

Evaluation of the Extension to NDLP Eligibility

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Written by James Holland at the
Department for Work and Pensions
using research undertaken for them by
The Tavistock Institute



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The views in this report are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Work and Pensions or the Tavistock Institute.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) is a voluntary programme aimed at helping lone parents into work, improving their job readiness, and supporting them in employment. In November 2001, eligibility to participate in NDLP was extended to all lone parents not working or working fewer than 16 hours per week. Previously, the programme had been available only to those lone parents claiming Income Support (IS).

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Tavistock Institute to carry out an evaluation of NDLP for the newly eligible customer groups. The overall aims of this evaluation, then, were to ascertain

- How newly eligible NDLP participants differ from those participants claiming IS, and whether there are any issues specific to the new groups
- How well NDLP works for these newly eligible participants.

This report is written by DWP based on findings from the Tavistock Institute's research.

Methodology

In-depth interviews were carried out with 49 lone parents and seven lone parent personal advisers (PAs). The methodology was chosen to provide in-depth information about lone parents' lives and their engagement with NDLP and the labour market. The research was designed to be lone parent led, and included discussions around family circumstances, work experience and aspirations, and experience of NDLP. Researchers based their discussions with respondents around topic guides, but encouraged the lone parents to comment freely on their experiences in order to understand their priorities, concerns and viewpoints, and examine the issues most pertinent to them as lone parents.

Key Findings

Characteristics of the sample

The research found that newly eligible lone parents do not differ a great deal from those claiming Income Support. Most of the lone parents in the sample were female, with an age range of 21 to 51 years. Most of the sample had previously lived with the other parent of their children, and some continued to live with their ex-partners on an intermittent basis.

The lone parents in the sample were particularly well qualified, with only a minority – less than 20 per cent – reporting having no qualifications at all. Lone parents in the sample had a range of vocational and academic qualifications, with 12 of the lone parents in the study qualified to degree level.

Health issues were also particularly prevalent in the sample, both for the lone parents themselves and for their children. Over a fifth of the sample reported that they had a current or past health problem, and a similar proportion said their children did.

Family Situations and Support Networks

There was an overall picture of complexity in these lone parents' lives. Most had come into lone parenthood following separation or divorce, and a small number had suffered recent bereavements.

Respondents reported that they often had to rely on family and friends, and sometimes ex-partners, for practical, emotional and financial support. Parents of lone parents were a major source of support.

Childcare and Work

Most of the lone parents in the sample wanted to work or plan their return to work. However, domestic circumstances took priority. Many of the respondents simply wished to look after their children themselves, and this was paramount above all else, including economic considerations. This was intensified for some by the fact that they did not want to put their children through further upheaval following traumatic separations or bereavements.

Even in cases less extreme than this, lone parents' family and domestic issues came first for the majority. The dilemma of reconciling the conflicting demands of having more money through employment, providing emotional support for children and dealing with the practicalities of running a home was a major issue for lone parents. For many of those with school-aged children, this meant that work which did not fit in with school hours and term times was considered inappropriate.

Those who did use childcare reported a number of issues, including affordability and accessibility. Many stated a preference for using informal care because they did not wish to leave their child with a stranger.

The majority of lone parents wanted to work, in the most part for financial reasons, but also for reasons of personal fulfilment. Some felt guilty about wishing to work, feeling that it was something for themselves rather than their family.

Work was commonly be seen as something to be planned for when family circumstances allowed, and the lone parents in the sample were reluctant to get 'just any job' and often wanted training to allow them to pursue careers.

Engagement with NDLP

Respondents had a number of reasons for participating in NDLP. Many were looking for work and had gone to the Jobcentre to look at vacancies, or were thinking about work and had gone in to find out if they would be better-off. Some had gone to find out about training, and some had gone to discuss benefit issues.

Prior knowledge of the programme itself tended to be low, and most did not know about the programme before they had visited the Jobcentre. Given NDLP's generally positive reception, some lone parents were critical that it was not more widely publicised.

Relationships with Personal Advisers were key to lone parents' positive views of the programme. Although some found their adviser unapproachable, the majority were pleased that they had an adviser who appreciated their situation and dealt with it sensitively.

There was an indication from some respondents that they had not been given a full account of what NDLP can offer, and some felt that their adviser had not gleaned all the relevant information from them. Some also felt that that Jobcentre Plus was not best placed to match them to the higher-level jobs they wanted.

However, all lone parents referred to the work-related aspects of their meetings with advisers, and particularly appreciated the help with benefits, In-Work Benefit Calculations, and assistance with filling in forms. They found the comprehensive package of advice and provision available through NDLP to be reassuring and encouraging.

1 Introduction

In November 2001, eligibility to participate in New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) was extended to all lone parents not working or working fewer than 16 hours per week. Previously, the programme had been available only to those lone parents claiming Income Support (IS).

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Tavistock Institute to carry out an evaluation of NDLP for the newly eligible customer groups. This work builds upon a large body of work already carried out for the Department on NDLP with Income Support recipients (see Evans *et al*, 2002; 2003). The overall aims of this evaluation, then, were to ascertain

- How newly eligible NDLP participants differ from those participants claiming IS, and whether there are any issues specific to the new groups
- How well NDLP works for these newly eligible participants.

The research consisted of face-to-face, in-depth interviews with 49 newly eligible lone parents and seven lone parent Personal Advisers (PAs). These interviews were steered by the interviewers using topic guides but as far as possible were led by the lone parents themselves to ensure that they were able to discuss the issues most pertinent to them.

Key findings from the evaluation were as follows:

- Newly eligible NDLP participants do not differ a great deal from those claiming Income Support
- Overall, NDLP was well received, with Personal Advisers particularly appreciated
- Similar issues and concerns arise for newly eligible participants as for those claiming IS. These include concerns about self-confidence, childcare, financial worries, and employers' perceptions of them as lone parents
- Health issues were commonplace, both amongst the lone parents and their children. Some mentioned that they had not discussed their health issues with their personal adviser, although it was clear that this could have had a bearing on their ability to work
- The lone parents in this sample were particularly well qualified, compared to lone parents on IS, and some of these thought that NDLP was limited in matching them to the sorts of higher level jobs they wished to get
- Advisers do not view the new groups as any different to IS recipients, and had not seen enough newly eligible lone parents to make any specific comments about their particular characteristics, needs and engagement with the programme.

This report will take the following structure:

- Strategic and Policy Context
- Aims and Objectives
- Methodology
- Findings
- Summary

2 Strategic and Policy Context

2.1 New Deal for Lone Parents

New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) is a voluntary programme which is open to all eligible lone parents. It is a part of the Government's Welfare to Work strategy, and contributes to the targets of increasing the proportion of lone parents in paid employment to 70 per cent by 2010, and decreasing the number of children living in poverty by half by 2010, and eradicating it by 2020.

NDLP has the following operational objectives:

- to help and encourage lone parents to improve their prospects and living standards
- to improve the job readiness of lone parents to increase their employment opportunities.

The programme is delivered through a series of caseload interviews. If a lone parent agrees to join NDLP, they will develop a realistic action plan with their New Deal Lone Parent Adviser (NDLPA), detailing steps to be taken to assist the lone parent to find work. NDLPAs will offer a package of advice and support, tailored to meet the needs of each lone parent. This may include:

- advising lone parents on job vacancies
- explaining what benefits are available if the lone parent finds work, and helping to complete claims to these benefits
- drawing up an In-Work Benefit Calculation to illustrate the lone parent's financial circumstances in work
- explaining what incentives are available to lone parents when they start work
- advising on childcare available locally
- arranging training to update skills and payment of the Training Premium when the lone parent starts an approved activity
- drawing up an action plan with the lone parent's agreement, to guide them in the process of finding work
- providing an in-work support service to help lone parents make the transition from benefit into employment.

NDLP was introduced as a prototype in eight areas in July 1997, before being rolled out nationally, to those lone parents claiming Income Support, from April 1998. A large-scale quantitative evaluation (Lessof *et al*, 2002) showed that NDLP has a large positive effect in moving those Income Support recipients who participate in the programme into work, and a large body of research (synthesised in Evans *et al*, 2002; 2003) indicates that NDLP is broadly well received by lone parents, who particularly value the relationships they develop with their Personal Advisers, and the In-Work Benefit Calculations which can be provided at NDLP interviews.

However, participation in the programme, and subsequently its overall impact on the lone parent population as a whole, is low. From April 2001, mandatory Work Focused Interviews (WFIs, formerly known as Personal Adviser meetings) have been introduced to increase participation in NDLP by making lone parents aware of the help

and support available to them at the beginning of their IS claim, and at points throughout the duration of that claim.

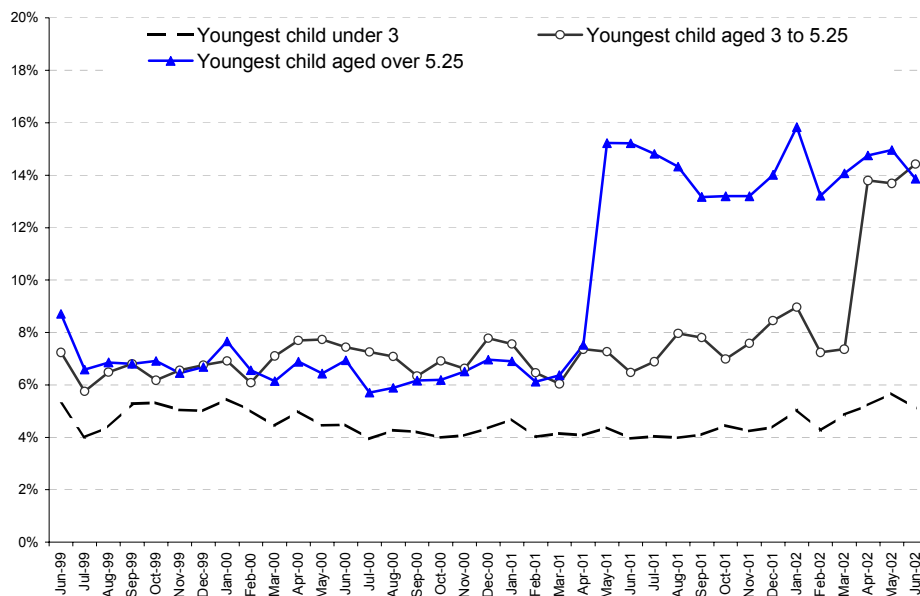
2.2 Work Focused Meetings (formerly PA meetings)

Since April 2001, all lone parents nationally making a new or repeat claim to Income Support (IS) have been required to take part in a mandatory Work Focused Interview. Lone parents who have an existing claim to IS are required to take part in a Work Focused Interview on a rolling programme as follows:

- April 2001 to March 2002: all lone parents with a youngest child aged 13 years or more
- April 2002 to March 2003: all lone parents with a youngest child aged 9 years or more
- April 2003 to March 2004: all lone parents with a youngest child aged over five years and three months
- April 2004: all lone parents who have not yet participated.

These Work Focused Interviews have been successful in increasing the numbers of lone parents claiming IS who participate in NDLP, by approximately 15 per cent since their introduction. Figure 1 clearly shows the jumps in NDLP participation as work focused interviews are rolled out to those with youngest children aged over five and over three years.

Figure 1: Participation in NDLP by New and Repeat Claimants



Source: DWP analysis of NDLP Evaluation Database.

2.3 Extensions to NDLP Eligibility

The Chancellor’s pre-budget report in November 2000 announced an extension to NDLP to make the help and support of NDLP available to a wider group of lone parents on low income who might be able to raise their income and prospects. On 5

November 2001, NDLP was extended to the following groups of lone parents on low income, who were previously ineligible for the programme:

- Lone Parents not in work but in receipt of a State benefit other than Income Support. This includes lone parents on Widowed Mother's Allowance, JSA and those who have lost their job and are in receipt of residual WFTC¹ at a level which renders them ineligible for IS
- Lone parents who are not working and not in receipt of any State benefits. This group includes lone parents who are receiving sufficient maintenance to exclude them from IS or who have other sources of income/capital which means that they do not need to rely on State benefit
- Lone parents who are working less than 16 hours per week but not claiming Income Support.

Essentially then, in November 2001, NDLP became available to all lone parents not working or working fewer than 16 hours per week. This evaluation looks at how NDLP is working for these newly eligible lone parents, and at whether there are any specific issues most pertinent to these new groups.

¹ Note that this was the case at the time of the extension in NDLP eligibility, although Working Families Tax Credit was superseded from April 2003 by Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit.

3 Aims and Objectives

This evaluation builds on a large body of work already carried out on NDLP for lone parents claiming Income Support, and for lone parents claiming IS (before the introduction of Work Focused Interviews), existing evaluation provides evidence on

- Lone parents' perceptions and experiences of NDLP
- Participation rates for different groups of lone parents
- The impact that NDLP has had on lone parents' movement towards labour market participation.

The aims of this project are to discern any differences in experiences of NDLP for the newly eligible groups, compared with other NDLP participants. In particular, it will examine the ways in which the newly eligible groups participate in the programme; the particular characteristics and requirements of the new groups, and how they differ from those participants claiming IS; and the success of the programme for these newly eligible participants.

The specific objectives of the evaluation are to ascertain:

- What are the experiences of the different groups in relation to the extensions to NDLP eligibility (such as, are there different participation rates between client groups, and do the different client groups have different attitudes towards NDLP?)
- What barriers do the new groups face in participating in the programme?
- How can participation be encouraged for these newly eligible groups?
- What are the characteristics and work-histories of these lone parents, and how successfully is Jobcentre Plus engaging with them?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of participation for the newly eligible groups?
- Which aspects of the programme are most helpful for members of the new groups? Which are less helpful?
- How do the new groups respond to NDLP? Do they face different issues or barriers to starting and continuing work?
- What are the labour market and other outcomes of this extended participation in NDLP?

4 Methodology

This project is a small-scale evaluation of the extension to NDLP eligibility. Based on projections made before the extension, only small numbers of newly eligible lone parents were anticipated to participate in the programme. The evaluation was therefore designed in two strands:

- Qualitative research with newly eligible lone parents and NDLP advisers
- Analysis of Management Information (MI).

A number of issues arose during the project which necessitated this approach to be modified. These will be discussed later in this chapter.

4.1 Qualitative Research

Given the relatively low participation rates forecast for newly eligible lone parents, it was decided that a full scale quantitative survey would be difficult to perform and could be expected to yield poor-quality results. A qualitative approach was taken, and it was intended that 160 lone parents would participate in face-to-face, in-depth interviews. The evaluation was designed to focus on three specific groups of newly eligible lone parents:

- Those not in paid work and in receipt of benefits other than Income Support
- Those not in paid work or working fewer than 16 hours per week and not in receipt of any benefit
- Those working fewer than 16 hours per week and in receipt of a benefit other than Income Support.

The sample for the 160 lone parent interviews was split into three ‘clusters’ of 40 interviews each, which were carried out in different areas of the country, plus a ‘mop-up’ of 40 interviews distributed more widely, which was planned because it was clear that with the small numbers of newly eligible lone parents, selecting subgroups of specific lone parents for interview could prove difficult.

The sample was to be taken from LMS (the Labour Market System, a database which records all customers who participate in Jobcentre Plus programmes), matched to Income Support records. This is discussed in more detail below.

A small number of interviews with Lone Parent Personal Advisers was also planned, and these were to take place in offices where management information demonstrated that newly eligible lone parents had participated in NDLP.

The qualitative research methodology was chosen to provide in-depth information about lone parents’ lives and their engagement with NDLP and the labour market. The research was designed to be lone parent led, and included discussions around family circumstances, work experience and aspirations, and experience of NDLP. Researchers based their discussions with respondents around topic guides, but encouraged the lone parents to comment freely on their experiences in order to understand their priorities, concerns and viewpoints, and examine the issues most pertinent to them as lone parents.

Prospective respondents were sent a letter inviting them to take part in the evaluation. They were asked to 'opt-out' of the research by replying if they did not wish to participate. Those who did not write back were contacted by a member of the research team to arrange a convenient time to be interviewed. Interviews lasted on average an hour, and were recorded then transcribed into a reporting frame for analysis.

4.2 Analysis of Management Information

A second strand of the evaluation was planned involving the analysis of Management Information (MI) to complement the qualitative work. This was to allow more quantitative issues to be explored, and was perceived as a viable alternative to a quantitative survey. A quantitative survey was unfeasible given the low expected participation rate for newly eligible lone parents.

The MI analysis was to be based on a revision of LMS which fully discerned the newly eligible participants. This was not available from the outset so the first months of the study, as well as the sample for the qualitative element, had to be based on the existing Primary Benefit Marker. The marker would distinguish between those NDLP participants who claim IS from those who claim certain other benefits, including Incapacity Benefit, Severe Disability Allowance, Invalid Care Allowance, and 'None'. Given that the marker had not been used for analysis before, this was validated by matching the data onto IS records, to ensure that those whose Primary Benefit Marker indicated that they were part of the newly eligible group were not actually claiming IS.

4.3 How the project changed

Since the initial design and specification of the evaluation, a number of changes have been made.

MI Analysis

The analysis of Management Information was reliant on a number of factors. The main analysis was to be based on MI from the latest release of LMS, since this would break down the newly eligible customers fully into their benefit groups. However, it emerged that the new marker was not being used as expected, and far fewer customers showed up in the data than were actually coming through the system. By continuing to match IS records with the Primary Benefit Marker, it was clear that there were more newly eligible NDLP participants than indicated in the new MI. This being the case, the analysis of MI was clearly not going to be robust, because of the numbers not included in the data, and the fact that these gaps were not systematic.

The numbers coming through, as identified by the original matching methods, were also a good deal smaller than had been previously anticipated. This influenced both the MI analysis, and also the numbers of lone parents who could be sampled for the qualitative interview stage.

Qualitative Interview Stage

The in-depth interview stage itself was also curtailed, from a proposed 160 to the 49 already completed. The sample was more difficult to contact than anticipated – perhaps an attribute of the newly eligible group – and it became clear early into the interviewing stage that there were few major differences between this group and

‘traditional’ NDLP participants. Given the low numbers of newly eligible lone parents who were choosing to participate in NDLP, it was considered appropriate to finish the interviews stage to time, rather than extend the fieldwork period to try and recruit more respondents.

The respondents interviewed therefore were as follows:

		Per cent
Age	Under 30	19
	30 – 39	35
	40 or above	44
Gender	Female	90
	Male	10
Ethnicity	White	56
	Black Caribbean	18
	Black African	15
	Asian	0
	Other	4
	Missing/not stated	4
Health condition or disability	Yes	22
	No	78
Care for a child with a health condition or disability	Yes	22
	No	78

(Note- some of these may not add up to 100 due to rounding)

The result of these changes is that this final report is based on 49 interviews with lone parents and seven PAs. These small numbers, and the quality of the sample data, meant that the original three categories of newly eligible lone parents, could not be reliably discerned at the sampling stage. During these interviews, a good deal of in-depth information was gathered, which goes some way towards answering the questions asked in the design of the project. It should be noted though that this is now a fairly small piece of research, and the sample itself is not representative of the newly eligible lone parent population overall.

5 Findings

This research set out to ascertain any differences between those lone parents on NDLP who claim IS, and those who do not. It looks at how newly eligible lone parents engage with NDLP and at whether there are any issues specific to newly eligible lone parents which need to be attended to. Overall, the research shows that:

- Newly eligible NDLP participants do not differ a great deal from those claiming Income Support
- Overall, NDLP was well received, with Personal Advisers particularly appreciated
- Similar issues and concerns arise for newly eligible participants as for those claiming IS. These include concerns about self-confidence, childcare, financial worries, and employers' perceptions of them as lone parents
- Health issues were commonplace, both amongst the lone parents and their children. Some mentioned that they had not discussed their health issues with their personal adviser, although it was clear that this could have had a bearing on their ability to work
- The lone parents in this sample were particularly well qualified, compared to lone parents on IS, and some of these thought that NDLP was limited in matching them to the sorts of higher level jobs they wished to get
- Lone parents' movement towards work was set against a need for economic security and a desire to provide a stable home for their children
- Advisers do not view the new groups as any different to IS recipients, and had not seen enough newly eligible lone parents to make any specific comments about their particular characteristics, needs and engagement with the programme.

5.1 Characteristics of the sample

The lone parents in this sample did not differ a great deal from those lone parents claiming Income Support. The majority were mothers: only five were fathers. Parents' ages ranged from 21 to 51, with more than two fifths over 40 and only a fifth under 30. The length of time they had spent as a lone parent varied between a few months and 16 years.

Ethnicity was taken from information supplied by the Department. This was drawn from LMS which uses the parents' description of their ethnic group and is recorded only with their agreement. In terms of the main ethnic groups, 56 per cent of the lone parents were white, 18 per cent were Black Caribbean and 15 per cent Black African. Two parents were classified as 'other' and there were two missing entries. There were no Asian lone parents in the sample.

There was considerable variation in the composition of the family lives of the lone parents in the sample. Of the five fathers, two were widowers. None of the women was widowed. Recent bereavement of partners and other family members featured in the lives of a number of the lone parents interviewed, with a number of respondents reporting that they were struggling to cope with those bereavements as well as their caring responsibilities.

Only a very small number had never lived with the father of their child(ren), the majority having been divorced or separated from a partner. Among this group was a small number of women whose status was unclear. Some might be described as ‘intermittent’ lone parents, their partners living with them some of the time but not on a regular basis. Others might be termed ‘virtual’ lone parents: they were still married but their partner was living abroad, unable to return to this country so they were effectively living as single parents for an indefinite period of time.

Over a fifth of the lone parents stated that they currently or previously had a mental or physical health problem, and roughly the same proportion stated that at least one of their children suffered from some form of ill health or disability. In four cases ill-health affected both parent and child. In total, 17 families (over a third of the sample) contained at least one member who was experiencing a health problem.

A number of the parents suffered from mental ill-health – depression or agoraphobia, for example – or conditions such as epilepsy which had an impact on their capacity to work. Overall, parents who described their health as not good were unlikely to be in employment. Conversely, illness or disability of their children did not necessarily act as a barrier to their employment. Conditions such as asthma and dyslexia could be managed though others often required complex childcare arrangements.

Four lone parents had children with conditions on the autistic spectrum. One of these (Parent 5) had four daughters, all with similar conditions, of which three were grown up but still to some extent dependent on her.

In all, this group of newly eligible NDLP participants, whilst small and not sampled to be robustly representative, does not appear to differ greatly from those lone parents claiming Income Support identified in previous NDLP evaluations. The lone parents interviewed here are likely to identify problems due to ill health, and the health conditions of their children, are most likely to be female, and are likely to have become a lone parent following separation or divorce.

According to the MI, 37 per cent of these parents were not in receipt of any benefits when they joined NDLP. A further 21 per cent were receiving a benefit other than Income Support and 42 per cent were in receipt of the childcare element of WFTC. Because, at the time of the study, WFTC was assessed only every six months, it could remain a source of income for those no longer in employment until the next assessment took place.

According to information supplied by the lone parents themselves, the majority – 59 per cent – were not employed at the time of their contact with NDLP and had not been so for a considerable length of time. More than a third of these parents (10) had financial support from a former (who was sometimes also a current) partner, or supported themselves with their own capital or through a student loan. Three were receiving benefits other than IS – Incapacity Benefit or Jobseekers Allowance. But a relatively high proportion of the non-working parents (44 per cent) stated that they were in receipt of income support or ‘benefit’ at that time. Five of these had received letters ‘inviting’ them to meet the PA and it would appear that they, at least, entered NDLP through the traditional, IS, route. One possible explanation for this apparent

discrepancy is that these parents had had more than one episode of NDLP involvement, the first of which was as an IS claimant. They had then moved into employment and returned to NDLP through the extension to eligibility. However, in reporting the involvement with NDLP to the researcher the two episodes had become conflated. Another explanation is that parents may have made a claim for IS, joined NDLP, had their claim rejected but continued on NDLP.

Of the remainder of the sample nearly a third of the parents had just left employment: the majority had been made redundant, or lost their job for some other reason, and a handful had given up work voluntarily. A small number (4) were still in employment. This group of parents had gone voluntarily to the Jobcentre predominantly to look for employment or alternative employment and, in occasional cases, to make enquiries about benefit. They had then been referred to an adviser. Only two parents had gone specifically to see a PA because they had prior information about the programme.

5.2 Family Situations and Support Networks

There was an overall picture of complexity in these lone parents' lives. As the previous section shows most of the respondents had come into lone parenthood following separation or divorce, and a small number had suffered recent bereavements. Added to this, many were coping with health issues, problems with debt and issues to do with confidence and anxiety, and some were looking after children who suffered ill health or behavioural problems.

Respondents reported that they often had to rely on family and friends, and sometimes ex-partners, for practical, emotional and financial support. A major source of support was parents. Their practical input covered childcare and financial help with items such as clothing and 'extras' for the children. Interestingly, parental support did not appear to feature in the lives of the fathers in the sample but for many mothers parents provided a financial lifeline.

One mother with a three year-old child was living with her parents while work was carried out to her home. She stated she would not know how to cope without the support of her parents,

I'm 42 and rely quite heavily on my parents. They are very good and will buy my daughter shoes and clothes. I don't think I could manage without them.

Another who had been a lone parent for most of her daughters' lives stated,

I do worry about when the kids get older, about how to provide for them financially when they start wanting things. But I would worry a lot more if I didn't have my parents' support. But I do feel guilty sometimes about having to rely on them

(Parent 40).

A third was very dependent on her sister, who provided both emotional and financial support,

Without her I don't think I could do things the way they have been done. I'm really grateful to her

(Parent 20).

One had the advantage of having additional help from her partner who was an intermittent presence in the family, and considered herself very fortunate:

I am quite lucky, I mean I've got my partner when he's around and the family to support me both financially and looking after the kids and picking them up from school and stuff if I'm at work.

(Parent 3)

Other mothers (but none of the fathers in the sample) relied on other parents in the same position as themselves. They were a source of moral support and a means of effecting informal and reciprocal arrangements whereby both parents took part-time employment and the children were cared for by the parent who was not working.

In all, these findings reflect those from other evaluations (Dawson *et al*, 2000). They show that like NDLP participants who claim IS, newly eligible lone parents' situations are highly diverse. Many lone parents are able to draw on support networks which make them better able to cope with their complex situations. These newly eligible lone parents' lives involve a number of factors in addition to the care of their children and direct support for movement towards the labour market.

5.3 Childcare and Work

The lone parents interviewed expressed a number of particular attitudes in relation to work and childcare. Many of these were not distinct from the views shared by lone parents generally. Although this section is split in two parts, these necessarily have significant overlap given the bearing of each on the other.

Childcare

The lone parents in this sample had children aged between six weeks and 16 years. Like lone parents in general, they expressed a number of views and concerns about the care of their children and the effects of this on their attitudes towards work. While most of the lone parents in the sample did want to work or begin to plan their return to work, their domestic circumstances often took priority. There was evidence that parents wanted to phase their (re)entry in to the labour market.

Many of the lone parents interviewed simply wanted to look after their children themselves, and this was paramount above all else, including economic considerations. Not working was a conscious decision based on their views on the role of parents. As one father stated,

When the children are young I think the best place for parents is in the home.

(Parent 41)

This was intensified for some by the fact that they did not wish to put their children through any more upheaval given that they had already experienced a great deal during the breakdown and break up of their parents' relationship, or following a bereavement.

The priority afforded by parents to the well-being of their children can obscure all other issues. A typical example in this sample was of a recently bereaved man whose child was experiencing extreme difficulty in dealing with the death of his mother. The interviewer noted that the father's concern for the child was 'overwhelming him' and

that, coupled with his own grief, was a major obstacle to talking about jobs, money or benefits.

Even in cases not as extreme as this, it was clear that family and domestic issues took pride of place for the majority of lone parents. It was the dilemma of reconciling the conflicting demands of having more money through employment, providing emotional support for the children and dealing with the practicalities of running the home that was a major issue for lone parents.

For those with children of school age, this meant that work which did not fit in with school hours and term times was considered inappropriate. Some lone parents did not wish to work at all because they wanted to be at home in case they needed to pick up their children from school. One respondent had a child with behavioural problems who was often sent home from school, and because of this, could not sustain paid work:

I couldn't cope in the end ... I kept having to go up to the school ... (child) gets difficult and they just send her home ... it always happens ... I have to be there for her all the time really.

(Parent 2)

Those who did use childcare reported a number of preferences and concerns for the type of care they used.

Affordability was a key issue for the lone parents interviewed. One parent pointed out that the typical hourly rate of pay for a childminder exceeded her own hourly rate of pay. Another referred to the 'nightmare' of finding affordable childcare for three children (Parent 41). Informal childcare is cheaper than and may be preferential to formal childcare because it often involves grandparents and friends. Whilst parents may be better off using registered childcare, with which they receive financial assistance through WFTC, this may not be their preferred option and may cause further anxieties. As one respondent pointed out,

WFTC will pay towards the cost of a childminder, but she has to be registered and I didn't want to leave them [children] with a stranger after all the upheaval.

(Parent 38)

Some parents preferred their pre-school children to attend nurseries which had an educational component, but their cost, even with subsidies, was considered high. One lone mother described how her daughter attended a nursery one day a week for which the childcare element of WFTC paid one third of the costs. Despite the satisfaction of both mother and child with the nursery, the child's grandmother assumed childcare for the rest of the week because the nursery would be too expensive.

Childcare is often associated with the care of children under school age but the lone parents in this sample pointed to the fact that care of older children after school and during holiday periods is a crucial issue and often more difficult to cover than that provided on a regular basis for younger children. In some cases this had led to parents refusing to take jobs which did not have flexible working conditions or required unsocial shift work.

One mother described the after-school club which her children attended as ‘*very, very good*’ and another had solved the problem by working at the after-school club her children attended, but these were exceptional cases, with many respondent reporting difficulties in finding suitable childcare provision.

There just aren't enough childminders out there who come recommended, provide quality care and are affordable, you really have to fight for them. I mean it's not just during the normal working day which actually isn't an issue because she's at school, but whether or not they can provide morning care, so you can get to work on time and after school care, school finishes at 3.30, I finish work at 4 o'clock and so on. It really isn't easy and it does irritate me that this isn't recognised.

(Parent 29)

Another mother foresaw the problems arising when her child became three and began attending nursery school on a half-time basis.

Who will pick her up from nursery? I don't know, it will be difficult. I will either have to find another job or employ a childminder who will pick her up and keep her at her house until I finish work. I don't know how I'm going to work around it.

(Parent 42)

Most problematic is care for children with special needs. This was explained by one parent:

The really significant problem was that there are no child care facilities for children with special needs. Basically in [locality] once kids are over the age of eleven then childcare stops, there are some after school activities provided by the schools, but the secondary schools don't actually provide a care service for before or after school when parents are at work. I had to beg for a service that wasn't out there. I managed to get a place for [child] at (after-school club), but that didn't really work out because all the other children were so much younger than [child]. I mean even though he's got learning needs he was aware that he was different from them - bigger and older. The special needs schools only provide clubs two days a week for after school, so there was a real lack of choices and services.

(Parent 27)

In one case this involved an older sibling having to take responsibility but in another, where more than one child in the family had special needs, it was a major factor in the mother's decision to discontinue her attempts to enter the labour market.

Work

As the previous section showed, caring responsibilities play a large part in lone parents' attitudes about work. Nevertheless, virtually all the lone parents in this sample wished to work, and all had experience of working in the past, many fairly recently. Lone parents were reluctant to get ‘just any job’ and often wanted training to allow them to pursue career jobs. Whilst nearly all the lone parents in the sample wanted to work, and motivation seemed high, work was not necessarily a priority but something to be planned for, when family circumstances allowed.

Four respondents had moved into work by the time of the interview. In contrast to the low levels of qualifications reported for lone parents on IS (Lessof et al, 2001), only a minority of the lone parents in this sample (16 per cent) reported that they had no qualifications at all. Qualifications reported included those gained in vocational courses (tourism, catering, secretarial and office skills and computing), mainstream educational (including O Levels, GCSEs, and A levels and equivalents). A substantial minority (12 respondents) had a degree and a further three were studying towards one.

Despite many of the respondents' desires to work, some felt guilty about wishing to do so. They felt that work was 'something for themselves'. One lone parent, for example, commented that staying at home looking after the children made her feel 'brain dead', her only relief coming from 'mixing with other brain-dead women in the same rut' (Parent 9).

The other major reason for wanting to return to work was financial. Some lone parents were worried because their ex-partner's maintenance payments were about to cease. That said, work was not always seen as a good move economically, and there were concerns expressed about low wages, insecure and low-level jobs, and employer attitudes towards caring responsibilities. Lone parents' decisions in entering or returning to the labour market were often predicated on the prime importance of economic security, and the decision to move into low level and precarious jobs is set against the security of benefit.

Given the issues already identified regarding childcare, many respondents saw part-time and flexible work as their preferred option in the short term, although they often aspired to working full time at some point in the future. Despite being highly qualified, some had trouble finding work which fitted in with their childcare responsibilities:

Finding a job which offers flexi-time, vital if you're the sole carer for the children

(Parent 33, qualified architect)

This respondent highlighted the difficulty in finding a childminder who could offer longer hours than average. The nature of her work required some meetings which would extend into the early evening and which she would consider unprofessional to leave early.

Aside from the stances towards and problems associated with childcare, a number of other issues were reported which were seen as preventing or hindering lone parents' movement into work.

Respondents sometimes feared that employers themselves would be biased against them as parents of young children:

I tried from when she was tiny to get back into work, but employers are very biased about taking on someone who has a small child, regardless of whether they realise you are a single parent

(Parent 29)

Interestingly, this respondent envisaged the general parental responsibility – as opposed to lone parenthood specifically – as an issue for employers.

Many respondents identified issues associated with anxiety and lack of confidence.

One mother commented succinctly that, 'Just going back to work was scary' (Parent 38). Another, representing the feelings of a number of other respondents noted, 'I felt useless, helpless, had no self-esteem' (Parent 34).

A major factor in this for some was lack of employment for many years which left parents out of touch with recent developments, especially in the technology field. As one explained,

When you have been out of work for some time, there are new skills and technologies to be learnt, you think, 'Where do you begin? How do you start?' (Parent 19).

Another parent recognised that some of this was attributable to her own state of mind, commenting,

What's standing in my way? Me, I guess! I think that if you put your mind to something you can get it. Fear of the unknown, I suppose. (Parent 31).

A fifth of lone parents in the sample were experiencing health problems or had done so in the past. These ranged from mental and emotional issues such as depression and agoraphobia to physical complaints such as epilepsy and asthma. Some considered that these conditions limited their capacity to work, to varying degrees. One respondent, for example, said,

I get panic attacks. I'm not completely agoraphobic. I'm all right in my own area ... but I won't go near a bus or the tube. I'm having some sessions with the doctor. (Parent 17)

5.4 Engagement with NDLP

Reasons for Participation

Participants had joined NDLP for a number of reasons. Many were looking for work and had gone to the Jobcentre to look at vacancies.

I learnt about NDLP because I went in there and looked at the job notice board and found a vacancy... somebody directed me to NDLP. (Parent 3)

I went in and asked what I had to do if I was thinking about taking a job and they said I needed to see the lone parent adviser... I didn't know there was one. (Parent 35)

Some were also looking for information about the possibilities of working, and were not necessarily sure of the cost-benefits of doing so, or if work was a realistic option for them.

I thought I might be able to find a suitable job or get back to college and find out about childcare ... Once you have trained to do something you feel a lot more confident. (Parent 37)

A few lone parents went because they were specifically interested in training and saw this as their next step towards employment:

I was desperate one day, so I went along [to the Jobcentre] and asked if there was anybody who could help me [find training in computing] ... I was directed to NDLP.

(Parent 27)

Several people were seeking clarification of their benefit situation because of losing a job, or being made redundant. Some had previously been on NDLP, had got work but then had not been able to manage their care responsibilities: they had had to give up work and return to NDLP.

It was all very fast ... we had no idea ... the organisation I was working for went bust ... the bailiffs came in and cleared the place out within the day.

(Parent 29)

Use and Perceptions of the Programme

Prior knowledge of NDLP itself was low amongst this group: most had participated after having visited the Jobcentre to look for work or help with benefits. Respondents' perceptions of the programme were mixed, but on the whole positive. Given their positive experiences of the programme, many referred to the lack of information about services like NDLP and were critical that more people did not know about it.

The relationships with Personal Advisers were key in lone parents' positive views:

I cannot praise [PA] enough - she didn't make me feel stupid because I couldn't fill in the forms. Just going back to work was scary - she understood this.

(Parent 38)

I had a really lovely lady.

(Parent 1)

The PA was brilliant!

(Parent 26)

There were some who found their adviser unapproachable or difficult in some way:

He didn't listen - it was more like he was going through a script rather than listening to me and trying to understand my situation.

(Parent 29)

The [PA] was quite diffident.

(Parent 21)

But on the whole, the respondents were pleased that someone who appreciated their situation and dealt with it sensitively was available to support them:

She didn't make me feel like a sad old lone parent and in the early stages of lone parenthood you really care about what people think about you - so that was really nice.

(Parent 37)

For some, the issues about confidence affected not only their attitudes towards going back to work, but also attending NDLP interviews:

I found it quite frightening because I'd never been there [Jobcentre] before - it was really daunting and scary because I didn't know what would happen.
(Parent 39)

Respondents commented favourably that PAs were to be honest about the extent to which they could help, and about the positive aspects of work.

She appreciated I couldn't just do any job.
(Parent 40)

The [PA] was very honest [about limitations of work available] she listened and was frank which I really liked.
(Parent 27)

Better than being on JSA who don't treat you as a person. The PA listens to you and you can talk to her. She understands that people are different and have different needs.
(Parent 12)

There was an indication from some respondents that they had not been given a full account of what NDLP could offer, and some felt that PAs had not gleaned all the relevant information from them. This could be because the lone parents themselves did not see particular issues as relevant to their participation in NDLP, or did not wish to talk about them with their PA; or that PAs did not 'probe' deeply enough.

The question arises about how far PAs expect to assess job readiness of lone parents. In many ways it appears that the expectation or assumption is that if people are willing to work they are, also, job-ready. It is fair to ask how far PAs should probe these matters, and how they might actually do so. But the indications are that these issues can significantly affect people's ability to work and they might be helped more effectively if the information was shared.

All lone parents referred to the work related aspects of their meetings with advisers. Most had had the opportunity to discuss their work history and ideas about working. It was clear that most advisers offered a search through the vacancies listed on LMS and contacted employers for interviews whenever possible. Several people said that they were sent weekly lists of jobs which the adviser thought could be suitable and this was appreciated. However, across the sample, lone parents mentioned the limitations in the system, in terms of job-matching and access to higher-skilled and paid jobs, and this could represent a particular issue for the newly eligible group relative to IS recipients. Some lone parents also noted that they would have liked more help with finding or accessing training opportunities.

The following remarks highlight a number of specific views held by the some of the lone parents interviewed: that Jobcentre Plus is not able to place them into higher level jobs; that although some are willing to take on lower level jobs, employers will not employ them because they are over-qualified; and finally, perhaps, some antipathy towards Jobcentre Plus and its ability in placing them into jobs.

I don't think it's very likely I will get that sort of job [better paid] through the Jobcentre - they have low paid jobs.

(Parent 32)

I have to say, I didn't get any help at all with jobs. They just didn't understand. The way it was put was 'just do anything', but I didn't want that after three years at college. I was telling them where to look for suitable jobs!

(Parent 34)

I fell into the 'over-qualified' trap - its difficult convincing people [employers] that you really mean you want this type of work.

(Parent 41)

I felt I was too highly qualified.

(Parent 34)

I've got a thing with Jobcentres. I just wouldn't go there actually to find a job

(Parent 6)

As well as the general satisfaction with PAs, lone parents appreciated the advice, clarification and help they received about benefits and financial matters. A number of lone parents had expressed concerns about the complexity of the benefits system, and several had reported significant difficulties because of delays when switching between benefits. Nearly all respondents here were highly positive about this part of their contact with NDLP and their comments here were the most animated.

Several particular issues emerged as most important:

- Understanding what they might be entitled to if/when in work and ensuring they were currently getting all they were entitled to. This was a really useful opportunity to 'rehearse' their way through what might happen if they took employment:

The PA said, 'I'll work all that out for you' and went through the things I was entitled to and could apply for.

(Parent 27)

- Running an In Work Benefit Calculation and generally assessing financial options. A specific aspect of this was going through a financial check:

She did an in-work calculation and I couldn't believe how much better off I'd be. That was very helpful, it was instrumental in me taking the full-time job.

(Parent 35)

What was also appreciated was when PAs were honest when the calculation showed that someone would be worse off or only marginally better off. One person commented that she thought the PA's attitude had been 'a bit odd' (Parent 2) because she had not advocated a return to work.

- Help with filling in forms was key for many. Even a lone parent who was a civil servant admitted to difficulties coping with the multi-page form:

Fantastic help with the forms because it is a nightmare moving from IS to family tax credit.

(Parent 30)

- Assisting with the transition into work. The fast tracking of WFTC was cited as most valuable:

They were very helpful with WFTC - I hadn't realised it was hard cash ... and they have a fast-track system - an enormous difference - it meant I could work part-time and be as well off as full-time.

(Parent 41)

Overall, what was most appreciated was having someone to explain the benefits and to check through all the financial aspects. The reassurance of someone going through entitlements and costs - like rent, housing benefit, costs of transport, childcare - and helping with the forms was invaluable. For nearly all the lone parents interviewed, this package of comprehensive advice, detailed knowledge of the benefit system, careful calculations and accurate form-filling was the most reassuring and encouraging part of NDLP. What NDLP can deliver for lone parents is a sense of security based in an individualised and reasonably accurate forecast of the cost-benefits of working.

The advisers interviewed did not see the extension of eligibility to NDLP as a major issue. They saw it as a sensible change and some commented that they had unofficially been helping many of this group previously anyway. Given that throughflow of newly eligible lone parents was low, they did not have a great deal of information to give on the new customer groups and their engagement with NDLP. They did not make any distinction in their working practices between IS recipients and newly eligible clients, since all NDLP participants would be treated on an individual, case-by-case basis.

6 Summary

The research on which this report is based was curtailed after 49 interviews with lone parents. The result of that is that some of the sub-categories of newly eligible clients have not been identifiable, and some of the original research questions cannot be answered.

Nevertheless, this report has shown that newly eligible lone parents engage with NDLP in a broadly similar way to IS recipients. Lone parents appreciated particularly the relationships they build up with their Personal Advisers, and the help with working out benefits and the merits of moving into work. The advisers interviewed did not view the new groups as any different to IS recipients, although they had not dealt with large numbers so were unable to offer strong opinions.

Given the voluntary nature of the programme, motivation to return to the labour market was high – perhaps particularly so. Amongst the key differences between this group and those on IS was the high level of academic and vocational qualifications. A high proportion of these newly eligible lone parents had GCSEs and A Levels (and equivalents), and many also had degrees. One area where they thought that NDLP was not catering particularly well for the more highly qualified respondents was in matching them to suitably high-level jobs.

The priority which lone parents afford to caring, self fulfilment and economic and domestic stability need to be understood as key factors in their decisions to (re)enter the labour market. Like lone parents on IS, childcare was paramount for the lone parents interviewed. Many relied on family and friends for support in this, and many felt that part time or flexible working was the solution to negotiating their caring responsibilities with their desires to work. Childcare was seen as a particular problem for those lone parents whose children had health or behavioural problems. Some felt guilty about wishing to work, as it was seen by some as a personal aspiration which was somewhat at odds with their views about the role of parents.

As well as childcare, similar issues and concerns were reported by respondents as have been identified by IS recipients. A number of lone parents reported issues associated with self-confidence, and health issues – for the lone parents and their children – were commonplace. Some lone parents had not brought up their health issues with their personal adviser, although it was clear that they could have a bearing on their ability to work. Some issues were therefore raised about the extent to which Personal Advisers should probe for this information.

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8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix A: Lone Parent Interview Topic Guide

Overall, the interview should obtain information and views which focus on the following objectives of the evaluation:

- to identify the key characteristics of the new client groups
- to understand their experience of NDLP
- to assess the effectiveness of the service for the new groups
- to make some comparisons with 'traditional' NDLP clients

The aim is initiate a discussion with the client. This guide is intended as a check to ensure coverage of key points: it is not a questionnaire.

Topic Areas

A. Check participation in NDLP (this should have been sorted when arranging the interview)

Contact with Jobcentre - when - which benefit (if any)?
How learnt about NDLP - any previous experience?

B. Family life / child care responsibilities

Current circumstances - how long a lone parent?
Ages of children - any special concerns about them?
Childcare issues?
Personal situation - including any health issues, sources of support (eg, family/informal), responsibilities within the family
General sense of security - any recent changes?
Financial circumstances - maintenance - any concerns?
Plans for - concerns about - the future

C. Work history

Experience - interests - qualifications?
Last employment - what? - when?
General level of confidence - aspirations - what type of work?
Any plans - thoughts about preparation - eg training?
Difficulties about working?
Specific barriers?

D. Commentary on NDLP process

Why contacted NDLP - who seen - accessibility?
Comments about the process - the way greeted and treated - waiting?
Thoughts about PA and what they actually did - eg:

- good at listening - understanding?
- looking at barriers to working - eg. caring responsibilities?
- making links with other agencies - Benefits Agency - CSA - Vol sector - SSD etc?
- job search - vacancies - links with employers?

- benefit or other financial issues - in-work benefit calculation?
- any follow up by PA?

E. Outcomes of joining NDLP

What happened - what contacts - activities - training, etc?

What happens next?

Supports and services - eg child care?

Work? If so, in line with aspirations?

If working - does NDLP help with staying in work?

Outcome of any contacts, appointments made, etc?

Any difficulties arising from joining NDLP?

F. Overall views on the service (triangulates with 4 & 5)

Relationship with PA?

What was/is helpful?

What was/is not helpful?

Potential? What would be more useful?

Any previous experience of ND? Comparisons?

G. Financial considerations (triangulates with 1& 2)

Thoughts about current financial situation - adequate - secure?

Preferences and hopes for the future

If on benefit before - which - how long?

H. Local issues and employment

Local issues of relevance - economic - political - educational - social?

Knowledge of local employers and employment - what is available?

Knowledge of local services and supports for employment

I. ‘Sweeper’ questions

Anything else which is important?

What are the main concerns at the moment?

Any further comments on access to employment for lone parents?

8.2 Appendix B: PA Interview Topic Guide

Focus of interviews:

To obtain information, views and commentaries from frontline staff about:

- The process and outcomes of the extended service
- The clients who come into the extended eligibility categories

Sample:

PAs from each of the main sample areas.

Select those who have worked in NDLP for two years or more - ie are able to make some comparison between ‘traditional’ lone parents and the new eligibility clients

Style of the interviews:

As with clients, we aim to have a discussion-based interview with staff - guided by the topic areas set out below.

Topic Areas

A. Experience and General Views of NDLP

Length time in job and relevant previous experience
 Their understanding of the purposes of NDLP
 Achievements and issues - for clients
 Job satisfaction and issues - for staff

B. Any Local Issues

Any points of relevance about eg, features of local labour market, availability of services.

C. Introduction of Extended Eligibility

How was the eligibility extension explained: purposes and objectives
 How did it come into effect in practice: eg managing the flow, transition issues, identifying the new clients
 Particular start-up issues for staff? eg, training, new benefits, handling new data, new requirements, effects on work loads?

D. Operation of the Extension

How is it working? Numbers of clients? Patterns of contact with PA.
 Characteristics of the 'new' clients - who are they? - what are their needs?
 Differences between the different routes into the extension?
 Issues for clients? eg expectations, willingness to join

 Issues for staff? eg expectations, targets, changes to working practices? Contact with other agencies? Benefit related? Resources available?
 Issues for management? Logistic? Data handling? Staff deployment?

E. Outcomes for Clients

Time scales - how quickly do clients move into or towards work?
 Work placements
 Personal preparation for work
 Training and skill development
 Childcare and social issues
 Number of 'returners' - their characteristics

F. Personal Views on the Extensions

Own views on the purposes of extended eligibility
 What is working well in terms of process and outcomes
 What is causing problems generally
 Any specific issues for you

G. Any other comments?

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