

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 319

Work Focused Interviews and lone parent initiatives: further analysis of policies and pilots

Andrew Thomas and Dr Gerwyn Jones

A report of research carried out by Insite Research and Consulting on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ADF	Adviser Discretion Fund
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
IS	Income Support
IWEF	In Work Emergency Fund
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
WFIs	Work Focused Interviews

Summary

Introduction

Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) for lone parents are designed to contribute towards the achievement of the national strategy target of having 70 per cent of all lone parents in work by 2010. The premise behind WFIs for lone parents claiming Income Support (IS) is that the majority of them will be better off in paid employment than on benefit and will have greater disposable household income as a result. This in turn will contribute to other strategic goals, notably the reduction of the number of children living in poverty.

The main aims of the mandatory lone parent WFI initiative are: to move lone parents on benefits closer to the labour market; to increase the numbers entering New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP); to reduce the numbers of lone parents on IS; and to increase the numbers of lone parents in work.

This report follows up the longitudinal evaluation of WFIs for lone parents that was carried out during 2002 and 2003 and presents findings on recent delivery changes and also on four new policy measures. These include two measures that have been introduced nationally across all Jobcentre Plus districts, namely the Mandatory Action Plans and Childcare Assist measures and also two new measures that have been introduced in the six 'Work Works' pilot areas, namely the NVQ level 3 training provision and the In Work Emergency Fund (IWEF).

Key findings and updates on WFI delivery

- Advisers appeared generally satisfied and comfortable with how the mandatory WFI programme for lone parents was running. They remained confident about working with this customer group and were on the whole, positive regarding the overall support package and incentives they were able to offer lone parents interested in progressing on to the NDLP programme and into employment.

- A key area of the lone parent WFI programme that was perceived to be working less effectively were the annual review meetings, and in particular the 24 and 36 monthly review meetings. Advisers felt they were faced with a residual hardcore of lone parents at these meetings that remained difficult to mobilise under the current 12-monthly review process. Despite these concerns, a number of advisers remained optimistic that policy changes (namely quarterly review meetings), for some lone parents with older children, would have some positive impact on this group of lone parents.
- Operational procedures appeared to have been tightened up across the board and there seemed to be more uniformity in general WFI delivery and processes. Two key areas where this had occurred were in relation to telephone interviews and home visits. Evidence from across all four districts suggested that these had either stopped altogether or were now only taking place in very exceptional circumstances, where lone parents were faced with serious health or caring issues. Management structures had also become more uniform with all the lone parent teams now being managed at the local Jobcentre Plus office level (as opposed to district lone parent teams). Although there had been some teething problems and initial resistance to this management change, advisers by now had generally accepted these changes and had adapted to the new management structures. Most of the initial problems they had encountered were said to have been gradually ironed out. As the mandatory WFI interview regime had become bedded and positive word-of-mouth had spread amongst the lone parent customer group, fail-to-attend rates were said to have been gradually dropping over time in most areas.
- Advisers were of the general perception that Jobcentre Plus budgets had been reduced over the past twelve months and that this had detrimentally impacted on two key areas of provision. A number of advisers felt that the reduction in maximum amount payable via the Advisor Discretion Fund (ADF) had undermined their ability to 'sell' the NDLP programme and that the reduction of the maximum limit to £100 had limited the amount of assistance they were able to provide lone parents to ease their transition back into work. Advisers in two Jobcentre Plus districts were also of the view that an increasing amount of their business cases for training courses had been turned down over the past twelve months. Again advisers indicated that this was undermining their ability to offer a full NDLP service to their customer group.

- The development of more non traditional delivery methods, such as group information sessions and the use of outreach venues were two key areas where Jobcentre Plus offices across all four case study districts had been attempting to innovate and improve their performance. In areas where these had become firmly established, advisers felt strongly they had improved access to Jobcentre Plus services. In outreach venues where WFIs had been delivered, fail-to-attend rates were said to be lower than at Jobcentre Plus offices and advisers reported that they achieved good NDLP and job outcomes. Lone parents were said to prefer the more relaxed and friendly environment of these venues, which often had good childcare or crèche facilities and they appeared to prefer the familiarity that these centres offered, which were often located within their local neighbourhoods.

Key findings on the new WFI measures

- The introduction of Mandatory Action Plans had been initially met with some mixed responses from advisers and there was evidence to suggest that not all advisers were currently completing these as fully as they should, particularly during initial meetings with new/repeat customers. Nevertheless, management teams stated that they had been, or were in the process of, addressing such problems. Despite these issues, Mandatory Action Plans do appear to have met a key objective of maintaining progression between meetings and enabling advisers to build on any previous WFIs. The vast majority of advisers had found this aspect of Mandatory Action Plans useful, particularly during mandatory WFI review meetings.
- Advisers stated that Mandatory Action Plans enabled them to make better assessments of how far lone parents might have progressed (or not progressed) since their previous meetings and commented that the amount of information stored on action plans enabled them to familiarise themselves with customers prior to a review meeting. Action plans thus helped advisers to build better relationships with their customers as lone parents were said to respond more positively if they felt an adviser had remembered them. Consequently, advisers indicated that this had helped to improve the quality of their review meetings.
- It appears to be too early to fully assess whether the Childcare Assist measure has contributed positively to the delivery of WFIs and to NDLP more specifically, although early indications suggest that it may not be meeting typical lone parents' needs. Very low take-up was reported and advisers suggested that this measure might prove more beneficial and popular if it covered childcare costs during a lone parent's first week back in work, rather than the week prior to them commencing work. With many childcare providers asking for up-front payments of childcare costs, advisers felt that assistance with these payments, rather than for the week prior to commencing work, was a more pressing need amongst their customers.

- When it had been accessed, the IWEF fund had played a crucial role in sustaining lone parents in work. However, a number of uncertainties and a lack of clarity remained around when and how the fund could be advertised and used. Several advisers also felt its criteria needed to be broadened and made more flexible to address the more multi-faceted problems that lone parents faced in the early weeks after returning to work.
- Advisers stated there was a clear customer demand for NVQ level 3 training courses and immediate vacancies were said to exist for lone parents qualified to NVQ level 3 in childcare. There was strong evidence demonstrating that some lone parents had been securing permanent employment contracts while they were still undertaking their courses. However, the two evaluated 'Work Works' areas had struggled to set up NVQ level 3 provision and only a small number of providers were currently offering this training. Subsequently there were very limited numbers of training places available to lone parents, despite the evident demand. Nevertheless, very positive job outcomes were reported to have been achieved amongst lone parents that had undertaken these training courses. A small number of these had included stock lone parents that had come to hear of the provision during their annual review meetings.

1 Introduction

1.1 Policy context

Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) for lone parents are designed to contribute towards the achievement of the national strategy target of having 70 per cent of all lone parents in work by 2010. This, in turn, will contribute to other strategic goals, notably the reduction of the number of children living in poverty. The premise behind WFIs for lone parents claiming Income Support (IS) is that the majority of them will be better off in paid employment than on benefit and will have greater disposable household income as a result.

Mandatory WFIs for lone parents were introduced in April 2001 for all lone parents making new or repeat claims for IS and whose youngest child was aged at least five years and three months. The adviser meetings were to take place prior to a claim being processed. From April 2002, mandatory WFIs for new and repeat customers were extended to include new lone parent customers whose youngest child was aged between three years and five years three months. This was extended further from April 2003 to also include those with a youngest child aged between 0 and three years.

For new and repeat lone parent IS customers there is a mandatory review meeting after six months, after 12 months, and annually thereafter.

From April 2001, lone parents already in receipt of IS ('stock' cases) were also invited to attend mandatory WFI meetings on a phased basis. Two criteria were initially used to determine which customers were invited:

- the age of their youngest child;
- the length of their claim (those with longer claims being called first within each age group).

In 2001-2002, the policy was extended to include stock customers whose youngest child was aged from 13 to 15 years. On the same basis, in 2002-2003, stock customers with a youngest child aged between nine and 12 years were included, in

2003-2004, this was extended to those with a youngest child aged from five to eight years and from April 2004 it was extended to those stock customers with a youngest child aged between 0 and five years.

These 'stock' IS customers, who remain on benefit, are required to attend a mandatory WFI review meeting with an adviser twelve months after their initial meeting, and annually thereafter. Since September 2004, in Extended Schools Childcare pilot areas, 'stock' lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 years or over have been required to attend quarterly mandatory WFIs. From the end of October 2005, quarterly WFIs were introduced nationally across all Jobcentre Plus districts for lone parents with a youngest child aged 14 or over.

Alongside these changes to the mandatory WFI process a number of new policy measures and initiatives have also been introduced both to assist Jobcentre Plus advisers and to encourage lone parent participation on New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and to ease their transition off benefits and back into work.¹ Four of the more recently introduced policy measures have been Mandatory Action Plans, Childcare Assist, NVQ level 3 training provision and the In Work Emergency Fund (IWEF). All four of these will be looked at as part of this evaluation.

1.2 Aims and objectives of the evaluation

This qualitative evaluation forms part of the wider national evaluation of WFIs for lone parents and aims to pursue some of the work undertaken in previous national evaluations of the programme² by providing an update on how WFIs for lone parents are currently being delivered. The main objectives of the evaluation are to:

- explore advisers' experiences of the WFI programme and any changes in delivery since the previous national evaluation of lone parent WFIs in 2002;
- explore in more detail any unorthodox or 'non-traditional' delivery methods that Jobcentre Plus districts or individual offices may have been using;
- evaluate the delivery of four new help and support measures, namely the Mandatory Action Plans, Childcare Assist, NVQ level 3 training provision and the IWEF.

¹ See Evans, M. *et al.* June 2003 for summary of these policy changes and summary of NDLP development.

² Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., September 2003 and Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., August 2002.

The key research questions to be addressed were thus:

- What are advisers' perceptions of the mandatory WFI programme and what changes have occurred in the delivery of WFIs for lone parents since 2002?
- Have Jobcentre Plus districts been experimenting with any unorthodox or 'no traditional' delivery methods, and if so, what have these methods been and what are advisers' views on their effectiveness?
- What are adviser attitudes and perceptions of the Mandatory Action Plans, Childcare Assist, NVQ level 3 training and IWEF measures? How have they found these new policy measures to work in practice and what effect have these measures had on WFIs for lone parents and on the customer group?

1.3 Methodology

Research was conducted in four areas across England, Scotland and Wales during June and July 2005. Two of these were 'Work Works' urban areas and were chosen not only to evaluate the general delivery of WFIs for lone parents, but more specifically the IWEF and the NVQ level 3 training provision. The remaining two areas were single Jobcentre Plus districts, both of which had been involved in previous lone parent evaluation work. While these were to be used to evaluate the national Mandatory Action Plans and Childcare Assist measures, they were also to be used as a benchmark for comparing how the delivery of mandatory WFIs for lone parents had progressed and changed over a four-year period. In order to provide more continuity to the evaluation process a small number of Jobcentre Plus staff in these latter two districts had also been involved in previous evaluations of the mandatory WFI programme for lone parents.

The research mainly comprised face-to-face interviews with lone parent advisers although a small number of interviews were carried out with other key Jobcentre Plus staff, such as Childcare Partnership Managers and 'Work Works' Co-ordinators. Interviews focused on exploring any changes that had occurred in the delivery of the mandatory WFIs for lone parents since the previous evaluation of lone parent WFIs was carried out in 2003.³

The interviews also sought to explore any 'unorthodox' or 'innovative' methods of delivery that were currently being used or had been tried in the past, within the Jobcentre Plus districts. Finally, the interviews explored staff views and perceptions of the four new policy measures, namely the IWEF and NVQ level 3 provision (in the two 'Work Works' districts) and the Mandatory Action Plans and Childcare Assist (across all four districts). The interviews with advisers included an in-depth discussion of individual lone parent customers (on an anonymised basis) that had used each of the new measures.

³ Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., September 2003.

1.4 Report structure

The remaining chapters of the report are structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2** provides an overview and update of the key changes that have occurred in the delivery of mandatory WFIs for lone parents over the past four years. The chapter also explores the non-traditional delivery methods that have been used in each of the four study areas;
- **Chapter 3** presents an analysis of lone parent advisers' perceptions of Mandatory Action Plans, describes the key practical issues that advisers have faced in using them and concludes by providing an assessment of how they have benefited the delivery of lone parent WFIs;
- **Chapter 4** looks at the Childcare Assist measure and assesses its current take up and adviser perceptions of it;
- **Chapter 5** describes the issues faced in 'Work Works' areas that have attempted to set up NVQ level 3 training provision for lone parents. The chapter also takes an in-depth look at one of the current NVQ level 3 training courses and provides some case study examples of lone parents that have undertaken NVQ level 3 courses;
- **Chapter 6** explores the impact of the IWEF on lone parents and provides some case study examples of customers that have used the fund. This chapter also explores the key factors which have been affecting take up of the IWEF;
- **Chapter 7** presents a concluding overview of the main issues found to be affecting the delivery of lone parent WFIs four years into the initiative.

2 Update on Work Focused Interviews for lone parents

2.1 Delivery case studies

Any changes in the overall structure, management and administration of the delivery of mandatory Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) for lone parents claiming Income Support (IS) were explored in all four of the research areas. The areas are identified in this report as research areas A-D:

- **District A:** a predominantly rural district in Scotland, with pockets of deprivation and a number of isolated rural communities;
- **District B:** an urban area of Wales with an extensive rural hinterland with particular difficulties of access and small isolated communities;
- **District C:** an urban area in England with historically high levels of unemployment and high concentrations of social housing. District C is one of six 'Work Works' pilot areas;
- **District D:** a largely 'inner city' urban area in England with pockets of high level unemployment and concentrations of social housing, also with a relatively large ethnic minority population. District D is one of six 'Work Works' pilot areas.

2.2 Adviser perceptions of Work Focused Interviews and New Deal for Lone Parents

Advisers were asked to reflect and comment on the delivery of WFIs for lone parents and the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) programme four years after mandatory adviser meetings were introduced in 2001. Responses were generally positive and lone parent advisers on the whole were satisfied with how the programme was operating. Both the newly recruited and more experienced advisers, many of whom had been involved with the lone parent programme since its inception, were of the

view that NDLP was a high quality Jobcentre Plus programme and a number highlighted the attractive 'support package' that it had to offer to lone parents:

'NDLP is a really good programme...I think it is one of the best programmes I've seen in a long time in the years I've worked in the department.'

(Adviser)

'I think for any lone parent, just now is the time to go out and find work because I think the help is excellent.'

(Adviser)

The availability of key financial assistance, such as the Work Search Premium, job grants and the in-work credit (which was being piloted in two of the case study districts) were all highlighted by advisers as being particularly successful incentives that provided positive outcomes from WFIs and encouraged NDLP participation:

'We've got the Work Search Premium and the in-work credit...I can't remember a time when there has been so much on offer to lone parents... I think we are slightly over our target with our job outcomes...'

(Adviser)

When asked to comment on how they believed the lone parent programme might be improved or made more effective, a small number of advisers actually felt that no changes were required, with one adviser stating that *'the NDLP programme works fine as it is...it doesn't need any changes'*. Other advisers offered more mixed views and did highlight parts of the programme which they thought needed further attention. A considerable number believed that they were faced with a residual **'hard core'** of lone parents, in particular those now attending their twenty-four and thirty-six monthly review meetings, and that these were proving increasingly difficult to mobilise during their WFIs:

'The NDLP and the WFIs process have been around for quite a while now so I think that we are down to the hard core...at annual reviews meetings...with regards to converting them on to NDLP and moving them on [into work].'

(Adviser)

'We get hardly no outcomes with the twenty-four and thirty-six monthly reviews...I would say they are full of promise but then when we pull them in again [for their annual reviews] they say 'no I've had a change of heart' or something has happened...I don't know whether [the initiative] has worn off a little bit with them.'

(Adviser Manager)

It was felt that very little, if any, progress was being made with these customers during their annual review meetings and that the length of time between mandatory

meetings made it very difficult to maintain momentum and progression with them. Despite these fears, however, it was evident that advisers had far from given up on this group of customers. Many remained optimistic that future changes to the lone parent WFI programme would impact positively even on these lone parents:

'I think the quarterly [WFIs] will have an effect because you are more or less saying "look it is now nine months [until you stop receiving IS], and then six months, what exactly are you going to do?"...I do think you are going to get more results [with quarterly WFIs]. They are going to be quite effective.'

(Adviser)

'If you're doing a WFI every three of four months you are going to be jogging their memory...It never ceases to amaze me the ones who come in here and say "they've stopped my benefit because he's 16' and I say 'yeah, but I've been telling you this is coming"... They are really shocked, [which] I find astounding.'

(Adviser)

In particular, the introduction of quarterly WFIs for those lone parents with a youngest child aged 14 or over, was welcomed by a number of advisers. Advisers believed that the timing of these regular interviews coinciding with the youngest child approaching sixteen year's of age would enable them to achieve some positive outcomes with this group of stock claimants:

'I think we are dealing with a hard core of lone parents now and basically this is where the quarterly WFIs will come in from October... We should be able to do something performance wise with them...'

(Adviser)

'They are going to introduce quarterly interviews with lone parents...It is about time this happened...A lot of these are stock and they are the ones that are quite hard to move and they need to be in the process more often... The more you make them aware of this, then eventually the penny sinks...'

(Adviser)

2.3 A 'tightening-up' of delivery

Findings from across the four research areas suggested that there has been an overall 'tightening-up' and an increased uniformity in the delivery of the lone parent programme with the roll-out of Jobcentre Plus. This was a trend that was noted in previous lone parent research.⁴ Advisers highlighted a number of key areas where they felt this had occurred, namely in relation to:

- home visits;

⁴ Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., September 2003, page 11.

- telephone interviews;
- sanctioning and failure to attend procedures;
- line management structures;
- training provision;
- the use of Adviser Discretion Fund (ADF).

2.3.1 Home visits and telephone interviews

Home visits and telephone interview procedures appear to be two areas where delivery practices have converged and become more standardised both between and within districts. Whilst telephone interviews were said to be occurring with some regularity (in some offices) during previous lone parent evaluations⁵, all advisers interviewed as part of this evaluation reported that they had been discouraged from carrying-out interviews over the telephone. Advisers stated that WFIs were now only being carried out over the telephone in very exceptional circumstances. These tended to be with customers who had already received an initial WFI at the Jobcentre Plus office and whom advisers knew had a genuine caring or health-related issue that made it very difficult for them to attend a face-to-face interview:

'If they have been into the jobcentre before and they understand the mandatory part of it and it is a genuine reason, I have conducted them on the phone...but it is usually if there is a health problem or a problem with one of the children.'

(Adviser)

Generally advisers had no complaints with the fact that they no longer undertook very many telephone interviews and many indicated that in any case they preferred not to do interviews over the telephone as these could not replicate the benefits of a face-to-face meeting:

'I like to see people [face-to-face]...I prefer to get people in. Apart from anything else it's easier to do the job as you have got the tools to do the job in the office...When you do home visits you don't have your computer.'

(Adviser)

⁵ Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., August 2002, page 27 and Thomas, A. & Jones, G. November 2003, pages 30-31.

'I think without really seeing a person you don't really know if they are telling the truth...I think we should see people face-to-face...when people are claiming income support...it's not much to ask them to come in once a year for a chat.'

(Adviser)

Again, whilst previous lone parent evaluations revealed that home visits had been carried out by advisers in some districts⁶, evidence from all four areas taking part in this evaluation was that home visits were no longer delivered by advisers. In all four areas they were now being undertaken by visiting officers instead. Only in one of the districts did a minority of advisers indicate that they still undertook some home visits with customers who had serious health issues. However, these would only be carried out after these individuals had first been seen by a visiting officer:

'It has tightened up now...It used to be three [no shows to WFIs] and then a home visit automatically...whereas now we send visiting officers out...That seems to work... We only do three or four [home visits] every couple of months [now]...The last three I did were all health issues...depression, agoraphobia, one lady had MS.'

(Adviser)

The overwhelming feeling amongst advisers was one of relief that they were no longer required to undertake home visits. Not only were they viewed as taking up valuable staff time and resources, but they were also perceived by advisers to have provided extremely limited effectiveness in engaging lone parents with the NDLP programme.⁷

'We used to go out a lot and do home visits when people failed to attend...That was horrendous because they didn't want you there...But we don't do that anymore...It would be a whole afternoon on home visits and half of them wouldn't be in or they would be hiding. It was just a nightmare.'

(Adviser)

2.3.2 Fail-to-attend rates

A number of advisers commented that the numbers of lone parents failing to attend appointments for WFIs had been gradually dropping over time. They believed that positive word-of-mouth amongst the lone parent customer group was responsible for this.⁸ Individual advisers in two of the districts taking part in this evaluation also believed that recent steps to tighten-up the sanctioning process, and the resulting word-of-mouth amongst lone parents resulting from this, had impacted positively in reducing fail-to-attend rates:

⁶ Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., September 2003, page 16 and Thomas, A. and Jones, G., November 2003, pages 20-21.

⁷ See also similar findings in Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., September 2003, page 16.

⁸ See similar findings in Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., September 2003, page 16.

'I think we have got tougher with the sanctions... We're quite rigid now with how we follow [fail-to-attends] up... We had a lot of fail-to-attends, even with the annual [reviews]... We decided we needed to tighten this up... It has worked because they know now if they don't turn up they will be sanctioned. You do find that not so many of them are failing to attend now.'

(Adviser)

'I think people are getting to know that they have to attend. Sanctions have got slightly lower [recently] because people know they have to attend.'

(Adviser)

A small number of Jobcentre Plus offices in one of the case study areas had, however, continued to experience high fail-to-attend rates. In order to combat this, group information sessions had been introduced at outreach venues (see section 2.4.4 for further discussion of these group sessions). The Childcare Partnership Manager for this district reported that there had been an approximately 50 per cent reduction in their fail-to-attend rates since group sessions had been introduced.

2.3.3 Management structures

The roll-out of Jobcentre Plus also appeared to have resulted in a greater uniformity in management structures, which was reported to have been beginning to become evident in previous lone parent research.⁹ All the Jobcentre Plus offices visited as part of this evaluation were operating a system whereby lone parent advisers were being managed by local business managers as part of the office advisers team (rather than at a district level as part of an overall lone parent team).

This management change seemed to have settled-in relatively smoothly and advisers, on the whole, appeared to have accepted these changes and were reasonably satisfied with how they were being managed. Only in one district, which was the most recent to have experienced this change, did there seem to be some resistance and concerns amongst advisers. These concerns echoed those raised by advisers in previous lone parent evaluation work, who were undergoing the same management change at that time.¹⁰

The main issue for advisers was that these management changes had led to the removal of advisory time specifically 'ring fenced' for work with lone parents and that they were now more likely to be diverted to other work as the need arose. Mirroring the findings of previous research, some of the advisers taking part in this evaluation also felt that this change had, on occasions, impacted detrimentally on their ability to carry out all of their work effectively. In particular, advisers felt that

⁹ Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., September 2003, pages 12-13.

¹⁰ Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., September 2003, pages 12-13 and Thomas, A. and Jones, G., November 2003, page 29.

since changing to being managed at the local office level, they were not always available to see lone parents that 'dropped into' the Jobcentre Plus office, as opposed to attending for an appointment. Advisers indicated that these represented missed opportunities for gaining employment outcomes:

'Local business managers have used [lone parent advisers] on other work... I know we have lost quite a few job entries because lone parents have come in [to see an adviser] before they have to pick their children up from school...and there has been nobody available to see them...They haven't got the time to sit and wait...'

(Adviser)

Moreover, advisers also felt that this management change had weakened the links between themselves and other lone parent advisers working in offices elsewhere, resulting in fewer opportunities to exchange experiences and expertise:

'The lone parent advisers were such a good close bonded team [before]...and we seem to be losing that a little bit...We could be losing ideas because we used to share ideas a lot more [before].'

(Adviser)

Despite these concerns, the majority of advisers even in this district admitted they were adapting to the changes and a number commented that they were now learning to work more productively alongside their local business managers and other Jobcentre Plus staff, and vice versa. Staff also indicated that the issues and problems that had arisen as a result of management changes were gradually being addressed:

'Some lone parents have complained that it hasn't been easy for them to get into Jobcentre Plus offices without an appointment...It's getting all the Jobcentre Plus staff to understand that these lone parents can walk in off the street without an appointment...[But] we are trying to address the problem and things are improving.'

(Childcare Partnership Manager)

'The business manager [in this office] is not a parent, and she doesn't really know lone parents...She has got a learning curve, just as we have...'

(Adviser)

2.3.4 Training and the Adviser Discretion Fund

There was a general perception amongst advisers from across all districts that Jobcentre Plus budgets had been 'tightened' over the past year. Advisers indicated that this tightening of budgets had detrimentally impacted upon two key areas of the NDLP programme. The ADF had been reduced from a maximum allowance of £300 per customer to £100 and advisers felt that an increasing number of their business cases for training courses were now being rejected.

A number of advisers bemoaned the changes that had been made to ADF. While previous evaluations had demonstrated that staff used the ADF as one of their key 'selling tools' for the NDLP programme¹¹, some advisers now indicated that they could no longer use it to the same effect. As a consequence, several commented that this had made 'selling' the NDLP programme more difficult for them:

'ADF has always been a good selling point for us, but then they've reduced it... That has made it more difficult for us to sell [NDLP] now.'

(Adviser)

'The ADF has been cut quite drastically. We don't really sell it anymore. The simple reason is that we are unsure if it is going to be cut any more... We don't want to promise anything we cannot deliver...'

(Adviser)

In three out of the four study areas a common complaint put forward by advisers was the perceived general lack of training opportunities now available to lone parents. In two districts respondents indicated that an increasing number of their business cases for sending lone parents on training courses had been turned down over the past twelve months:

'We can offer them any courses from [the local college] but they have to do business cases, but recently all the business cases for training courses are getting turned down.'

(Adviser)

Advisers in both these districts were concerned that this had detrimentally impacted upon the service they were able to provide lone parents by restricting the availability of training opportunities through NDLP:

'All the publicity says if you want training then come and see a lone parent adviser... Everyone that comes in wanting to do some training... we can't afford it, we can't pay for it.'

(Adviser)

'There's not a lot we can offer now in terms of training... A lot of our customers used to go on hairdressing and beauty therapy [courses]... There is no training available in those areas now.'

(Adviser)

¹¹ Thomas, A. and Jones, G., November 2003, page 8 and Webster, L. et al., September 2003, pages 19-23.

Whilst these particular problems were not aired in the third district, advisers there did face problems of a shortage or a lack of available training provision. However, these problems were caused by the district's predominantly rural geographic make-up and lone parents from this district had always suffered as a result of rural isolation and the lack of accessible training courses.¹²

'[Lack of training] is a massive problem here because we are a rural area... You are very limited as to the type of work you can get training for.'

(Adviser)

'There is no training available to update skills... There is nothing locally around here.'

(Adviser)

2.4 'Non-traditional' delivery methods

As the mandatory WFI initiative has 'bedded-in' and become more uniform in key areas of delivery over time, most districts have experimented with non-traditional delivery methods¹³ in order to improve performance. As suggested in previous research, group sessions and the use of outreach venues were two key 'non-traditional' methods with which districts were experimenting. All the districts visited as part of this evaluation had, by now, some experience of using these two methods. Nevertheless, the reasons why they had been used; the details of how they were being used; the degree to which they were being used and how successful they were perceived to have been, did vary significantly both within and between districts.

2.4.1 Case study area A

Due to its predominantly rural nature, outreach venues had been formally set-up by the majority of Jobcentre Plus offices in this area in order to combat problems of rural isolation and the subsequent travel difficulties faced by a number of more disadvantaged groups, such as lone parents and incapacity benefit recipients. This district had also established outreach venues in identified deprived neighbourhoods, within some of its more urban areas, in order to provide these disadvantaged communities with better accessibility to Jobcentre Plus services:

'We've got what is called 'deprived wards' in the area... We thought we needed to get more into the community [in these areas]... We wanted to make ourselves more accessible to people living in these areas... We thought having a face there that they could get used to seeing and know that they could come along and speak to us [would be useful].'

(Adviser)

¹² Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., September 2003, page 28.

¹³ Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., September 2003, page 15.

Advisers were using several different facilities as outreach venues, including family centres, community schools and a women's refuge. Depending on the demand for the outreach service, and the location of the venue, outreach sessions were taking place at a range of times, from once a week in some venues to once a month and once every three months in others. Advisers indicated that the response from lone parents to these sessions had varied. While at certain periods of the year (particularly during the summer months) these venues were less well attended, advisers believed that those lone parents who used the service preferred using outreach venues to attending the Jobcentre Plus offices. The more comfortable and relaxing environment often provided at these outreach centres was highlighted as a key factor that helped to positively influence the meetings taking place at them.¹⁴

'It's less intimidating [for the lone parents]...I think lone parents tend to be more relaxed...It suits them more...It [helps] build a contact and a relationship with that lone parent. They don't see you as officialdom.'

(Adviser)

'It's not a structured setting because we're just sitting around the room chatting with a cup of tea...The lone parents are more relaxed [there].'

(Adviser)

The majority of meetings taking place at these outreach venues were NDLP information sessions, rather than formal WFIs (these took place at Jobcentre Plus offices). However, one adviser reported that in exceptional circumstances, some individual WFIs had been carried out at a women's refuge. These had occurred under circumstances where lone parents had been particularly worried about their identity and safety being compromised by entering the Jobcentre Plus office. Another adviser also reported that she carried out some of her caseload meetings and review meetings at her outreach venues (although she did not do any initial WFIs there) with customers that faced particular difficulties in reaching the Jobcentre Plus office.

The vast majority of advisers that worked at these outreach venues were positive about the impact they were having on lone parents. In particular, advisers felt that these outreach services were making Jobcentre Plus services and information more accessible to lone parents living in deprived neighbourhoods and to those experiencing rural isolation. Moreover, respondents argued that the more informal atmosphere of outreach venues helped them to build better relationships and communication with lone parents and although small, advisers did believe that these sessions had resulted in some additional movement onto their NDLP caseloads and subsequently into work:

¹⁴ See also Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., September 2003, page 15.

'There's been a few in the past that have come on to my caseload from outreach. It's not high numbers...I had one girl at one of the [outreach] group information sessions, she came to see me [at the Jobcentre] the next day and within a week she was working.'

(Adviser)

2.4.2 Case study area B

A number of outreach centres had been used in this district since 2001 and were now firmly established venues for delivering mandatory WFIs with lone parents. Community centres, sports centres and an enterprise centre were all being used as locations for outreach work. As in other districts, improving accessibility to Jobcentre Plus services was the key reason for their establishment. Initial WFIs; six monthly and annual review meetings and caseload interviews were all taking place at these outreach venues.

Advisers were based in most of the outreach centres for one or two days per week, although one adviser was permanently based in one of the centres. Due to the high concentration of lone parents residing in this deprived area and its situation some distance from the city centre Jobcentre Plus offices, this was felt to be a worthwhile allocation of staff resources:

'One adviser is permanently based in one of our outreach venues...Simply because it was quite a large area with a high number of lone parents [living] in it. We decided to put [the adviser] there full-time and they are doing really well down there.'

(Childcare Partnership Manager)

Advisers and managers alike were positive about the achievements of these outreach venues. Fail-to-attend rates were said to be lower than at Jobcentre Plus offices and advisers again commented that lone parents preferred to attend outreach centres due to the more relaxed and child-friendly atmosphere they provided. The locations of these outreach centres were also highlighted as key reasons for their success. Due to the fact that these outreach venues were often located within the neighbourhoods where lone parents lived, advisers commented that lone parents were not only more likely to attend their mandatory meetings but were also more likely to 'drop in' to see their advisers during other periods:

'Lone parents like [the outreach centre] because you are in their community, you are on their doorstep. You tend to get known, word-of-mouth... They will drop in here...I'm in an ideal location. They have to walk past this building to get to the shops, to go to school or to the doctors surgery... You generally find they will just pop in [to see you].'

(Adviser)

'People in the community are so used to these centres being there and they [also] use it for a meeting place as well...The [outreach centres] work pretty good.'

(Childcare Partnership Manager)

This district had also briefly experimented with group information sessions during the first year of the mandatory WFI initiative. These sessions had been introduced to address an early administrative backlog of stock claimants that were required to attend mandatory meetings. Two experimental group sessions were set-up, both for between 25 and 30 attendees. A single lone parent adviser carried out the group sessions, which had been intended to replace individual WFIs. Very high fail-to-attend rates were experienced for both sessions, resulting in a significant administrative workload for the adviser. The district's lone parent team were also informed, soon after these first group sessions had been carried out, that they were against policy, as they did not include an individual WFIs. This information, combined with the high fail-to-attend rates, resulted in no further group sessions being undertaken here.

2.4.3 Case study area C

Although some attempts had been made to experiment with outreach venues, no group sessions had been attempted in this area. Negative feedback from other areas that had tried group sessions in the early days of the lone parent WFI initiative, where high fail-to-attend rates had been reported, seemed to be the main reason why group sessions had not been tried here.

A small number of Jobcentre Plus offices had experimented with outreach venues, although views regarding their success did vary amongst advisers. The most negative responses came from those advisers at Jobcentre Plus offices that had attempted to provide informal lone parent information sessions at outreach venues as a 'one-off' experiment. As a result of receiving little attendance or feedback from lone parents, these were viewed to have been '*a waste of time*' by staff and the decision had been made not to carry out any further outreach work in the future.

Advisers at Jobcentre Plus offices that had given their outreach services more time to 'bed-in' and establish themselves were much more positive about their impact. One office in particular had been undertaking outreach work for the past year and had two advisers spending part of their week based at outreach venues (both of which were Sure Start centres). These outreach services were located in two outer neighbourhoods of the city centre, both areas with high concentrations of lone parents residing in them and both far enough outside the city centre to make it difficult for lone parents to attend the Jobcentre Plus office:

'It was decided to have an adviser in that area because...it's a few miles from the city centre...Lone parents who have got a couple of kids [and] they may have a pram [as well]... They've got to get a bus to come to the Jobcentre...It's not that easy really... With me being based here a day and a half a week they just come in [to the outreach centre] to see me.'

(Adviser)

These advisers believed that lone parents preferred attending WFIs at outreach centres rather than Jobcentre Plus offices. The more relaxed environment in which interviews were conducted and the more accessible location of the Sure Start centres were seen to be important reasons for their success. Advisers argued that these venues were preferred by lone parents because they were more child-friendly, with on-site crèche and nursery facilities. Advisers also believed that lone parents were more likely to drop in without appointments to meet them at these venues:

'I think we should do more outreach [than we currently do]...It's nice for [lone parents] to come and sit and have a cup of tea, let the kids play in the nursery and be seen by an adviser...Lone parents say they hate coming into the Jobcentre with their kids... They've got nothing for the children to play with in here.'

(Adviser)

'[Outreach] takes all those barriers down...They think the Jobcentre is the place that is going to stop their money... Here we're sitting with someone and having a cup of tea and they are opening up to you...It is just fantastic.'

(Adviser)

Advisers also reported good outcomes from the WFIs they carried-out at these outreach centres, with one adviser claiming that she succeeded in moving at least two to three lone parents per week on to her NDLP caseload as a result of meeting them at the outreach centre.

2.4.4 Case study area D

In contrast to area B, the design of this district's group sessions had been somewhat different, and they were deemed to be working successfully. In fact, the initial success of these sessions, in a small number of piloted venues, resulted in the district progressively rolling them out to additional areas.

Despite being four years into the WFIs initiative, some of the district's outer city centre areas had continued to experience high fail-to-attend rates with lone parents being particularly resistant towards attending their mandatory interviews at these Jobcentre Plus offices. In an attempt to address the problem the district decided to pilot the delivery of small group sessions (of no more than four to five lone parents per session) in two designated outreach venues. These sessions were combined with a one-to-one advisory WFI, with each attendee, after every session. In addition to one Jobcentre Plus lone parent adviser, these group sessions also included individual

representatives from other agencies and groups, for instance from the Action Team, from ethnic minority support groups and specialist health support groups. The group sessions had mainly involved lone parents called to review meetings and had predominantly been aimed at stock customers, which had been proving the group most resistant to attending the Jobcentre Plus offices. During the booking of appointments the central administration team provided lone parents with the choice of either attending a group session at an outreach venue or an interview at the Jobcentre Plus office, thus ensuring that lone parents not wanting to take part in a group session could avoid doing so.

Fail-to-attend rates were said to have significantly reduced, by as much as 50 percent in some Jobcentre Plus offices, since introducing these small group sessions. Mirroring responses from other districts, advisers stated that lone parents felt more at ease attending outreach venues, which they were familiar with, and that the more informal atmosphere, coupled with other activities taking place alongside adviser work, benefited this customer group:

'People don't like coming into this [Jobcentre Plus office]. They hate this place...The [outreach centre] is buzzing when you go in there. There is a lot going on there, a lot of activity...It's engaging [for lone parents].'

(Adviser)

The Jobcentre is an off-putting building...The lone parents are much more likely to go into the [community] centre...They are happier to go there...With the [outreach centre at the] school...they are familiar with it and they might have children going there or know people who have children going there...That has worked.'

(Adviser)

Respondents also felt that lone parents were more likely to attend future interviews at the Jobcentre Plus office once they had met their adviser in an outreach facility. Advisers felt that the informal atmosphere of outreach venues contributed towards building a more positive customer-adviser relationship, thus benefiting any future contact at the Jobcentre Plus office:

'It's introducing a face to the name so that when they say "this is [adviser name] your lone parent adviser" they have actually met that adviser in the children's centre, so they don't feel so bothered about going into the Jobcentre [in the future].'

(Adviser)

Small group sessions were also proving to be popular with lone parents from similar socio-cultural backgrounds and staff indicated that some lone parents, in particular those from similar ethnic minority groups, were responding more positively during group sessions and preferred these to one-to-one advisory interviews at Jobcentre Plus offices. Advisers commented that these lone parents preferred to be amongst

people facing similar circumstances to themselves and the presence of key support groups, such as those for women from ethnic minority groups, were said to have benefited the mandatory meetings taking place at these outreach venues:

'The feedback we have had from ethnic minority groups has been really positive...They prefer group session because they are with people that are in similar situations, this is the feedback [we get]...They want to be with people so they are not on their own...'

(Adviser)

3 Mandatory Action Plans

Mandatory Action Plans were introduced nationally in October 2004 making it compulsory for advisers to complete an action plan during all lone parent Work Focused Interviews (WFIs), and thereafter to discuss and update these action plans at any subsequent WFIs.¹⁵ The key difference between mandatory WFI action plans and other action plans (e.g. those used for New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP)) is that these plans do not have to be agreed by the lone parent or include any future action or 'next steps' which need to be completed by the lone parent before the next WFI.

Mandatory Action Plans are used to collect basic information, for example, age(s) of child(ren), level of qualifications, past employment history, barriers to work, etc, and if the lone parent agrees, also include any commitments towards taking steps to prepare for work in the future, before subsequent WFIs. For lone parents unwilling or unable to consider working at the time of the WFI, advisers are required to note this along with any other longer-term plans the lone parent may have, for instance, that they may consider looking for work when their child starts school.

Mandatory Action Plans were introduced following previous research suggesting that WFIs were most likely to be effective where any subsequent meetings built on, rather than repeated, the content of previous meetings. It was also shown that lone parents appreciated seeing the same adviser and when this was not possible, that a different adviser knew what had been discussed/agreed at any previous WFIs. Mandatory Action Plans were intended to build on previous good practice and to reinforce the work focused element of the interviews.

¹⁵ At the end of October 2005 it became compulsory for Mandatory Action Plans to be agreed and signed by lone parents.

3.1 Adviser perceptions of Mandatory Action Plans

Reactions of lone parent advisers towards the mandatory use of action plans during WFIs were mixed. For advisers with a background in dealing with mainstream New Deal customer groups, having to complete action plans for lone parents had not presented them with anything new or different to what they had used before. As such, these advisers did not view the process of having to complete an action plan to have impacted greatly on their work. Typically, advisers stated that they were already using action plans with their lone parent customers, prior to the introduction of the Mandatory Action Plans in October 2004:

'I've always found [action plans] useful...because if you get somebody that doesn't want to see you for a year, action plans are useful to get a bit of background so you don't have to go over the same thing [next time].'

(Adviser)

'[Mandatory Action Plans] are not making me do anything more than I was doing before.'

(Adviser)

Advisers with little or no experience in working with mainstream customer groups were less enthusiastic and less positive regarding the use of action plans during lone parent WFIs. A number of these advisers found the process of having to complete an action plan with every lone parent and at every WFI to be both '*unnecessary*' and '*time consuming*', particularly with those lone parents that showed no interest in working:

'I can't see the relevance in [Mandatory Action Plans] unless it's a case loaded lone parent...The very term that they are 'action' plans means you're giving the customer an action to do. If the customer says "I'm not going to work" then there is no action to do...so for the ones that say they're not interested in looking for work, I do think action plans are a bit of a waste of time.'

(Adviser)

'If someone adamantly doesn't want to work, what do you put in an action plan?...I think it should really just be [used] if [the lone parent] is interested and wants to come on board [NDLP].'

(Adviser)

Interviews with adviser managers confirmed these mixed responses, and revealed that practice amongst advisers in completing action plans was presently variable, both in terms of what and how much information they included. One adviser manager went as far as to admit that some of her advisers had been '*a bit lazy*' when it came to completing Mandatory Action Plans. This particular adviser manager had decided to address the problem and had recently taken the step of laminating action

plan 'desk aids' in order to provide advisers with an example of how action plans should be completed and details of what information they needed to include on them:

'We have had desk aids done and these will be going out to all advisers. I've had them laminated and it's to show advisers exactly what needs to go into each section of the action plan...It's to reiterate the importance of action plans.'

(Adviser Manager)

3.2 Adviser discretion

A minority of advisers seemed concerned that Mandatory Action Plans led to unsuitable and forced questioning on occasions, particularly during some initial adviser meetings with new or repeat customers. Examples were provided of lone parents attending their initial advisory meetings under great personal stress and some advisers felt that the action plans forced them to ask work-related questions which they felt to be inappropriate under the circumstances. Such examples highlight an issue around striking the balance between enforcing a uniformity to improve poor practice, and leaving advisers with enough discretion to deal flexibly with each customer on their individual merits and according to their circumstances at the time of receiving their mandatory WFI:

'I had two women in one week, both from the same [women's] refuge. They had been battered, they were getting away from violent partners. In both cases there was no way I was going to talk about qualifications and what work experience they had had...They were terribly upset...I ended up putting slashes and full stops [in the action plan] because it wasn't relevant.'

(Adviser)

'Sometimes it's difficult if they are on the bounce and not even wanting to be here. You can't start going through actions and job goals. It's just going to wind them up even more.'

(Adviser)

3.3 Practical issues

Some practical issues were highlighted by advisers in relation to the user-friendliness of Mandatory Action Plans. The most commonly raised irritant was the requirement to print copies of action plans. A number of advisers stated that customers did not want copies of their action plans, and advisers were unhappy with the on-screen system that did not allow them to exit from an action plan without first printing a copy, no matter how minor the changes that may have been made. Staff viewed this as both a waste of their time and office resources:

'I'm forced to print out a rain forest, which I think is costly to the department and costly to my time...It's ridiculous.'

(Adviser)

'There will be a lot of money wasted because you have got to print [the action plans] off...and most customers are not interested in them.'

(Adviser)

A more minor issue raised by advisers was the perceived need for Mandatory Action Plans to include a separate space for placing information on any health-related issues. While most advisers seemed to be currently placing these in the 'personal reasons' section it was widely felt that having a separate 'health' section would ensure more consistency in where these details were placed. This was deemed to be particularly important if advisers were to meet any lone parents that had been previously interviewed by a different adviser.

3.4 Impact of Mandatory Action Plans on WFIs

Many advisers commented on the usefulness of Mandatory Action Plans for their WFI review meetings. In fact, the introduction of Mandatory Action Plans seems to have reinforced the good practice already carried-out by some lone parent advisers (as seen in Section 3.1) and formalised the good practice, that was identified in earlier research, amongst some lone parent advisers who were actively keeping more detailed written records of their WFIs to aide subsequent review meetings.¹⁶

Even amongst those advisers that were critical of their appropriateness during some of their initial meetings, there was a somewhat contradictory acceptance that these action plans were helpful advisory aids for subsequent review meetings. In particular, advisers indicated that the information held on action plans made it easier for them to build on their previous meetings with customers, more so than a Labour Market System (LMS) 'conversation', and enabled them to better assess how far a lone parent might have progressed (or not progressed) since their previous meeting:

'Action plans are useful because you can see how they have progressed and you have got something there that shows what you discussed last time. It's a starting point for the interview...'

(Adviser)

'Action plans are good because they are an information sheet where you can store everything on...We used to put it in conversations before but a lot of them get deleted so far down the line, whereas the action plans stay. Now that I am doing action plans I've got used to them...I'm perfectly OK with them.'

(Adviser)

¹⁶ Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., September 2003, page 53.

Advisers also commented that the amount of information stored on action plans enabled them to familiarise themselves with customers prior to a review meeting. As such, it was felt that action plans helped advisers to build better relationships with their customers because lone parents responded more positively if they felt advisers had remembered them. Consequently, some advisers indicated that this had helped to improve the quality of their review meetings:

'When I first heard about [action plans] I thought "how are we going to manage [with the workload]"...But they are very useful...When a customer comes in [now] I always look at the action plan. It makes that person feel that you know something about them...Action plans are a useful tool...They are a good idea.'

(Adviser)

'Having [an action plan] you can show that you have remembered them. They feel that you have remembered them...I feel you have got a better relationship with the lone parent [because of that].'

(Adviser)

Some less experienced advisers had also found the action plans to be useful 'prompts' during interviews and stated that they helped to ensure that all the necessary questions and ground was covered with customers during their WFIs:

'The action plan prompts me to ask more of the questions that I should ask, which is good...That is useful.'

(Adviser)

Others stated that Mandatory Action Plans helped to formalise meetings. By entering information on to the computer, as they interviewed customers, some advisers felt customers were more likely to take them seriously, and that this had benefited their meetings:

'The action plan makes the customer feel that you are actually writing down why they don't want to work...From that point of view it makes it a bit more serious for the customer...Like "we are not going to make you look for work, but we are interested in what you are doing".'

(Adviser)

4 Childcare Assist

Childcare Assist was introduced nationally from the end of April 2005 and covers the costs of formal childcare for a lone parent participating on the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) programme for up to one week **before** they start work. The Childcare Assist measure was introduced in order to assist the transition into work by:

- giving a lone parent the opportunity to familiarise themselves with a childcare provider before commencing work;
- allowing a lone parent's child(ren) to have a 'settling in' period with a childcare provider prior to the lone parent commencing work;
- leaving a lone parent free to undertake any activities required in preparation for starting work, without the worry of having to arrange childcare.

4.1 Limited take-up of Childcare Assist

During the period of the evaluation fieldwork (June-July 2005) there had been virtually no take-up of Childcare Assist. In fact, there had only been one reported case of its use across all four of the study areas, despite most of the advisers indicating that they were mentioning the availability of Childcare Assist during their Work Focused Interviews (WFIs).

Two key reasons relating to the timing of the evaluation may partly account for this low take-up: First, Childcare Assist had been in place for less than three months when the evaluation was being carried-out. Second, the research was conducted in the six weeks immediately prior to the start of school summer holidays. A small number of advisers commented that this timing may also have accounted for low take-up, indicating that fewer lone parents moved into work in the months leading up to the school summer holidays, reducing the potential for its use during this period.

Despite these factors, the vast majority of advisers still remained sceptical of how widely the Childcare Assist measure would be used amongst lone parents.

A number of reasons were put forward for this scepticism. The most prevalent related to the limited notice many lone parents received between attending job interviews and starting work, which hampered their ability to access Childcare Assist. Advisers highlighted the fact that the nature of the work undertaken by many lone parents (many enter entry level, low skill and low wage jobs)¹⁷ meant that in most instances they were given very little notice by their new employers before commencing work, giving them insufficient time to utilise the assistance and no time for advisers to process a Childcare Assist case:

'The [lone parents] I usually see they are starting work the following week... For somebody who is working in a local store there is not going to be a month in advance notice... If they go into the shop on the Friday and have a quick interview, the [employers] say "can you start on Monday?" That is the reality with a lot of our customers.'

(Adviser)

'I haven't used [Childcare Assist] because usually when a lone parent goes into work they don't get that much notice. It's usually a local job and starting next Monday!'

(Adviser)

Not only was it advisers' experience that most lone parents were given little notice before commencing employment, but they perceived a tendency amongst this customer group to make sudden work-related decisions further compromising the time available to take advantage of Childcare Assist. Advisers also commented that many lone parents found it easier and preferred to use family members or friends over formal childcare¹⁸ which further limited the use of Childcare Assist:

'Most [lone parents] seem to get jobs that they start very quickly, so there is not the timescale there to get childcare organised and that's when they turn to family. Very few times have I ever had somebody who has known about a month [in advance] that they're starting a job... where I could possibly organise [Childcare Assist]. I think that's where it falls down.'

(Adviser)

The availability and offer of childcare taster days in 'Work Works' areas was also highlighted by some advisers as a factor which they felt reduced the need for lone parents to use Childcare Assist. Very often these free childcare days were seen to be sufficient for lone parents to 'try out' a provider and were also seen to be offering more flexibility than the Childcare Assist measure:

¹⁷ For evidence see Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., September 2003, pages 35-37.

¹⁸ See also Thomas, A. and Griffiths, R., September 2003, page 29.

'[My lone parents] have used the child care taster days more [than child care assist]...They have five full days of childcare provided by the Childcare Partnership...That's what I've been using to settle the child into nursery if the mum is going into work...'

(Adviser)

'We use the child care tasters an awful lot. They're for girls who are arranging interviews...[They're] a bit more flexible because they can be ten half days as opposed to say five full days...'

(Adviser)

A number of advisers believed that the Childcare Assist measure would prove more beneficial and popular if it covered childcare costs during a lone parent's first week back in work, rather than the week prior to them commencing work. With many childcare providers asking for up-front payments of childcare costs, advisers felt that assistance with these payments, rather than for the week prior to commencing work, was a more pressing need amongst their customers:

'A lot of childminders want two week up front [payment]. It would be better if they could have a week of childcare paid through Childcare Assist.'

(Adviser)

*'For the majority of my clients who use childcare I am sure they would prefer the first week of childcare paid **after** they start work. I can understand the reasoning behind [Childcare Assist] but if [lone parents] are only having a few days notice before starting work it's no good to them is it?'*

(Adviser)

4.2 A case study of Childcare Assist use

In view of these factors, the one reported use of Childcare Assist proved to be an exceptional case, and one not necessarily reflective of the situations facing the majority of lone parents. The customer was a qualified overseas doctor, had claimed asylum in the UK, and had been in receipt of benefits over the past four years. The customer had one six year old child and had no close family members living in the UK.

She had recently secured work as a doctor and had been given one month's notice prior to commencing work. Before starting full-time paid employment she was required to undertake a voluntary two-week clinical attachment. Having no family or close friends that could care for the child the customer approached her lone parent adviser for assistance. Given that the lone parent had a full month before commencing work, the adviser had sufficient time to set-up a business case to assist her customer with her childcare costs. Childcare Assist was used to pay for the customer's childcare costs during the second week of her voluntary clinical

attachment (the week prior to commencing paid employment) and Adviser Discretion Fund (ADF) was accessed to help cover childcare costs during the first week of the voluntary attachment and during the customer's first week in paid employment.

The adviser acknowledged this to be an exceptional case and highlighted that unlike the majority of lone parents, this customer was given sufficient notice before commencing employment, which enabled her to access Childcare Assist:

'The only reason I used Childcare Assist was because the lady was going to become a doctor...[and] she knew a long time in advance that this job was coming up. She knew a month in advance that it would be starting and that she needed childcare.'

(Adviser)

This particular case also seems to run contrary to the original aims of the Childcare Assist measure, in that it was used as part of a 'financial package' to cover childcare costs, rather than specifically to provide the lone parent with the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the childcare provider; to allow their child to have a 'settling in' period; or to free the lone parent to prepare themselves prior to starting work.

5 NVQ level 3 training

The provision of NVQ level 3 training for lone parents was introduced in 'Work Works' areas in October 2004. The aim of this measure was to provide lone parents with access to NVQ level 3 training in childcare and one other sector where there was an identified skills shortage, but which might not have traditionally been accessed by lone parents. 'Work Works' districts were given the freedom to choose the second occupational area. By making NVQ level 3 training available to lone parents on New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) the aim was to provide more sustained jobs by:

- training lone parents to a higher level than has traditionally been available under NDLP;
- reducing lone parents' barriers to work by providing them with skills in sectors where labour market demands and skills shortages have been identified;
- giving lone parents the opportunity to earn a higher wage in a supervisory/leader role as a result of having an NVQ level 3 qualification.

5.1 The demand for NVQ level 3 training

Advisers on the whole were positive regarding the introduction of NVQ level 3 training provision for lone parents. They felt there was a clear demand for such training, not only from within the customer group itself, but also amongst employers, who advisers knew were looking to employ NVQ level 3 qualified individuals, particularly in childcare jobs. In one district the demand was such that advisers stated there were immediate vacancies for lone parents qualified to NVQ level 3 in childcare. Examples were provided here of lone parents securing permanent employment even before completing their NVQ 3 training (see Sections 5.5.2 and 5.5.3):

'The [NVQ level 3 childcare] course has plugged a gap in the labour market...It is a good course, with good provision and in thirty-nine weeks you can get a qualification.'

(Adviser)

'The NVQ level 3 opens all the doors. The level 3 is definitely the one to get.'

(Adviser)

While advisers widely welcomed the opportunity and possibility of providing this extra provision, both 'Work Works' areas visited as part of this evaluation had been experiencing a number of obstacles relating to acquiring NVQ level 3 provision and securing sufficient numbers of course places for their lone parents.

5.2 Limited NVQ level 3 training provision

There was very limited NVQ level 3 training provision in either of the 'Work Works' areas. One of the areas currently had two providers in place, one offering NVQ level 3 training in childcare and the other offering NVQ level 3 training for classroom teaching assistants, a more specialised branch of childcare. The other area had no NVQ level 3 training courses currently running in childcare, although one course was in the process of being tendered for in another identified skills shortage area, which in this case had been identified as 'logistics' (including goods vehicle driving).

A lack of suitable pre-existing training providers as well as a number of contracting difficulties were the key reasons suggested for the limited amount of NVQ level 3 training provision currently in place and accessible to lone parents. One of the areas in particular reported having encountered numerous obstacles and difficulties in the process of trying to set up its NVQ level 3 training provision in childcare. Due to the pressing timescales faced within which to establish provision, the area co-ordinator approached both the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the local further education (FE) colleges in order to try and secure training provision.

The LSC informed them that they currently had no training provision available for unemployed people. The FE colleges did have training provision available, but only with a number of restrictions and strict eligibility criteria, which made participation for lone parents very difficult. These eligibility criteria included the requirement that participants on NVQ 3 courses first had to have an NVQ level 2 qualification. If participants did not have an NVQ 2 then they were required to have at least twelve months' experience of working in a formal childcare/early years setting (paid or voluntary). Participants were required to have experience of formal employment working with children and they were required to secure their own work placement first (paid or voluntary) before commencing their course. The FE colleges also had fixed September enrolment dates, which meant that the earliest lone parents could start would be September 2005. For this reason, no lone parents were currently undertaking an NVQ 3 in childcare in this area, and the strict eligibility criteria had left many advisers doubting whether any lone parents would be able to successfully gain access to these NVQ level 3 courses:

'The problem...is the college set their own criteria...for instance they must be over nineteen years' old, they must have an NVQ level 2 and a positive reference from working with children...For our lone parents...unless they have done that work before they had children, they wouldn't have anything like that.'

(Childcare Partnerships Manager)

'[NVQ level 3] has just sort of died a death as far as we are concerned.'

(Adviser)

Such contracting difficulties had led to a situation where there was currently very little or no NVQ level 3 training provision on offer to lone parents. Lone parents had either no NVQ level 3 training provision available to them, or in areas where there was some provision, issues remained regarding the accessibility of the training. For instance, the provision that did exist in one area was with a very small number of providers centrally located within a large urban conurbation. This model of having only one or two central training providers was viewed as unsuitable for lone parents who advisers believed were reluctant to travel any great distance outside their local neighbourhoods.

'If you are a lone parent, you don't travel far.'

(Adviser)

There was supporting evidence of this in one of the areas where the vast majority of referrals for the available NVQ level 3 training course were coming from Jobcentre Plus offices that were immediately local to where the training was taking place, with hardly any from further afield:

'Having one training provider...That's not really very convenient for us because it's such a journey for the girls...It takes an hour and a half by bus [from here]...It's a long journey.'

(Adviser)

5.3 NVQ level 3 participation

The paucity of provision had impacted on participation, with low overall numbers of lone parents reported to be undertaking any NVQ level 3 training. Exacerbating the issue was the fact that even where providers existed, they had very limited training places available. For instance, one provider had a total of 16 training places available on a first come first serve basis for both its NVQ 2 and NVQ 3 training courses in childcare. Twelve places had been taken on the NVQ level 2 course leaving only four spaces available for the NVQ 3 course (although there remained sufficient demand amongst lone parents to fill more places and there was an NVQ 3 waiting list).

The demanding nature of completing an NVQ level 3 course had also impacted on participation numbers. Advisers admitted that they had been selective in who they referred to NVQ 3 training provision and that they worked closely with providers to ensure that customers could cope with the demands of an NVQ level 3 training course and would be able to complete the course:

'You have to make sure the [lone parents] are committed. You don't want to be sending people who you know are not going to stick with it.'

(Adviser)

'[The NVQ 3] is just very in-depth. It's a lot of work. Going from just bringing up your children at home every day to actually having to go somewhere five days a week and then you've got all of your homework...[Some of them] don't realise how in-depth it is going to be.'

(Adviser)

5.4 A case study of NVQ level 3 provision

Advisers were generally very pleased with the NVQ level 3 training providers that they currently had in place. All advisers reported having a close working relationship between themselves and key training provider staff and stated that they worked closely together during the whole process from customer referral and selection through to supporting them while undertaking the course.

One NVQ 3 training course in particular was deemed to have been a major success with lone parents. This course was a specific variation on childcare, offering lone parents the opportunity to gain a qualification as a classroom teaching assistant. Advisers believed that it was proving even more popular amongst lone parents than other childcare courses. The more family-friendly working hours and the lack of any requirement to work during school vacation periods were seen to be key factors which were attracting lone parents to train as teaching assistants:

'Lone parents tend to go for teaching assistants rather than into childcare...[Lone parents] love the teaching assistant work because it is during school hours...and then they are off in the half term and in the six weeks holidays.'

(Adviser)

A lot of lone parents don't want to be a child-carer in early years because it's nursery [work] and it is long hours...They want the use of nurseries, [but] they don't want to be working in one.'

(Adviser)

Staff also highlighted a number of other factors that had contributed to the success and popularity of the teaching assistants NVQ level 3 training provision:

- training was provided within a large primary school (in the region of 850 pupils) and took place during school hours (9.30am to 2.30pm) and during school term time;
- the lone parents' work placements (which were organised for them) and training all took place within the school, thus minimising the need for participants to travel between their work location and training provider – participants spent ten hours a week in the classroom and the remaining time compiling their portfolios, using the school's IT facilities;
- participants were not required to have a prior NVQ level 2 or any other formal qualifications, although applicants were required to have some basic literary and numeracy skills and to undergo an interview with the school's deputy head prior to being accepted on to the course;
- participants completed the NVQ level 3 qualification in one year;
- good on-site childcare facilities were available, including a crèche and after-school club;
- good support structures were in place, with a counsellor based at the school and a number of teachers qualified as NVQ 3 mentors;
- good job outcomes were reported. In the previous academic year (2004-2005) almost 60 per cent of participants had secured employment after completing the NVQ level 3 teaching assistants course. At the beginning of July 2005, six out of 30 participants for the current 2004-2005 academic year had already secured employment, despite having not yet completed the course.

'Part of the success is due to the fact that they have a course counsellor, a range of childcare available at the school and hours that suit mothers who need to pick up their children [from school]...The course co-ordinator is very committed...I feel the format of the course should be rolled out across the country.'

(Work Works Co-ordinator)

'The [teaching assistant] course is perfect because it is in a school...It has the [work] placement there [on-site] and it is within school hours and they have an after school club with it...It is just perfect [for lone parents].'

(Adviser)

Despite the success of this NVQ level 3 training course it was reported that Jobcentre Plus would not be funding the course during the following year (from September 2005 onwards), much to the dismay of both the training provider and lone parent advisers:

'They've pulled the plug on the [course]...Something that works, something that is really effective, [and] they pull the plug on it!'

(Adviser)

5.5 Positive participant outcomes

Despite the contractual problems of setting up NVQ level 3 provision and the low overall participation numbers, outcomes amongst those that had participated on NVQ level 3 training had been very positive. Advisers commented that the availability of the provision met the needs of a small but significant number of their lone parents, some of whom had become difficult to progress during their mandatory review meetings in the past. In particular, a small number of stock customers had come to hear about the provision through their annual review meetings, had subsequently participated on the NVQ level 3 courses and also gained employment (see case studies B and C). Of particular importance to these lone parents seemed to be the availability of local and flexible provision, provision that occurred during school hours, the availability of affordable and local childcare and finally, good support structures, both from their advisers and training providers.

5.5.1 Individual case study A

Lone parent A undertook an NVQ 3 classroom assistant training course mainly because the course occurred during school hours and there would be no need to spend any additional money on childcare. The lone parent had two young children of primary school age:

'She had two little girls in primary school and there is no way she could have worked in a shop or anything like that because even if she could get an out of school children's club, you have got all of the school holidays and with two children, it costs a lot. It wouldn't have been feasible.'

(Adviser)

Lone parent A had struggled with the NVQ level 3 course at times, however, good support from the training provider and the adviser sustained her on the course:

'There has been a couple of times when she has come in and said "I can't do it, I just can't. I am going to leave"...The [training provider] is marvellous and gives them so much support and give them an awful lot of one on one time...The [lone parent] just panics a bit...because there is a lot of work involved.'

(Adviser)

The lone parent was also given the flexibility from the provider to work from home for a short period while she was undergoing a particularly difficult personal trauma. While the lone parent had not yet completed the course or secured work, the adviser was confident that she would do so, and highlighted the personal progress she had made during the time she had been undertaking the NVQ 3 training provision:

'It has made her a lot more confident, an awful lot more confident.'

(Adviser)

5.5.2 Individual case study B

Lone parent B was a stock customer and during her first 12-month review meeting expressed an interest in childcare-related work as she had been involved in voluntary work within this sector. The customer had no formal qualifications and was concerned about the financial implications of going into work. During the annual review meeting the lone parent adviser carried out an In Work Benefit Calculation:

'She needed to know in black and white that she would be better off and if she could get a bit of training...she would be better off working.'

(Adviser)

The customer started her NVQ level 3 training provision and work placement approximately one month after her annual review meeting. Soon after starting her training she was offered paid employment by the employer that was providing the NVQ 3 work placement. After completing her training course the lone parent increased her working hours with the employer from sixteen to thirty hours and remains in full-time employment.

5.5.3 Individual case study C

Lone parent C was a stock customer and had three young children (all under five year's of age). The customer had wanted to undertake some training but had found childcare to be a significant barrier to doing so. After attending her annual review meeting the customer was sent to both an IT training provider and a childcare NVQ level 3 training provider for an informal discussion. The customer opted for the NVQ level 3 training in childcare due to the level of childcare that was available to her while she undertook the course:

'[She] found how much childcare was available, how much we were willing to pay and then opted to go on the childcare course.'

(Adviser)

The customer was yet to complete her training course but had been offered a permanent contract by the employer that was providing her NVQ level 3 work placement. She had been offered an initial hourly rate of £4.85 an hour which would subsequently be raised to £6 an hour upon completion of her NVQ 3 course:

'She's delighted that she's actually going to be having a job and that it's local to where she lives...With three young children...because if there is a problem then she is near to home.'

(Adviser)

6 In Work Emergency Fund

The In Work Emergency Fund (IWEF) was introduced in 'Work Works' districts during October 2004 to help lone parents meet the costs of emergencies during the first 60 days in employment and to overcome barriers that might otherwise make it difficult to remain in work. The overall aim of the IWEF is, therefore, to help sustain lone parents in work and to prevent them from returning to benefits.

6.1 Sustaining lone parents in work

All advisers welcomed the introduction of the IWEF and felt it had a crucial role to play in sustaining lone parents in employment, particularly during their first month back in employment, when many were required to work for a month before receiving their first pay cheque.

When it had been accessed the IWEF was believed to have been crucial in keeping lone parents in work, and advisers were certain that had this financial assistance not been available to those lone parents that required it, they would not have remained in employment:

'I've only had two [lone parents] that have needed the IWEF, but certainly for those two people it was vital for them to have that little bit of extra money to be able to stay in work.'

(Adviser)

'[My lone parent] was coming out of work...had she not received any [IWEF] help for the next couple of weeks...Without the IWEF she would have had to pack in [her job] and make a new claim and she desperately wanted to stay in work.'

(Adviser)

6.2 Case studies of In Work Emergency Fund use

All of the reported cases of IWEF usage were either for childcare or transport emergencies, most of which had arisen during the first month of lone parents being back in work. Advisers who had awarded an IWEF payment stated that the arrangements for providing the financial assistance were generally quick and efficient and that the £300 maximum limit had been sufficient to cover all the necessary emergency costs.

6.2.1 Individual case study A

Customer A contacted her adviser two weeks after commencing work to see whether there was any financial assistance available to her as she needed the brakes of her car replacing. The customer could not afford to pay for any replacement brakes herself and, as she worked on an industrial estate that was not served by public transport, there were no other transport alternatives available to her. Customer A received £150 from the IWEF to pay for fixing the car:

'Working on an industrial estate, outside of the [town centre] it was very difficult for her to get there without a car...I thought that was a prime example of what the IWEF was there for...and [the lone parent] is still working, so the [IWEF] did work.'

(Adviser)

6.2.2 Individual case study B

Customer B had started working part-time as a catering assistant, however, after only two weeks' employment she was offered a full-time supervisory position, as another staff member had left. The lone parent was very willing to take the new position but as it would be a full-time position she would not be able pick her children up from school and would, therefore, need to consider using an after-school club. However, she was told by the childcare provider that she would need to provide an up-front payment for the provision. As customer B had not yet received her first pay cheque she returned to see her adviser for assistance:

'It wasn't a lot of money but [the childcare provider] was asking her to pay it there and then, and she didn't have the money. But she needed to secure [the childcare provision] before she started [the new position].'

(Adviser)

The adviser provided her lone parent customer with £27 from IWEF to cover the childcare costs, which meant she was able to progress from working part-time to working full-time as a catering supervisor:

'[The IWEF] allowed her to take on the extra hours, which financially was going to be beneficial to her and her family...and she is still in the job.'

(Adviser)

6.3 Low take up of the IWEF

Despite its evident success in sustaining some lone parents in employment, take-up of the IWEF was reported to be very low. Several advisers had not awarded any IWEF payments at all and the vast majority of those that had done so had only awarded this financial assistance on one or two occasions. A number of factors seemed to be responsible for this low take-up:

6.3.1 Advertising the availability of IWEF

There appeared to be some uncertainty amongst advisers as to how explicitly they could promote the availability of the IWEF. A number of respondents stated they had not awarded any IWEF because they were not allowed to 'tell' their lone parents about it or advertise the fund:

'We couldn't tell [lone parents] that we could give [the IWEF] to them... We weren't to publicise it... they had to find out from other sources... We were told we weren't allowed to tell the customer that [the IWEF] was available... so nobody knew about it!'

(Adviser)

'I don't market [the IWEF] because you're not supposed to...'

(Adviser)

'Low take up is due to the fact that we are not allowed to promote [the IWEF].'

(Work Works Co-ordinator)

Some advisers felt that they should be allowed to promote the IWEF more explicitly with their customers, particularly as there was a tendency amongst lone parents to give up work first, if they ran into any financial emergencies, and only then to return to see their adviser:

'We are not allowed to advertise [the IWEF]... The main reason it hasn't been used is that the public don't know that it is there... If they did, I think it would be used by people who needed it, whereas they struggle now or leave work [if they run into trouble].'

(Adviser)

A small minority of advisers did appear to be making it more explicitly known to their lone parents that there was financial assistance of this sort available to them. One adviser in particular readily informed her lone parents returning to work that there was a period of in-work support available to them and that they should return to see her if they ran into any difficulties. This adviser had awarded the IWEF on more occasions than any of the other advisers interviewed, having awarded it to four lone parents:

'I say "there is a period of in-work support and if you hit a problem, it may be financial, childcare, anything, there might be a solution, so just don't sit there and bury your head in the sand, come back"...and they do.'

(Adviser)

6.3.2 Uncertainty over IWEF eligibility

A key issue appeared to be that a number of advisers were uncertain as to when exactly the IWEF could be used. Advisers claimed that while they had been encouraged to use the IWEF during times of emergency, they had also been warned by management only to use it under the right circumstances. However, some advisers complained that it had never been made entirely clear to them when they could award the IWEF and raised questions regarding the training and guidance they had received:

'There's a big question [mark] around when we use it and what do we class as an IWEF? What I class as an IWEF and what somebody else does are two different things!'

(Adviser)

'There were a lot of things that hadn't been sorted out at the [guidance] meeting...A lot of the questions [about the IWEF] they hadn't got answers to...'

(Adviser)

Issues relating to unpaid tax credits also seemed to have clouded the water. A number of advisers complained that delayed tax credit payments were causing financial problems for some lone parents, of whom many were returning to their advisers for assistance:

'I think tax credits is the reason for [lone parents] coming back...More often than not tax credits are not been sorted out within the first month of [lone parents] starting work.'

(Adviser)

'We find the main people who need emergency funding are those whose tax credits don't come through on time.'

(Adviser)

Several advisers complained that these delays in tax credit payments were causing unnecessary financial difficulties for lone parents after they returned to work, but as these were general financial problems, there was little advisers could do to help them as they were not eligible for IWEF assistance:

'The problem we've had is that a lot of the customers...were...returning back to us because of [unpaid] tax credits...and the advisers were told that they couldn't use [the IWEF] for that...it had to be a one-off stand alone emergency.'

(Adviser Manager)

When lone parents were returning for assistance, a number of advisers commented that it had been proving difficult for them to identify and be clear about whether the financial problems these lone parents faced, for instance with not being able to afford childcare or transport costs, were symptoms caused by wider financial difficulties resulting from delayed tax credit payments or were one-off crises that they could use the IWEF for.

One adviser had gone so far as providing an IWEF payment to a lone parent who had run into financial difficulties after her tax credits had been delayed, only to be told soon afterwards that the IWEF should not have been used for this purpose. In this particular case, the lone parent in question could not afford to pay for petrol, which she required in order to travel to work. Having reached a point where she was considering leaving her employment the lone parent approached her adviser for assistance. The adviser provided £50 from the IWEF (which was agreed with her manager at the time) to provide enough petrol for the customer to travel to work until she received her first pay cheque.

Nevertheless, soon afterwards the adviser was informed that the IWEF should not have been used for this purpose. Since this incident the adviser had not awarded any further IWEF and commented that she had become quite uncertain as to when she could use the emergency fund. Moreover, she indicated that this uncertainty and lack of clarity was a major reason why she and her colleagues were rarely using the IWEF:

'It is [unclear] how [the IWEF] is used and what it is used for...It makes you feel quite uncertain about using it because [management] are saying "watch what you use it for!" I think that's probably why [advisers] don't use it, which is a shame because [the IWEF] is a good idea.'

(Adviser)

Several advisers were concerned that the present criteria for when the IWEF could be used were too narrow, particularly as a number of lone parents returning to work were facing general household financial emergencies rather than isolatable single causes:

'[With] most of our lone parents the reason [they come back] is to help with the housing or the food...[But] they don't fit the [IWEF] criteria when this happens.'

(Adviser)

Both advisers and 'Work Works' co-ordinators were of the view that the criteria for making an IWEF award should be broadened and made more flexible to reflect the

more complex and multi-faceted problems that lone parents faced in the early weeks after returning to work:

'Immediately advisers felt that the [IWEF] remit was too narrow. This has proved to be the case in that help is usually needed to pay for food bills and household living expenses...'

(Work Works Co-ordinator)

'[The IWEF] is quite prescriptive... You can't use it for domestic things... In the main it's childcare costs... [or] car breakdown... if they have a car... I would also consider food, but you can't use it for that... or housing costs or general bills... It's too prescriptive.'

(Adviser)

There was a general feeling amongst advisers that that they should be given more discretion and flexibility to assist lone parents who ran into genuine financial problems after returning to work. In fact, advisers in one of the areas had forged close working relationships with their local Action Team, who, they argued, did have more flexibility and discretion to assist lone parents who ran into financial difficulties after returning to work. The main reason given for the low IWEF take up at Jobcentre Plus offices in this area was that lone parents living in the Action Team area were being referred to them for financial assistance. Advisers commented that the range and flexibility of financial support available through the Action Team meant that they often encouraged their lone parents to approach them if they ran into financial difficulties after commencing work, rather than returning to the Jobcentre Plus office:

'If somebody is starting work and they are in an Action Team area... we ring [the Action Team] and say "we are paying for this and this, can you help with anything?" They normally get them the week in hand travel passes, they will look at childcare and clothing as well, whereas we can't... [The Action Team] will look at anything, anything at all.'

(Adviser)

7 Conclusion

After more than four years of delivering Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) for lone parents, advisers appeared generally satisfied and comfortable with how the programme was running. They remained confident about working with this customer group and were on the whole, positive regarding the overall support package and incentives they were able to offer lone parents interested in progressing on to the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) programme and into employment.

However, a key area of the lone parent WFI programme that was perceived to be working less effectively was the annual review meetings, and in particular the 24- and 36-monthly review meetings. Advisers commented that they were faced with a residual hardcore of lone parents at these meetings that remained difficult to mobilise under the current 12-monthly review process. Despite these concerns, a number of advisers remained optimistic that future policy changes already in the pipeline would have some positive impact on this group of lone parents.

The national introduction of quarterly WFIs for lone parents with a youngest child aged 14 years and over was seen as a particularly important policy development. The intention of bringing these lone parents into more frequent contact with a Jobcentre Plus adviser during a crucial period of time, as they approach the end of their eligibility for Income Support (IS), was broadly welcomed by advisers. They felt that the timing of quarterly WFIs to coincide with this period in a lone parent's IS claim would give them the opportunity to reinforce the message to their customers that they should take advantage of the support available to them while they were still eligible to do so. Most were confident that as a result they would achieve more job outcomes in the future than they were currently able to achieve through their annual review meetings.

Far from waiting for such key changes in the review meeting process to take place there was strong evidence across all four of the evaluated Jobcentre Plus areas that lone parent teams were actively attempting to find new ways of engaging these lone parents with the NDLP programme, and were continually trying to improve their overall performance. The development of more non traditional delivery methods, such as group information sessions and the use of outreach venues have been two key areas where innovation had occurred.

Where these had become firmly established, advisers felt strongly they had improved access to Jobcentre Plus services, particularly in rural areas or in deprived outer city centre neighbourhoods where lone parents faced particular difficulties in reaching town or city centre Jobcentre Plus offices. Lone parents were said to prefer the more relaxed and informal atmosphere provided at outreach venues, where often there were also good childcare and crèche facilities provided. Outreach centres that appeared to be working particularly well were those that were situated at the heart of local neighbourhoods where lone parents resided and where the venues were familiar to them, for instance Sure Start or community centres or even local schools. All these seemed to be contributing factors to the widely held perception that at outreach centres, where WFIs were being carried out, fail-to-attend rates were lower, compared to those at Jobcentre Plus offices.

In areas where outreach centres had become established and were known to the lone parent customer group, advisers also commented that lone parents were more likely to drop in to speak to them between review meetings than they would if they were based at the Jobcentre Plus office. Moreover, these outreach venues were said to act as a useful bridge to Jobcentre Plus offices with customers being more likely to attend future meetings there, after initially meeting their adviser at an outreach centre. Advisers also felt they had a better relationship with customers at these venues due to the more relaxed environment and indicated that this had fed through into the achievement of good job outcomes and NDLP participation.

Some of the four new measures looked at as part of this evaluation also appear to have assisted advisers in the delivery of mandatory WFIs and there was evidence that one of the measures in particular, had helped to engage lone parents with the NDLP programme.

Although it seems too early to assess whether the **Childcare Assist** measure has contributed positively to the delivery of WFIs and to NDLP more specifically, early indications suggest that it may not be meeting typical lone parents' needs. Advisers suggested that this measure might have more of an impact and better assist lone parents if it were offered during their first week back in work rather than the week prior to them starting work.

Despite the introduction of **Mandatory Action Plans** receiving some mixed responses from advisers, they do seem to have met a key objective of maintaining progression between meetings and enabling advisers to build on any previous WFIs. All advisers had found this aspect of Mandatory Action Plans useful, particularly during mandatory WFI review meetings.

When it had been accessed the **In Work Emergency Fund (IWEF)** had played a crucial role in sustaining lone parents in work. Nevertheless, a number of uncertainties and a lack of clarity remain around when and how it could be advertised and used. Several advisers felt its criteria needed to be broadened and felt constrained by its perceived lack of flexibility and their lack of discretion around its use.

Evidence for the **NVQ level 3 training** provision demonstrated that this measure had contributed positively towards moving lone parents into work. In particular, it seemed to have successfully addressed the needs of a small number of 'stock' lone parents who decided to participate after hearing about the availability of the provision through their annual review meetings. This measure did seem to be having a positive impact and there was some evidence that it had succeeded in moving a small minority of the perceived stagnant 'hardcore' of lone parents on to NDLP and into work.

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