jobcentre Plus office. It appeared that Kelly wanted a different reaction from the staff, based on factors other than her previous drug misuse:

'To be honest my life is being a mum, keeping the house tidy, getting the dinner on the table, keeping the kids clean and warm and tidy and that's me.'

5.4.4 Financial coping strategies

The data collected in regard to those respondents in Category C and unaware of a sanction suggested that they tended to borrow money – this was from friends, family and neighbours. However, some also borrowed from small scale local loan companies as well as door-step lenders. The lone parents in this small sub-sample also tended to have recurring social fund loans.

Additionally, the lone parent customers in this small group, common to others in the larger sample, appeared to cut back on purchases when they have less money; reducing spending on basic provisions such as food, electricity, gas and phones.

Overall, it would appear that almost all this group had debt and were continuing to accrue debt.

5.5 Focus group findings

Whilst the Jobcentre Plus staff were not asked specifically about the customers living with sanctions, there were discussions during the focus groups that were relevant to this topic.

Some of the participants suggested that lone parents who do not respond to the sanction have 'something to hide'; essentially that they were involved in fraudulent activity of some nature.

Others noted that, at times, lone parents when they realised they have been sanctioned and make contact with the Jobcentre, were 'quite upset' when they understand they had lost the money that formed the reduction.

Individuals became part of the sanction process for a variety of reasons, noted the Jobcentre Plus staff. The reasons suggested in the focus groups included; bereavement, the customer had not opened the mail, the customer had been in hospital or other reasons that were 'perfectly genuine.'

Staff also noted that there were customers who ignored any letters but would attend the Jobcentre when staff contacted them by telephone – the staff in the focus group tended to believe that some of these customers had literacy or language barriers or had mental health issues.

The issue of loans and the presence of them obscuring the reduction were noted by several members of staff in each of the three focus groups. In general the staff thought that some lone parents did assume the benefit reduction was caused by loan repayments, whatever the actual reason:

'I had one girl who thought the money was coming off for a loan and I said do you have a loan? Did you apply for one? And she said no!'

(CG, District Two)

'Sometimes customers think they're paying off a loan as... We have tonnes like that, you know they think they're paying off their social fund loans. And the extra money is going towards their loan. So sometimes it's like a year before they come in for their next one. And they've had a year's sanction.'

(AT, District One)

Analysis of all the comments made during the focus groups in relation to lone parents not noticing or reacting to sanctions, showed the staff tended towards the belief that there were genuine reasons for a lone parent not being aware of the reduction. However, there was also some belief amongst staff members that there could be fraud occurring.

5.6 Conclusions

During the focus groups the most commonly reported reason for lone parents not attending a WFI appeared to be that they had simply forgotten about it; this finding has been supported by evidence from the lone parents.

However, when compared to the wider sample in this study, Category C individuals displayed notable differences in terms of domestic situations, as well as some evidence of dispositional differences.

The data collected on health concerns noted by lone parents in Category C helped create an understanding that many of these individuals were experiencing challenging domestic circumstances. Additionally, they appeared to be more likely to accept the benefit payment they received, usually without question. Generally this small sub-sample, in relation to benefit receipt, can be understood to be more passive than the wider sample in this study.

There are many potential explanations in relation to why a lone parent might not respond or react to a sanction, analysis of the data demonstrated:

- The focus groups of Jobcentre Plus staff felt strongly that many of the lone parent customers simply did not realise that they had been sanctioned. This finding concurred strongly with data collected from the lone parents in this study;

- The lone parents in this study frequently had multiple social fund loans and assumed that any shortfall in benefit was due to a loan repayment. Again this view was supported by the data from staff in the focus groups;
- Lone parents in this study displayed, generally, a low level of awareness of the benefit amounts they were entitled to and should be receiving. This was a finding supported by data from both the lone parents and the focus groups of Jobcentre Plus staff; and
- There were some discussions within the focus groups concerning whether the lone parent may have someone living with them or be out of the country and that these situations could be implicated when a shortfall in payment failed to be noted. This was highlighted along with the importance of the role of compliance officers in 'policing the benefit'.

The evidence gathered from the lone parents in this research indicated that their situation was quite complex. Further, that many of those individuals may be somewhat passive in terms of the benefit system. Without further research more cannot be said as to why that was the case but it is likely to be a culmination of factors.

The lack of knowledge about levels of benefit entitlement combined with the challenging home situations of the customers appeared to work together to create a situation whereby lone parents did not, it seems, make an active decision to fail to go to the WFI and then to live with a sanction, but rather found themselves in that position due to a combination of factors.

The data surveyed here raised questions about the use of waivers and deferrals, as well as the consideration of the 'vulnerable group' status. It was noted that the application of any of these did depend, to a great extent, on the willingness of the lone parent customer to report their difficulties to Jobcentre Plus staff. However, the effectiveness of that communication depends on both the customer and Jobcentre Plus staff. The data collected in this study, however, suggested there were some customers experiencing challenging circumstances at a level that could have warranted the invocation of either a waiver or deferral.

6 Focus groups

Summary

- Jobcentre Plus staff involved in this study raised concerns about the title of the Work Focused Interview (WFI).
- The Jobcentre Plus staff felt that the written communications about WFIs and sanctions could be improved.
- The focus groups felt that Direct Payments may have had a negative effect in terms of keeping information up-dated and the lone parents' ability to manage their finances.

6.1 Issues raised only by the focus groups

This chapter examines topics discussed by the Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups that were not raised during the interviews with the lone parent customers in this study. These issues mainly refer to processes and procedures, which do not tend to factor in the lone parents' experiences of the sanction regime.

It should be noted, at the outset, that it was apparent from analysis of the focus group data that the Jobcentre Plus staff, across all three focus groups, had a clear understanding of the processes and procedures involved in both the WFI and sanctioning processes.

6.2 Communication

One of the key issues raised by the focus groups related to the letters used to communicate with lone parent customers; the majority of participants across all three focus groups discussed these.

6.2.1 Work Focused Interview letters

The majority of the staff (particularly in the focus groups in Districts Two and

Three) considered the overall terminology used in all² the letters to be problematic and, specifically, constituted a barrier to customers attending WFIs. The length and complexity of the letters were also raised as being problematic.

Many Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups felt that the letters (and the title of the WFI) suggested to the customer that they would be forced into employment:

'I think the majority of the customers when they get that letter, they're seeing that letter as 'I'm having to go in because they're going to give me a job', the way I think it's worded.'

(CG, District Two)

Some individuals in the focus groups also considered that the letters could be, potentially, quite frightening:

'...the letters are quite ambiguous and they've kind of like got a scare tactic to them and, if you're not that bright, you know it is one of these things that you will just decide put it in a drawer or put it in the bin.'

(TL, District Two)

There were a number of concerns in relation to the WFI letters, however, there was a divergence in opinion as to what was the most serious issue; comments ranged from the letters being threatening to them being ambiguous. Further, there were some Jobcentre Plus staff (predominantly in District One) that did not have concerns in relation to the letters:

'It is straight forward. It says three times, it says you were issued with a letter to attend an appointment, and today's date, you have not attended, it is telling them when the original letter was sent out, please contact us within five working days.'

(District One)

Many Jobcentre Plus staff members noted that the 'chocolate box leaflet', given to lone parents in the New Deal Plus for Lone Parents (NDLP) pilot areas, had been very useful. The leaflet was considered to cover a lot of information in a more accessible format than the letters used. Jobcentre Plus staff felt this leaflet had the potential to overcome some of the issues noted above in terms of the letters.

6.2.2 Sanction letters

Written communications around sanctions were also considered problematic by the majority of staff in the focus groups, who felt that the letters were overly complicated and contained too much text.

'The letter we send as well when the sanction goes on, it is really confusing.'

(ST, District Two)

² The discussions included the initial letters inviting customers to attend a WFI, the Failed to Attend (FTA) letter, the letters regarding imposition of sanctions etc.

'They could be worded better.'

(District Three)

There was also evidence that some offices had been, at times, making changes to the standard letters. There was an associated belief that these changes did increase the numbers of lone parent customers attending the office:

'We've made up our own letter that we send, once we know that the sanction's in place that just quite clearly says, 'do you understand that you're losing £11 odd until you've made contact with us'? And that's bringing some of them in. The print on the actual sanction letter, there's just so much wordage there, it just confuses them.'

(LM, District Two)

6.2.3 General issues

Aside from the specific issues in relation to written communication more general concerns were raised by the Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups. These related to difficulties some lone parents could be experiencing in relation to literacy and language barriers, as well as mental health issues.

'A lot of them have literacy problems, and mental health problems as well and the mental health ones are probably not even looking at their mail. You know, their mail's not even opened, so they're not going to see that there. We have a lot of problems with health, mental health.'

(GS, District Two)

'...when some customers, when the letters come through, it is a brown envelope, it is probably a bill or whatever, people just put it aside. So, you will have cases, where the visits start going there, the letters are just piled up in the corner, and nobody has opened it, it is not that they don't want to engage with you, but they haven't even opened the letters.'

(District Three)

Alongside the conversations concerning the written communications, many staff participants noted the usefulness of making telephone contact with individual lone parent customers.

The Jobcentre Plus staff all felt there was a distinct benefit in being able to have an opportunity to explain to the lone parent, verbally, the WFI and the sanction regime and the implications of each for the customer. It was noted that a phone conversation with the lone parent before the interview worked to 'pacify' the lone parent and put them 'at ease' before they arrived at the office 'heavy handed and guns blazing.'

In offices that had made increased levels of verbal contact, particularly by telephone, it was generally considered that this had made a significant difference to WFI attendance rates. Additionally, it was noted that when there had been a staff absence and there had been no telephone contact prior to the interviews, there had been a noticeable increase in the failure to attend rates.

6.3 The title of the Work Focused Interview

Aligned to the issue concerning written communications was a further concern that emerged strongly from the Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups – that of the title ‘Work Focused Interview’:

‘It all goes back to the letters...because the main heading is all about work focus and that immediately puts them off, so you might find that lone parents aren’t reading further on, telling them about the sanctions and everything and how it’s going to affect their benefit if they don’t come in, because they’re immediately hit with this Work Focused Interview paragraph and they’re scared, because they think we’re just going to give them a job.’

(District Two)

Most Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups considered that the WFI title strongly suggested to customers that the interview would be entirely directed towards getting them employment. This, staff felt, created a disincentive to lone parents attending the WFI, as well as a reluctance to engage with the interview when they did attend. These issues were regarded as a frequent and ongoing problem across all three districts.

‘As far as they are concerned Work Focus means that you are asking me to come back to work and they will try to tell you that I am not on Jobseeker’s Allowance...and you have to start repeating all over again, and tell them what Work Focus is all about.’

(District Three)

‘I’m sure all offices get phone calls from customers saying ‘I can’t take a job because I’ve got health issues’. I can’t come into my appointment and that’s because they think they’re coming in because we’re forcing them to take a job.’

(District Two)

‘...obviously the name came from the Government and the whole idea of the name is because, the interview is about talking about work, and yes, people might not be ready, I think the way the adviser explains the process to the customer is very important... You need to explain to them you are not forcing them into work, the process is about looking at barriers they might have to work, helping them with the barriers and then moving them gradually towards work, not necessarily now. So, obviously when the letter drops through the doors, it says Work Focused, some of them will call you and say I’m not looking for work, and you explain to them, this is what it is.’

(District One)

Further, there was a belief in one of the focus groups that many lone parents do not comprehend the word 'focused' and instead think the word was 'forced'. It was not clear whether this was a quirk of the regional dialect or was because the term 'workforce' was well known whereas the term 'work-focused' was not:

'They are not seeing Focus, they are seeing Forced.'

(District One)

There were many suggestions of alternative titles for the WFI, these included: Review Session; Information Session; Lone Parent Interview; Lone Parent Support.

6.4 Direct payments

There were some limited discussions across the focus groups of Jobcentre Plus staff about the implications of Direct Payments. The reasons for this issue being noted, however, differed between the groups. The most common observations were: the DWP being unaware of a lone parent moving house and the ability of the lone parent to keep track of their finances.

6.4.1 Address change

Lone parents may move house and not notify Jobcentre Plus of the change of address but will, however, continue receiving their benefits. Prior to direct payments clients needed to keep their address up-to-date on the Jobcentre Plus system. Focus group participants noted that the client would sometimes notify Inland Revenue but that this information would not be passed on to Jobcentre Plus.

6.4.2 Financial implications

The focus group participants observed that the direct payments system potentially makes it more difficult for lone parents to keep track of what benefits they are in receipt of. This lack of clarity also had the potential to contribute to lone parents failing to notice a sanction.

6.5 Conclusions

This chapter have brought to the fore some of the salient issues for those Jobcentre Plus staff involved in the focus group discussions.

The most significant of these issues appeared to be the title of the WFI, followed by the written communications used. It was interesting to note that both of these factors were thought to constitute a barrier to lone parents attending WFIs (and thus avoiding a sanction).

A further issue raised only by the focus groups was the practice of direct payments which were felt, by some of the participants, to have the potential to make keeping in touch with lone parent customers more problematic and to render financial management more difficult for some lone parent customers.

7 Conclusions

Summary

- This research has shown that a range of factors typically affected the lone parent Work Focused Interview (WFI) attendance. Amongst those lone parents interviewed here, it did not appear that failing to attend a WFI was an active decision.
- Lone parents in this study were frequently experiencing complex and challenging domestic environments.
- In this study lone parents showed an awareness of the WFI and acknowledged the risk to benefits of failing to attend the WFI.
- The research revealed that incurring a sanction had often been as a result of other pressures in the customer's life.
- Based on the small sample interviewed here, continuing to live with a sanction appeared to be linked to high levels of ill health, combined with a low financial acumen.
- Key to this research has been investigating the link between the sanctions regime and labour market behaviour; the data gathered suggested that the sanctions regime appeared to have a negligible impact upon the labour market behaviour of the lone parent customers involved in this study.

7.1 Discussion of the findings

It must be noted when considering the findings of this study that only a small percentage of lone parents claiming Income Support (IS) do actually incur a sanction, and it is likely that these individuals display some different characteristics as a group than the entire lone parent group.

This research has looked at 40 lone parent customers, all of whom were understood to have been involved in the sanction regime and whilst this study has provided rich qualitative data in regard to these lone parents the findings cannot be considered as being representative of all lone parents claiming IS.

It should be noted that whilst much has been learned about the lone parents in this study and their experience of the WFI and sanction regime and its effects upon labour market behaviour, these findings cannot necessarily be generalised to other groups of lone parents.

The data considered in this report has highlighted a complex picture of lone parent customers with difficult circumstances failing to comply with a Jobcentre Plus regime that, according to both the customers and the Jobcentre Plus staff, presented its own challenges.

There appeared to be a number of factors involved when a customer fails to attend a WFI, and then incurs a sanction. The data gathered in this study indicated that these reasons are complex and interlinked and can involve numerous situational and dispositional factors. However, the evidence from this study, suggested that the factors involved commonly related to ill-health, caring responsibilities, disorganisation (resulting in the WFI being forgotten about), and an unwillingness (or an inability) to engage with the written communication from Jobcentre Plus.

While it has been difficult to pinpoint more precisely than this the causes of failing to attend a WFI, there was no evidence in this study to suggest that failing to attend a WFI or incurring a sanction was as a result of an active decision made by the lone parent.

7.1.1 Lone parents as a group

This customer group was far from homogeneous; aside from the shared status of being a lone parent caring for at least one child and being in receipt of benefit, there were few common factors.

The lone parent customers involved in this study came from a wide range of backgrounds; some had held professional positions, while others had never worked, some enjoyed positive and supportive relationships with their families, while others had had no contact with their families for many years.

One of the few common factors applying to almost this entire small lone parent customer sample was the prevalence of debt. Most of the participants in this study had at least one social fund loan and most had more than one. Further, the majority of lone parents in this study also had other debts. How the debt was managed showed a wide-range of responses and varying levels of financial acumen; some individuals were managing the debt effectively, others were defaulting repeatedly and incurring substantial charges and penalties, thus their debt profiles were increasing.

In this study, it was apparent that overall there was a positive attitude towards work. The lone parent customers in this study did wish to return to, or start, employment, with many citing the attraction of working as being the ability to earn their own money.

A small number of those interviewed were actively looking for employment at the time of interview. For the majority, until their child(ren) reached a certain age, they felt unable to consider employment. There was also evidence of some customers

accessing courses, and one who had just been accepted into university to study social work.

Overall, this sample of lone parents was mixed and showed varying attitudes and backgrounds. However, the data regarding those who had incurred a sanction, and those who were understood to be living with a sanction, illustrated some common characteristics. In this study, this group, the Category C individuals, when compared to the wider sample, had:

- a low awareness of having been sanctioned;
- higher prevalence of ill health;
- higher levels of debt; and
- a lower propensity to check benefit entitlement and payments.

This small group of lone parent customers, as a whole, appeared to be experiencing some very challenging domestic situations, and generally exhibited more chaotic lifestyles, combined with a great passivity.

The issues of waivers, deferrals and entry into the 'vulnerable group' did not appear to have affected this group, with none reporting circumstances that would suggest that any of these measures had been applied. However, considering the detailed circumstances of this small sample suggested that some of the individuals may well have warranted the application at least one of these measures.

7.1.2 Awareness and comprehension of the sanctions regime

In this study the level of understanding and the accuracy of implementation of the sanctions regime by Jobcentre Plus staff raised no concerns. However, the data demonstrated that most of the staff who participated in the research did not consider that the sanctions regime encouraged labour market behaviour.

The Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups also suggested that the lone parents, whilst understanding a theoretical risk to their benefit in relation to failing to attend WFI appointment, did not necessarily believe that the reduction would actually be applied.

Analysis of the data gathered through fieldwork with the lone parents showed that while those interviewed had only a little knowledge about the sanction process and how it was implemented, there was a wide comprehension of the WFI and the risk to benefit of non-attendance without good cause.

It should be noted that the lone parents in this study, for the most part, considered that putting in place a risk to benefit in order to encourage people to attend a mandatory interview was reasonable. Further, several suggested that it was absolutely necessary to attempt to identify people who were committing fraud.

Further, it must be noted that the majority of lone parents claiming IS are not sanctioned, thus it would appear that the risk to benefit of failing to attend does operate to ensure attendance in most cases. Without further research it would be

difficult to understand more about why some lone parents were aware of, and comprehend, the sanction system (whether or not they have been sanctioned) and other lone parents lack that comprehension.

7.1.3 Issues around non-compliance

Considering the pertinent issues around a failure to comply revisited many of the same factors highlighted in the section above regarding the lone parents' domestic arrangements; it was these circumstances that formed a context for the behaviour of this customer group.

The failure to comply, the data strongly suggested here, was tied into domestic difficulties, disorganisation and a level of passivity demonstrated by some of the lone parent customers. These were all factors in not only the failure to attend situation but also in the process by which an individual came to be sanctioned. However, those who were sanctioned and then continued to live with a sanction appeared to be experiencing greater difficulties than others in the sample, and could be dealing with personal ill-health.

Living with a sanction, however, is a complex situation and would benefit from further research to comprehend exactly how the factors noted in this study worked together to create a situation whereby a lone parent family was living on less benefit than their entitlement.

7.1.4 Impact of sanctions on labour market behaviour

Based both on the evidence that emerged from the Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups and the lone parent customers, it has been reasonable to conclude that the sanction regime had only a negligible effect upon the labour market behaviour of the lone parents in this study.

The lone parents in this study reported, in the main, that for them individually the risk of benefit reduction or actual reduction to benefit had not encouraged labour market behaviour. Jobcentre Plus staff generally expressed similar observations; that the sanction regime does not encourage lone parents into the jobs market.

In relation to those individuals identified by Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) data as being 'Off Benefit' (Category A in this study), due to the small size of the sample conclusive findings could not be reported, there are, however some interesting observations. The data gathered from these four individuals who had left benefit, was that they appeared not to have any discernable differences to the wider sample of lone parent customers in this study. Additionally, they did not feel that the risk or application of a sanction played any part in their labour-market decisions.

However, it should be noted that the CPP research team encountered difficulty in making contact with individuals in Category A (which made up only a small proportion of the entire sample at the outset) and, it could be surmised, this may be linked to those individuals having taken up employment and not being in the home. Without further research more cannot be understood about the individuals in Category A and the reasons surrounding them ceasing to claim benefit.

8 Issues for further consideration

Summary

- A review of the Work Focused Interview (WFI) title could be considered.
- Written communication may be problematic for some lone parents.
- Increased telephone contact could be of benefit.
- The print-out calculations generated at the WFI were considered useful, but some customers found the format challenging.
- Compliance officers were seen as integral to the WFI/sanction regime, but their activities did not, at the time of this research, appear to concur with guidance or the expectations of Jobcentre Plus staff.
- The waivers and deferrals system may benefit from a re-examination in terms of how to make it work more effectively for the lone parents experiencing the most challenging circumstances.
- The process by which individuals become included in the 'vulnerable group' category may benefit from some further consideration.

A number of issues that may warrant further consideration have arisen during this research, either in relation to Jobcentre Plus processes and procedures or in terms of additional research. Some of the most significant of these are considered ahead.

8.1 Work Focused Interview title and letters – improved communication

The title of the WFI and the written communications used by Jobcentre Plus were the two issues that resulted in extended discussions during the focus groups.

In summary, the Jobcentre Plus staff who participated in this study considered the WFI title to be problematic as the words 'work-focused' gave lone parents the impression that they were going to be made to get a job. Many of the staff in the focus groups felt that that title is detrimental to WFI attendance.

Jobcentre Plus participants suggested that the name should be changed as soon as possible and offered suggestions for alternatives. Some staff asked that this issue be specifically raised with Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

The majority of staff in the focus groups also noted concerns with regard to the standard letters used to invite people to the WFI, the letter used when a customer fails to attend and the sanctioning letter.

Various issues were discussed in regard to the content, headings and tone of these letters. Some staff felt the letters were ambiguous and more difficult to understand – particularly with regard to people with literacy difficulties or a language barrier. Other staff felt that they were potentially threatening. However, there were staff who felt that the letters were not of concern.

There was a positive note in terms of the communication used, this was in relation to the use of the New Deal Plus 'chocolate box' leaflets which had been well received by both customers and staff.

Telephone contact was discussed, with the Jobcentre Plus staff noting that when telephone contact was initiated with the lone parent prior to a WFI, the customer was significantly more likely to attend the appointment. This success was also noted when discussing telephone contact with customers following a failure to attend. There were many positive comments about the use of the phone in 'speeding the process' up and in terms of getting the customer in. Some of the offices represented by the Jobcentre Plus staff had put in place ad hoc arrangements for making phone contact.

8.2 The 'better off' calculation

Many lone parents in this study discussed the usefulness of the print-out of financial calculations which is generated and considered during the WFI.

However, a significant number of those customers said it was often difficult to fully comprehend the print-out in the Jobcentre Plus office, due to other distractions (usually their own children). For this reason the print-out being available for them to take home was considered, generally, as very favourable. Some lone parents said this enabled them to more fully consider the benefits of work. It should be noted, however, a small number of lone parents in this study reported finding it difficult to understand the document when the Personal Advisor (PA) was not there to guide them through it.

Clearly this provision of information was useful to the customers and was appreciated and referred to in their own time at home. However, it may be that the format could be reviewed to ensure the information was as accessible as possible.

8.3 The involvement of compliance officers

This research has observed that the activities of compliance officers did not appear to concur with the Jobcentre Plus guidance or the expectations of the Jobcentre Plus staff.

The guidance regarding the use of compliance officers is clear – they should be informed and undertake a home visit when a lone parent who is considered to be in a ‘vulnerable group’ fails to attend a WFI. The compliance officer activity should also be initiated when any lone parent is sanctioned.

It was apparent that the staff who participated in the focus groups considered the compliance officers to be an important part of the process. Their significance was discussed both in terms of achieving a lone parent’s WFI attendance so that a sanction can be removed and, in the case of lone parents in ‘vulnerable groups’, preventing them being referred to a sanction.

In addition to these main roles, it was clear that the compliance officer was also considered to be an information gatherer for Jobcentre Plus. They could collect information regarding the failure to attend and the lone parent’s domestic situation. This information could, potentially, then have a significant impact upon a decision to defer or waive the WFI.

The Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups from all three districts reported that compliance officers were being informed in the same way as usual and that they remained an integral part of the process. However, staff in one focus group suggested that since compliance officers had lost the target linked with lone parents, visits to this customer group had become a low priority.

In this study, only one lone parent reported having had any person from Jobcentre Plus visit their home, and that visit was instigated following social service involvement.

In summary, there was a significant mismatch between the Jobcentre Plus guidance, comprehension amongst the Jobcentre Plus staff as to what was happening in terms of compliance officers and what the lone parent customers in this study had experienced.

What was certain was that compliance remained an important part of the sanctions process – providing a ‘safety net’ of sorts to lone parent customers, as well as a monitoring role for Jobcentre Plus. Without this role the sanctioning process can be understood as being somewhat weakened.

8.4 Waivers and deferrals

Waivers and deferrals offer an important opportunity for lone parents experiencing particular challenges to be released from the mandatory WFI regime. Jobcentre Plus guidance makes it clear that Personal Advisers have a significant level of discretion in applying both waivers and deferrals.

This level of discretion was echoed by the staff in the focus groups. However, during fieldwork with lone parent customers it was apparent that some were in positions, or had been in positions, which could have warranted a waiver or deferral of their WFI. In this study, there was no evidence to suggest that a waiver or deferral had been applied and these customers had been sanctioned for non-attendance.

Whilst this was a small group of individuals, for some lone parents the process of being sanctioned can result in them experiencing more financial difficulty, as well as adding pressure to what, for some of them is, a challenging domestic situation.

However, the responsibility for making an application of a waiver or deferral does not rest entirely upon the PA, as they must have the pertinent information from the customer in order to make this decision. Therefore, when considering this issue it must be noted that many decisions to defer or waive a WFI are dependent upon the lone parent customer effectively communicating to the Jobcentre the situation which had prevented (or would prevent) them from attending the appointment(s).

Without further research it is not known why these individuals, despite very difficult circumstances, did not attract a waiver or deferral, particularly those in a cycle of repeated sanctions.

8.5 Inclusion in the 'vulnerable group'

Lone parents who are placed in the 'vulnerable group' are eligible to receive somewhat different treatment; most notably in terms of earlier involvement of compliance officers following a failure to attend the WFI and the subsequent sanctioning process.

Currently, identification of 'vulnerable group' status relies on the customer self-reporting either mental health issues or learning disabilities at the time they make their claim (ie to the Contact Centre by phone) or for these issues to be identified by a PA during an interview.

There were some discussions by the Jobcentre Plus staff in the focus groups regarding the situations of some of their customers which indicated that the staff had knowledge of lone parent customers whose situations were challenging to an extent that would probably preclude them from employment for years.

Whilst the Centre for Public Policy (CPP) research team are not medical practitioners, during the fieldwork for this study a small number of lone parents discussed conditions, or personal difficulties, that suggested that it may have been appropriate for these individuals to have been considered as being in the 'vulnerable group', particularly some of those in Category C (those living with a sanction).

Had those individuals been identified as 'vulnerable' then a compliance officer visit would have been undertaken prior to a sanction being implemented. This could, potentially, have prevented the imposition of a sanction.

Appendix A

First contact letter

Reference number:

XX August 2007

Dear [FIRST NAME]

Parents and Benefits

We are writing to ask for your help.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) wants to learn more about parents' experiences of Jobcentre Plus, and the best way of doing this is to come and talk to you.

DWP have asked the Centre for Public Policy (CPP) at Northumbria University to carry out some research about this issue. CPP is a research organisation completely independent of the DWP and Jobcentre Plus.

Your name has been selected from DWP records and it would be very helpful if we could talk to you about your views. Your opinions are very important to us, even if you are no longer claiming benefits.

What happens now?

A researcher from the Centre for Public Policy may contact you in the next few weeks to see if you would like to take part and to arrange a telephone interview and/or face-to-face interview.

- Appointments will be arranged at times which suit you.
- Interviewers from CPP will telephone you or come to a mutually agreed venue (eg your home or a local Children's Centre) and talk to you about your experiences of Jobcentre Plus.

- We will thank you with a £10 'Love to Shop' High Street Voucher for your time during telephone interviews or a £20 'Love to Shop' High Street Voucher for your time during a face to face interview.
- Your answers will be treated in strict confidence in accordance with the Data Protection Act. No personal views or information will be passed on to Jobcentre Plus or to anyone outside the research team. Your views will be combined with those of other people and the report of the research will not identify any individual or family.
- Your involvement is completely voluntary and will not affect any benefit you receive, or any dealings you have with any government department or agency.

We hope that you decide to take part in the study. If you do not wish to take part, please let us know by 7th September 2007. You can contact Jane Ashby at the Centre for Public Policy on 0191 243 7425 or by email at jane.ashby@northumbria.ac.uk or write to the address above, quoting the reference number at the top of this letter.

Thank you for your help with this important study.

Yours sincerely,

Appendix B

Data sampling

The fieldwork was carried out in three Jobcentre Plus districts; for the purposes of preserving anonymity of the focus group participants these districts are known as District One, District Two and District Three. The districts each generated sufficient referrals to sanction to produce an initial sample. The selected districts also represent a range of sanction referral with resulting benefit reduction rates (respectively, low, medium and high); this was based on sanction referral and sanctions applied in the period March – May 2007.

Following the selection of the districts data derived from the Jobcentre Plus Labour Market System (LMS) was received for each of them.

Development of the sample

The LMS data, from which to develop the sample, came in the form of over 2,200 records which were firstly analysed to remove duplicates and the records relating to individuals with a history of threatening behaviour. Of the remainder a sample of 1,000 had to be derived, split equally between the three districts:

- All individuals in the 'Off Benefit' and 'Reinstated' categories were actively selected as these groups were small in number;
- The balance was made up of 'sanctioned' and 'referred but not sanctioned' individuals; and
- Due to the small size of the sample for 'sanctioned' and 'referred but not sanctioned' in Districts Two and Three, all the individuals in these categories were also actively selected.

When the telephone contact phase was initiated there was some evidence to suggest that the benefit status categories, as identified from the LMS data, may not be accurate in all cases. In response, the data was checked against the LMS conversation fields, however, there remained some ambiguity.

This issue was raised with Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and further data was then provided in September 2007 (by the Performance Measurement and Analysis Division (PMAD)), this derived from data held by the Income Support Computer System (ISCS). However, this data proved difficult to interpret against the LMS data the research team had previously received.

Following further discussions PMAD helpfully provided screen dumps of the ISCS for each of 40 individuals that had been identified as being willing to take part in this research. Analysis was undertaken on this second data, which again proved somewhat challenging, however this indicated that the categories assigned by CPP based on the DWP initial data on benefit status does not concur in 19 of the 40 individuals.

This discordance between the categories and the data was then raised with PMAD, and potential reasons why the data did not provide a match were provided. The key explanation is that the Personal Adviser (PA) records onto the LMS a Failed to Attend (FTA) which then shows a sanction being in force – this then may not be updated until the next WFI review data (6 months/12 months following claim date) and will remain showing a sanction even where the situation may have changed. An additional explanation was that other types of deduction applied to the benefit payment rates (social fund repayments, council tax etc) can 'mask a benefit reduction' making it difficult to tell if a sanction is in place.

The final sample

Following the clarification of the situation regarding the data and the receipt of possible explanations from DWP as to the anomalies the decision was taken to proceed with the fieldwork with the sample of 40 lone parents.

During the sampling and the fieldwork, out of the sample of 1,000, the research team in CPP ultimately had contact with 463 individuals, resulting in 31 face-to-face interviews and 40 telephone interviews.

The categories assigned to the lone parent sample are:

- A: Off benefits
- B: Sanctioned but reinstated
- C: Living with a sanction
- D: Referred but no sanction

Appendix C

The primary research

The approach employed to provide a sample somewhat balanced between the lone parent categories, as detailed previously, was purposive. This approach was applied as it was important to this study to consider lone parents in a variety of circumstances in relation to sanctions. The sample created through the purposive approach represents a range of customer circumstances and characteristics.

Initial contact with the customer was made via a letter which was sent to 1,000 individuals inviting them to take part in the research and detailing what was required and the broad area of interest. These letters also informed the individuals that the letter would be followed by a telephone call and gave customers an opt-out period. Once this period concluded the database of customers was used to select individuals for telephone contact. The script used during this contact is ahead.

Initial script for first telephone contact

Hello I'mfrom the University of Northumbria and I'm following up on a letter we sent you last month about some research we are doing for Jobcentre Plus.

I'm phoning to try to arrange a date and time when one of our researchers can ring you and spend around 20minutes of your time asking some questions about your experiences in dealing with the Jobcentre Plus. As we explained in our letter, we will be sending you a £10 gift voucher for taking part in the research and if you agree to follow up with a face to face interview there will be an additional voucher of £20.

Can I just say now that we are not part of the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and completely independent from the Jobcentre Plus so any information you give us will be confidential and we won't use your name in our report.

We were hoping to arrange a time for..... Is that convenient?

If pressed:

We will be asking you some questions about:

Your relationships with Job Centre Plus staff – particularly your Personal Adviser

Your experiences of attending work-focused interviews

Claiming income support

Your knowledge of the rights and responsibilities of lone-parent Income Support (IS) claimants.

How you manage your finances

Following the initial telephone contact an appointment was arranged when a senior staff member of the research team would telephone and undertake a semi-structured interview with the customer. When that interview was completed, the participant was asked if they would be willing to have a face-to-face interview to go through some of the aspects of the phone interview in more detail. It was explained that two research staff would carry out the interviews and that at least one of the pair would be female. Further, they were given the choice of having it in their homes or at another appropriate venue. Most of the lone parents were agreeable to the next interview without any concerns, some asked further questions about what the interview would cover and others did not want to take part in the next stage of the fieldwork. If the lone parent was willing an appointment was arranged.

During the phase of telephone and in-person contact customers were:

- Assured of confidentiality and anonymity;
- Reminded that participation in the research was on a voluntary basis;
- Informed that the research team was independent of DWP and Jobcentre Plus;
- Reassured that participation in the research would not make any difference to their benefit entitlement; and
- Were asked if they had any objections to having their phone interview recorded on a digital recorder and given an explanation as to why they were recorded and what happens to the recording.

The fieldwork took an exploratory nature being reflexive to the participant contributions, but was based around topic guides. These were designed in collaboration with DWP and outlined key areas for discussion (see Appendix Two). All the interviews were conducted by a senior member of staff who was accompanied by a junior member of the research team. The interviews all took place in the customer's homes or, in a few cases, at the homes of family members and were digitally recorded with the lone parent's permission.

The initial fieldwork resulted in a shortfall of four face-to-face interviews comprising of three in District Three and one in District Two. The shortfall was due, in District Three, to the significant difficulties in getting in touch with individuals for the initial phone interviews. These difficulties entailed that the fieldwork team went to District Three with eight face-to-face interviews booked, and of these one was not at her home address as arranged.

The fieldwork team in District Two had ten interviews booked at specific times and one further agreed in principle but to be arranged. Ultimately the team left District Two with nine face to face interviews completed, due to respondents being un-contactable prior to the interview and then not being present at their home addresses. The fieldwork team in District One completed the ten face-to-face interviews as arranged.

Following the initial wave of fieldwork a second round of fieldwork was initiated to address the shortfall of face-to-face interviews. This took place in District One.

From the outset of the project the CPP research team had some form of contact with 463 individuals. Of that number:

- 32 respondents specifically said they did not want to take part;
- 20 had incorrect addresses resulting in the initial invitation letters being returned;
- 169 of the individuals contacted by letter had incorrect telephone numbers on file, for example, calls were no longer being connected. There was an additional number who, whilst being initially contacted successfully were then unavailable at a later date. The problematic numbers were, in the main, mobile numbers;
- 23 people agreed during the first contact to take part in telephone interviews and when called at the date and time as arranged did not take part – this usually transpired through no answer on the telephone, over a significant number of attempts made during the agreed day. Additional subsequent calls were frequently disconnected immediately after getting an answer. It appeared that some individuals, whilst initially agreeing to take part, later changed their minds and so avoided the calls, resulting in a no answer or a disconnection;
- 164 people were simply un-contactable; in general this transpired as a case of not receiving an answer on the phone number despite several calls across different days and times;
- it is clear that the District Three sample posed specific difficulties in terms of undertaking the fieldwork. When compared to other two areas, this area had around double the failed contacts.

In addition to the fieldwork directly involving the lone parents, three focus groups were conducted. These utilised a semi-structured topic guide and involved Jobcentre Plus staff with experience of arranging or undertaking WFIs and with knowledge of the sanctioning process. The three focus groups were digitally recorded with permission of all participants and the recordings were transcribed verbatim within CPP.

Appendix D

District breakdown of the contact patterns

	District 1	District 2	District 3	Total
Does not want to take part	10	7	15	32
	8 A	6 C	1 A	
	2 C	1 D	7 B	
			6 C	
			1 D	
Incorrect address (returned letters)	6	8	6	20
	1 A	1A	6 C	
	1B	2 B		
	2 C	4 C		
	2 D	1 D		
Incorrect telephone number (tended to be mobiles)	46	33	90	169
	9 A	1 A	3 A	
	17 B	6 B	17 B	
	16 C	20 C	64 C	
	4 D	6 D	6 D	
Agreed to be interviewed but did not keep appointment	4	3	16	23
	2 B	1A	8 B	
	2 C	1B	8 C	
		1C		
No answer/unavailable (including: no reply, not in at time of call, engaged)	37	48	79	164
	6A	1 A	2 A	
	17 B	8 B	17 B	
	9 C	26 C	49 C	
	5 D	13 D	11 D	
	103	99	206	408

Appendix E

Topic guide for telephone interviews

Stage one – telephone interviews with lone parents

Introduce self/Centre for Public Policy (CPP)

Explain the purpose of the interview:

- The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) wants to learn more about parents' experiences of Jobcentre Plus.
- DWP have asked the CPP at Northumbria University to carry out some research about this issue.
- We are telephoning you today as arranged to undertake an interview with you.
- This interview will ask you questions about claiming benefits, visiting Jobcentre Plus Offices, your relationship with Jobcentre Plus Staff, and living on benefits.
- CPP is a research organisation completely independent of the DWP and Jobcentre Plus.

Tell participants:

- All information given is confidential.
- No names will be used in any documents.
- They have the right to withdraw from the interview at any point.
- The information we gain from today's interview will be incorporated into a report for the Department for Works and Pensions.

- That the interview will be recorded as this is the best way to ensure we have an accurate record of the discussion. Ask if the interviewee has any objections.
- Ask if the interviewee if they have any questions, answering these as necessary (if unable to answer tell the interviewee they can contact Jane Ashby 0191 243 7426).
- Ask the participant 'based on the information that you have been given are you happy to now take part in a telephone interview?'

A. Your Benefit/Employment Status

1. When did you make your most recent benefit claim?
 - A few weeks ago/few months/6-12 months/over a year
2. Have you ever claimed benefits before this?
3. When were you last in employment?
4. What kind of employment was this?
 - Was the job full or part-time?
 - Was the job temporary?
 - Why did this employment end?
5. Do you think you will be in a position to return to work in the future?
 - Why/Why not?
6. When do you think that you will be in a position to return to work?
7. Do you know what kind of work you will be looking for?

B. Attendance at Jobcentre Interviews

1. Do you live very far from the Job Centre?
 - Is the Job Centre easy to get to?
2. Do you go to the Job Centre on a regular basis?
 - Why do you go to the Job Centre?
 - For interviews with your Personal Adviser?
 - What are these interviews about?
3. Can you remember how many of these interviews you have been asked to attend?
 - Did you attend?
4. When were you last asked to attend the Jobcentre for an interview?
 - Did you attend this interview?

Those you did attend last interview

5. What made you decide to attend?

6. Did you find the interview useful?

- If so, why/If not, why not

7. Were you given any information at the interview?

8. Have you used any information you were given?

- If not, do you think you might make use of the information in the future?

Those who did not attend last interview:

9. Could you tell me why you did not to attend?

- Did past experiences of Jobcentre interviews influence your decision not to attend this one?

10. Do you think that you should have to attend interviews?

- If so, why/If not, why not

11. Did you realise that not attending an interview could result in your benefits being reduced?

- If respondent is aware why did this not encourage them to attend?

C. Benefit Awareness

1. Do you know which benefits you currently receive?

2. How do you get these payments?

- Paid into your bank account/collected from Post Office/Other

3. Do you know the amount of benefit that you are due to get each time it is paid?

4. Does the amount of benefit you receive sometimes change?

5. Do you check that the amount of benefit you are paid is correct?

6. Have you ever thought that the amount of benefit you have been paid has been incorrect?

- Did you think you were paid too much or too little benefit?

7. Did you contact anyone to check the amount you were paid was correct?

- Who did you contact?

8. What, if anything, happened as a result of this contact?

D. Awareness of the responsibilities of benefit recipients

1. Do you know what Jobcentre Plus expects from someone in order to receive his or her benefits?

- If yes, probe what sorts of things are expected?

2. Did you know that it in some circumstances Jobcentre Plus might reduce benefit payments?

If yes:

- How do you know about the risk of reductions to benefits?
 - When did you find out about this?

3. Do you know why Jobcentre Plus might reduce benefit payments?

If yes:

- Why would they do this?
 - When did you find out about this?

4. Do you think it is acceptable for Jobcentre Plus to reduce benefits in certain circumstances,

- prompt eg if someone does not keep appointments at the Jobcentre?

5. Do you think the risk of reduced benefits encourages people to:

- Attend interviews at the Jobcentre?
- Leave benefits and find work?

E. Personal Experience of Sanctions

1. Have you ever been told that your benefit was at risk of being reduced?

If yes:

- How were you told that your benefits might be reduced
- When were you told?
- Was the reason for a possible reduction in your benefits explained to you?
- Were you told what you would have to do so that your benefit would not be reduced?
- Did anything happen to stop your benefit being reduced?
 - If so, what happened?
- Do you think the way that you were told about benefit reductions could be improved?
 - If so, how?

2. Have your benefit payments ever been reduced?

If yes:

- How were you told about the reduction?
- Were you told before the reduction was made?
- Were you told the reason why your benefit was being reduced?
 - o If not, why did you think the reduction was made?
(Prompt - because you did not attend an interview at the Jobcentre?)
- Did you contact anyone at Jobcentre Plus about the benefit reduction?
 - o If not, why not?
 - o If so, did anything happen as a result of this contact?
 - o If so, what?

3. Was it explained to you what you would have to do so you could receive your full benefit again?

4. Did anything happen so that your benefit could go back to the original level?

- If yes, what happened?
- If no, is your benefit still at the reduced level?
- How long have you been living/did you live on reduced levels of benefit?
- Has the sanction led you to stop claiming Income Support? (if so probe to find out current situation).

F. Personal Circumstances

1. Housing - Do you:

- Rent from the council
- Rent from a Housing Association
- Rent from a private landlord
- Own your home/have a mortgage
- Other

2. Your family:

- How long have you been a lone-parent?
- How many children do you have?
- How old are they?
- Are you the only adult living in your household?

3. Health Issues

- Generally, do you and others in your household enjoy good health?
- Are there any health issues, affecting you or others in your household, that you feel you are able to tell me about?
- What impact do these have on:
 - o Your day-to-day life?
 - o Your ability to work?
 - o The kind of work that you can do?

4. Age

I am going to read out some age categories to you. Could you tell me which one you belong to you? Are you:

- Under 25
- 25-44
- 45+

5. Ethnicity

I am going to read out some ethnic groups to you. Could you tell which one you feel that you belong to?

- White
- Mixed
- Asian or Asian British
- Black or Black British
- Chinese
- Other (ask for details)

Close interview

Discuss next steps for face to face interview as appropriate

Remind participant that they will receive their voucher

DOUBLE CHECK THEIR ADDRESS SO THAT WE SEND VOUCHER TO CORRECT ADDRESS AND THAT WE HAVE CORRECT DETAILS FOR ANY FACE TO FACE INTERVIEW.

Thank participant for their time.

Appendix F

Topic guide for face to face interviews

Stage Two - Face to Face Interviews with Lone Parents

Introduction

Introduce self/Centre for Public Policy (CPP)

Explain the purpose of the interview:

- The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) wants to learn more about parents' experiences of Jobcentre Plus.
- DWP have asked the CPP at Northumbria University to carry out some research about this issue.
- Following on from the telephone interview, we are here today to undertake a follow up face-to-face interview to ask you some questions about your experiences of living on benefits, employment and your relationship with Job Centre Plus staff.
- We hope that the information you provide will inform policies around parents and benefits.
- CPP is a research organisation completely independent of the DWP and Jobcentre Plus.

Tell participants:

- All information given is confidential.
- No names will be used in any documents.
- They have the right to withdraw from the interview at any point.
- The information we gain from today's interview will be incorporated into a report for the DWP.

- That the interview will be recorded as this is the best way to ensure we have an accurate record of the discussion. Ask if the interviewee has any objections.
- Ask if the interviewee if they have any questions, answering these as necessary (if unable to answer tell the interviewee they can contact Jane Ashby 0191 243 7426).
- Give the interviewee the information sheet.
- Ask the interviewee to read it and sign the consent form if they are happy to do so once they have read the information sheet.
- Collect signed consent form, checking it has been correctly signed and dated.

A. Managing your finances

We'd like to start by asking you some questions about how you manage the money you have coming in. You can either tell us the amount you spend, or the proportion of your income that you spend, on particular things. For example, you could say you spend about £20 on shopping for food each week or that you spend about 20% of your money coming in on shopping for food.

1. How much of your income is spent on:

- Housing costs (rent/mortgage)
- Fuel costs
- On food for yourself
- Clothing for yourself
- Food for your child/children
- Clothing for your child/children

2. What other things do you have to spend money on?

3. What are these things? For example:

- transport
- repaying debts

4. Do you generally have any money left over once you have paid for all things that you have to spend money on?

1. If yes, do you spend this money on other things?

2. If so what?

5. If your benefits were reduced for any reason how would this impact on your spending?

- Would you reduce your spending (if so, in what areas would you reduce your spending?)

6. Do you have any other sources of income that you could rely on in an emergency?

- If so, what are these? (eg help from family or friends, loans – from where?)

7. How long would these sources be able to help you?

- A few days/weeks/months/longer?

8. If you needed financial advice would you know who to ask?

9. Have you used financial advice in the past? (if yes, probe for brief details – why/who/when, was this useful?).

10. Would you use it in the future (why/why not?)

B. Experiences of benefit sanctions

When we talked to you on the telephone about possible reductions in benefit you said that you had been told that were at risk of having benefits reduced/have had your benefits reduced.

1. Can you tell us what happened in terms of the benefit reduction or risk of reduction?

- How did the jobcentre get in touch with you to tell you about it?

2. Did anyone from the jobcentre come to your home to talk to you about the risk of reduction of reduction?

3. If yes, what did that person discuss with you?

4. When the reduction or the risk of reduction happened were there any important changes going on in your in your life? For example:

- Recently moved home
- An illness in the family or a bereavement
- Divorce or relationship breakdown
- Had you or a close relative been a victim of crime?
- Other

5. Did these changes influence how you responded to the Jobcentre asking you to attend an interview?

- If so, how?

6. Did these changes influence your attitudes towards work or your ability to work?

- If so, in what ways?

C. Work related attitudes and behaviour following a risk of a sanction/sanction

This part of the interview asks you about the influence that the risk of a reduction/reduction/to your benefit has had on your attitude to finding work.

1. Before you were at the risk of/experienced/a benefit reduction were you:

- Considering working
- Actively looking for work
- Thinking about training
- Undertaking training
- Thinking about or undertaking any other activities to help you move into work? (if yes, probe for details).

2. Has the risk of/experiencing/a benefit reduction encouraged you to attend future Jobcentre interviews?

- Why/Why not?

3. Since you were at the risk of/experienced/a benefit reduction have you:

- Considering joining the New Deal for Lone Parents?
 - o Why/Why not?
- Joined the New Deal for Lone Parents
 - o Why/Why not?
- Taken part in any activities designed to help you leave benefits?
 - o (if yes, probe for details).
- Found paid work

4. Has the risk of/experience of/a benefit reduction changed how you feel about working or training?

- In what ways?
 - o Has it motivated you to look for work?
 - o Made you feel less like looking for work?
- Why and how has the experience done this?

D. Sanctions and relationship to Jobcentre Plus/Personal Advisers and other staff

1. Has the risk of/experience of/a benefit reduction changed your views about Jobcentre Plus?

- If yes, can you tell me how it has changed your views?

2. Has the risk of/experience of/a benefit reduction had an affect on your relationship with Jobcentre Plus staff such as your Personal Adviser?

- What effect has this had?

E. Effect of living on reduced benefits (for those who have lived/are living with a sanction)

Financial impact

1. What effect did the reduction in your benefit have on your finances?

2. Did the reduction in your benefits cause you to change your spending patterns?

- If so, how did your spending patterns change? (eg what things did you continue to spend money on and what did you stop spending money on?)

3. Was anyone in particular affected by the reduction to your benefits?

- Eg your children?
- How were they affected by the reduction?

4. Were you able to live on the reduced benefits?

5. Were you been able to rely on other sources of income whilst your benefit has been/was reduced?

- What are/were these sources of income?

6. Are/were these sources of income adequate?

7. Would you be able to rely on these sources of income in the future to deal with any future benefit reductions?

Other impacts of a benefit reduction

1. Did the reduction to your benefits have an impact on your health?

- In what ways?
- Were you able to deal with this?
 - o How?

2. Did the reduction to your benefits have an impact on you emotionally?

- Did the reduction have an impact on how you felt in yourself?
 - o In what ways?
- Were you able to deal with this?
 - o How?

3. Did the reduction in your benefits have an impact on your relationships with family members and close friends?

- In what ways?
- Were you able to deal with this?
 - o How?

4. Did the reduction in your benefits have an impact on your social life?

- In what ways?
- Were you able to deal with this?
 - o How?

5. Are there any other ways in which you feel the reduction in your benefits have an effect on your life?

Close interview.

Check consent form has been signed.

Give participants voucher – make sure the receipt is signed.

Thank participant for their involvement.

Appendix G

Topic guide for focus groups

Centre for Public Policy (CPP) facilitators	Jobcentre Plus Office
Date	CPP Ref Number
Summarise any information about the office if available/applicable that is relevant:	

A. Introduction

Introduce self/CPP

Explain the purpose of the focus group:

- We are undertaking a project on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).
- The project explores the impact of benefit sanctions on lone-parents employment decisions.
- We are here today to gain your views on the administration and impact of benefit sanctions on lone-parents.

Tell participants:

- All information given is confidential.
- No names will be used in any documents.
- They have the right to withdraw from the focus group at any point.
- The information we gain from today's focus group will be incorporated into a report for the DWP.
- That the focus group will be recorded as this is the best way to ensure we have an accurate record of the discussion. Ask if anyone has any objections.

- Ask if the participants have any questions.
- Give the interviewee the information sheet.
- Ask participants to read it and sign the consent form if they are happy to do so once they have read the information sheet.
- Collect signed consent forms, checking each has been correctly signed and dated.

1. To begin with, could you briefly tell us about:

- Your job role within Jobcentre Plus and how long you have worked in this role.

B. Communication of Information about sanctions

The first part of the session is designed to explore how lone-parent Income Support (IS) customers are told about their rights, responsibilities and the circumstances in which their benefits can be reduced by the application of a sanction for non-attendance at a Work-Focused Interview (WFI).

1. Could someone in the group give a brief overview of the process that a lone-parent claiming IS goes through to receive the benefit?

2. Are there different types of lone-parent customers claiming IS?

- What are these different customer types?

3. When are customers informed of their rights and responsibilities relating to claiming benefit?

4. In particular, how are lone-parent customers told that their benefits may be reduced, by the application of a sanction, if they do not attend a WFI?

- Who gives the customer this information?
- When is customer told?
 - o That their benefits may be reduced?
 - o That their benefits are going to be reduced?
- Are different types of lone-parent customer told at different stages in their claim that their benefits can be reduced?

6. Are there any issues around communicating this information to lone-parents customers claiming IS?

- What are these issues?
- Are these issues common?

7. Do you think lone-parents understand the information they are given about the possibility of their benefits being reduced, if they fail to fulfil their responsibilities?

8. Generally, do you think lone-parents understanding sanctions?

9. How do lone-parent customers react when they are told about their rights and responsibilities and that reductions can be made to their benefits in certain circumstances?

- Do they accept these circumstances as legitimate?
- If they don't accept these circumstances as legitimate, why is this?

C. Non-attendance

This part of the session focuses on reasons for WFI non-attendance, the reasons that are considered acceptable for non-attendance and those which are not.

1. Does the customer have to provide an acceptable reason for the first time they fail to attend an interview? (note: customer does not have to give 'good cause' if it is their first invitation to interview and they contact Job Centre Plus within five days of being asked to attend).

2. Are you able to gain a reason from those lone-parents who do not attend their WFIs why this is the case?

- If not, why not?
- In what proportion of cases are you unable to gain an explanation for non-attendance?

3. What reasons do lone-parents give for not being able to attend their WFI?

- Are there any reasons that are particularly common?

4. What reasons are considered as justified, by Jobcentre Plus, for non-attendance at a WFI, resulting in rearranging or deferring an interview?

- Is there a standard set of acceptable reasons?
- Is there any guidance available to help advisers make a decision about whether a sanction should be applied? Is this guidance useful?
- Do advisers have any discretion when deciding if a sanction should be applied?
- Are the individual circumstances of the lone-parent considered when decisions about referring to a sanction are made? (probe for examples).

5. What reasons are not considered acceptable for non-attendance at a WFI and thus result in a referral to sanction?

- Does this vary on case by case basis?

6. Do customers who do not attend their interview(s) have characteristics in common?

- What are these?

D. Communication before moving to a sanction

1. How long after an individual WFI was due to start do you wait before starting a Fail to Attend action?

- Do you set the interview to Fail to Attend immediately?
2. When the customer fails to attend, do you ring them?
 - Immediately
 - On the same day
 - Other/varies
 3. Are you generally able to contact FTA customers by phone?
 4. What is the attitude of the customers that you contact by phone regarding their FTA a WFI?
 - Are they happy to re-arrange their WFI or not?
 5. For those customers you are not able to contact by phone, how do you contact them to book new appointment?
 - Which letters are used? Is a different letter used for lone-parent FTA WFIs than for other groups who fail to attend an interview?
 - Is there a time period that customers have in which to reply to this letter?
 - o How long do customers have to reply?
 6. Do customers generally turn up for their re-arranged WFI?
 - Why/Why not

E. Sanctions and role of Jobcentre Plus staff

This part of the focus group is designed to explore how sanctions impact on your role.

1. Do sanctions support the roles of Jobcentre Plus Staff?
 - Which roles do they support?
 - If so, how do they support this role?
2. Do sanctions make the role of Jobcentre Plus Staff more difficult?
 - Which roles do they more difficult?
 - If so, how do they make these roles more difficult?
3. Is there anything about the sanction regime that needs to change to make it easier for staff to fulfil their roles more effectively?
 - In terms of customer service?
 - In terms of staff undertaking the tasks required by Jobcentre Plus?

F. Implementing A Sanction.

The next set of questions ask about how Job Centre Plus staff implement a sanction

on the benefit of a lone-parents who fails to attend a WFI.

1. Which forms are used during when a sanction is applied?
2. How do Benefit Processing Centres respond to requests to apply a sanction?
 - Do they acknowledge a request to apply a sanction?
 - What action, if any, is taken if the Benefit Processing Centres do not respond/do not appear to be applying a sanction?
3. Do you experience any resistance from colleagues, at Benefit Processing Centres, with regard to implementing a sanction?

G. The impact of sanctions

The next set of questions are about your views on the impact of sanctions.

1. Do you think that sanctions alter the attitudes and behaviours of lone-parents?
 - How do they do this? (probe for examples/evidence).
2. Do you think there is evidence of lone-parents showing increased work related activities or movement towards labour market participation as a result of being involved in the sanction process?
3. At what point does the sanctions regime have the most influence on behaviours?
 - At the point a sanction is threatened?
 - Once a sanction has been applied?
 - Do sanctions influence some lone-parents more than others? Why?
4. Is increased work-related activity more apparent after:
 - The threat of a sanction
 - The application of a sanction
 - Both
5. Considering all the issues that have been raised, is there anything else you would like to discuss in relation to the use of benefits sanctions against lone-parents who do not attend an interview with their personal adviser?

H. End Interview

Thank participants for taking part.

Ask if anyone has any questions.

Appendix H

Fields used during framework analysis

Most recent benefit claim

When last in employment

Go to JC regularly (apart from for WFI)

Did you attend last interview (WFI)

Aware of £ risk if not attend?

Aware of which benefits receiving?

Ever told benefit at risk?

Benefits ever been reduced?

HOUSING

LENGTH OF TIME LP (YRS)

NUMBER OF CHILDREN

ONLY ADULT

LP GOOD HEALTH

OTHER'S GOOD HEALTH

AGE GROUPS

ETHNICITY

What is the WFI about:

Getting work

Engaging in study

Benefit Entitlement (if working)

Checking circs haven't changed

Childcare advice (for if working)

Giving 'better off' working calculations

Give details of jobs

Initial interview only (confirming details etc)

To get you off benefits

General advice (inc. debt advice)

Are the interviews useful

Were you given information at the WFI

Have you used it

Should people have to attend the WFI

Do you get payments straight into bank

Do you know the amount you are due each time

Does the amount sometimes change

Do you check the amount is correct

Have you ever thought it might be incorrect

If yes to above, did you contact anyone to check

If reason offered in interview for the changing amount:

Sanction

Payment of social fund loans

Clashes between benefits

CSA related problems

Other (inc. Other debts/DDs going out of acc)

Ordinary alterations in benefits provision

Direct payments (elec & gas)

Just changes - don't know why

Do you think the risk of reduced benefits encourages people to attend interviews

Do you think the risk of reduced benefits encourages people to leave benefits and find work

Those reporting no knowledge of a reduction or risk of reduction

Those Cat C's reporting currently on sanction (or very recently)

Did anyone from the jobcentre come to your home to talk about the risk of reduction or reduction?

When the reduction or risk of reduction happened were there important changes going on in your life?

None

Moved house

Illness of bereavement in family

Divorce or similar

Victim of crime

Just had baby

Other

None given

Before you were at risk of/experienced/ a benefit reduction were you:

Considering working

Actively looking for work

Thinking about training

Undertaking training

Thinking about or doing other activities to get you into work

Since you were at risk of/experienced a benefit reduction have you:

Have you heard of New Deal

Considered New Deal for Lone Parents

Joined New deal for LPs

Taken part in any activities to help you leave benefits

Found paid work

Work/training

Has the risk/experience of benefit reduction changed how you feel about work/
training

Has it motivated you to look for work

Has it made you feel less like looking for work