Lone Parents: Parenting and Employment

a National Council for One Parent Families report funded by the Nuffield Foundation

Heather Clark UEL
John Chandler UEL
Jim Barry UEL
Peter Woolliams APU

Introduction by Kate Green NCOPF
Lone Parents: Parenting and employment

a National Council for One Parent Families report
funded by the Nuffield Foundation
Contents

The Authors v
Acknowledgements vii
Summary and Key Findings ix
Recommendations xi
Introduction xiii

CHAPTER 1 Lone parenting and paid employment 1
CHAPTER 2 The survey 7
CHAPTER 3 The focus groups 18
CHAPTER 4 Conclusions 30

APPENDIX I The questionnaire used in the postal survey 31
APPENDIX II Schedule used for focus groups 38
Bibliography 39

Further reading 41
The authors


Heather Clark is a sociologist who spent a number of years working in industry before entering education, where she has taught a wide variety of courses. She currently teaches in Organisation Studies and is involved in a long-term research project into gender and organisations with particular reference to higher education. She previously coordinated Business Studies at Queen Mary and Westfield College and is currently co-director of the University of East London's Organisation Studies Research Group in the East London Business School. Heather has published articles and chapters on gender and organisations and gender and business ethics, and is co-editor with Jim Barry and John Chandler of Organisation and Identities, International Thomson Business Press UK, 1994), and with Jim Barry, John Chandler, Roger Johnston and Dave Needle of Organisation and Management: A Critical Text, International Thomson Business Press UK (2000).
**Professor Peter Woolliams** has recently joined the Anglia Business School, having formerly been Professor of Management at the East London Business School in the University of East London. His specialist interests are in comparative management and the use of data-mining techniques to derive inferences about organisation corporate culture and reconciliation of individual cultural differences. With a long-standing focus in business and management, he maintains an interest in the transfer and application of models and concepts originally developed in one area of social studies to other areas of interest in order to deepen the understanding of systems behaviour.
Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all the lone parents who participated in the postal questionnaire survey and focus groups. Without their willing help, this report would not have been possible. Thanks go also to Sue Monk who did so much at the start of the research.

The authors would also like to thank the Nuffield Foundation for a grant under their Social Science Small Grants scheme (ref: SOC/100 C 1482).
The published literature shows that the composition of one-parent families is mixed and that their needs are varied. Lone parents as a group are extremely diverse and individual lone parents vary considerably in their background and circumstances. Despite this, they are frequently stereotyped as a group by politicians and the media and often subjected to moral attack and lurid headlines that are at odds with the real lives of lone parents and their children.

Existing research confirms that one-parent families vary, and documents their continuing difficulties in securing paid employment. There is a tendency for researchers to isolate and elevate some factors, such as childcare, in order to bring these difficulties to the attention of policy-makers. The reality is that lone parents face a variety of barriers to paid employment. The interaction between these barriers and their effects is complex and requires a flexible response.

There is a range of approaches to lone parenthood and paid work across Europe. The current UK government focuses on paid employment as the vehicle to facilitate full and active citizenship. This reflects to some extent the parent/worker approach to lone parenthood found in Sweden and to a lesser degree in Denmark. The acceptance that there should be no compulsion to take paid work acknowledges Britain’s different cultural values and reflects to a degree the care-giving approach found in the Netherlands.

Although this focus in Britain on active citizenship puts a welcome emphasis on the provision of education and skills training, it rests on two assumptions which may not be realised in practice. Firstly, there may not be sufficient numbers of paid jobs available; there are certainly grounds for caution given recent experience of declining employment opportunities for lone parents in Sweden. Secondly, the strong emphasis on paid employment may simply serve to stigmatise and undermine those unable or unwilling to take up a job offer.

This research project used a sample of lone parents who were better placed to take paid employment than the general lone parent population. The key findings can be summarised as follows:

1. The lone parents in this study saw themselves simply as families with one parent, and echoed a strong belief in the importance of the family.

2. They respected the wishes of some lone parents to devote their energies full-time to caring for their families – particularly where they, or their children, suffered from poor health, or had children under five years of age.

3. They were pleased to have had the opportunity to form independent households.
4 A high proportion of those in employment had access to free (or low-cost) childcare from family members, while a large number of those not working had no access to such care.

5 Most expressed a wish to secure good jobs (eventually) and to come off benefits.

6 Maintenance was considered significant only for relatively few lone parents – and then only when sufficiently high and paid regularly.

7 They identified a need to review benefit levels in order to maintain the health of family members and to take account of any debt accumulated when one-parent families are at their most vulnerable.

8 They perceived a need for better publication of the details of available benefits.

9 They endorsed the provision of education and vocational training for lone parents, but emphasised that there are difficulties for one-parent families both at the beginning and during the period of study similar to those encountered when taking paid employment.

10 They identified a number of problems on entering paid employment, education or vocational training, including:

- the need to ensure continuity of income and state support for themselves and their families in the transition to paid work, education or training;

- low wages, particularly for lone mothers;

- the insecurity of the jobs available, including temporary, part-time and short-term contract work – again, particularly acute for lone mothers;

- inflexible working hours which make it extremely difficult to take time off to care for sick children and arrange childcare, especially outside school hours;

- the attitude of some employers who stereotype and stigmatise lone mothers, in sometimes subtle ways;

- the location of employment or study and the associated cost and availability of public transport.

Above all, the research undertaken for this report points to the many obstacles and barriers to paid employment which confront lone parents in their attempt to balance responsibilities as parents and as employees. The obstacles and barriers operate in complex ways, important on their own but highly significant in combination. The patterns varied for individual lone parents, who are far from being a homogeneous group. The variety and complexity of lone parents’ needs when entering paid employment represents a considerable challenge to policy-makers: their response will be a test case for Britain’s welfare reforms and will say much about Britain as a society in the new millennium.
Recommendations

For lone parents to secure paid employment, policy-makers need to focus their attention on the key factors identified in this study and in the published literature. These include the need to:

- provide confidence-building, education and skills training;
- provide more affordable and suitable childcare;
- improve public transport to places of work and study – currently inaccessible due to high cost and poor availability;
- tackle low pay, insecure jobs and the attitude of employers;
- tackle the inflexibility of work hours and the incompatibility of these with school hours and arrangements for the care of sick children;
- tackle the discontinuity and inflexibility of benefit provision in the transition to paid employment.

Our research has shown these factors not only to be important on their own, but highly significant in combination. Lone parents are a heterogeneous group of people whose multiple and varying needs require a flexible and robust policy response. This is no easy task. Our research, while supporting the measures identified above, offers no easy or simple solution to such complex problems. But the needs are real and they exist now.

Above all, perhaps, for lone parents to help themselves and sustain their families, they need greater access to affordable and suitable childcare, to education and vocational training and to a family-friendly, flexible labour market of reasonably paid jobs for those who wish to enter paid employment.
Introduction

by Kate Green

I am delighted to welcome this important report. It addresses themes which are close to the hearts of politicians of all parties, and presents important challenges to the policy-makers charged with the delivery of anti-poverty and welfare-to-work strategies.

Much has been done and more is planned to bring more lone parents into the workforce. The present Government has an ambitious target to bring 70% of lone parents into employment by the end of the decade. This would bring Britain up to the levels of Sweden or the United States – but it represents a huge step from the present level of around 50%. We watch with mounting interest and concern to see which path we follow in the UK – the European route that supports lone parents with income transfers, guaranteed child maintenance and infrastructure support such as universal childcare, or the US route that increases labour market participation through the withdrawal of benefits. The former provides a route out of poverty whilst the latter ends reliance on benefit but does not tackle poverty. We hope that only positive measures will be taken as part of the Government’s target to end child poverty in twenty years.

A plethora of initiatives have been introduced to help lone parents move into work – these include a national minimum wage; the New Deal for Lone Parents – recently expanded through the Choices package; a National Childcare Strategy; changes to the tax and benefits systems to help working parents, including the Working Families’ Tax Credit, and the new Childcare Tax Credit; and increased maternity pay and leave entitlements.

But what is needed now is a coherent access-to-work strategy that fills the gaps left by current policy. A joined-up approach, as this report powerfully shows, is essential to address the complexity of lone parents’ lives, and the different factors that lone parents have to juggle. A significant proportion of lone parents will always find they have to prioritise their children, at least for a time, and this must not be forgotten – for them, other measures are needed to lift them and their children out of poverty.

It is essential too to recognise the varied needs of individual lone parents, all of whom have had different life experiences, are at different stages in lone parenthood, and whose children too have differing needs. Alongside coherence, the needs of lone parents require a flexible response. If policy solutions cannot work for individual families, the consequences will be highly damaging – the gap between the included and the socially excluded will widen and those for whom return to work is already difficult will find it made harder still.
Perhaps the final message of this report therefore is the need for policy solutions to take the long view. Lone parents cannot become work-ready overnight. Their family responsibilities may force them to be out of the labour market for a time. What is needed therefore is an underpinning package of support which ensures that lone parents are enabled at all times to help themselves and sustain their families, and which can adapt as lone parents move through the lifecycle and their needs and those of their children change. Such an approach is essential if the Government’s twin objectives of ending family poverty and increasing the number of lone parents in paid work are to have a realistic chance of success.
CHAPTER ONE

Lone parenting and paid employment

This chapter considers the position of lone parents in the United Kingdom, drawing on existing evidence on the circumstances of lone parents. It outlines the characteristics of lone parents and the changing nature of family composition, and then goes on to consider some comparative approaches to lone parenthood, drawing on the experience of other European countries and the different policy models they have adopted. Finally, it outlines the employment patterns of lone parents, and considers the barriers and facilitators to paid employment.

Characteristics of one-parent families

The composition of one-parent families has changed over the past hundred years. At the beginning of the twentieth century most were headed by widows; today most are headed by the divorced and never-married.1 Nonetheless, the published research shows a rich variety of family circumstances2 with over a third divorced, nearly a third of lone parents separated, a quarter separated from cohabiting, a fifth never married and a little under one in ten headed by lone fathers.3

This changing composition reflects general changes in family formation in the UK:4 the past 25 years have seen the growth both of cohabitation and of individuals choosing to remain single, alongside declining marriage rates, later marriages and increasing levels of divorce.

The number of one-parent families rose from just over half a million in 1971 to reach 1.6 million by 1996,5 with a recent report stating that:

one-parent families are now more than a fifth of all families with dependent children, caring for nearly two and a half million children . . . [and with incomes] typically less than half of those of two-parent families, with mean disposable incomes averaging a little over £100 a week.

(Marsh et al. 1997 xii and xiv)

So one-parent families represent large numbers of people living in the UK. The experience of living in a one-parent family, however, is characterised by poverty for the vast majority, as documented in survey after survey.6 Poverty marks the lives of present and future generations, with adverse effects on diet, health, housing and many other aspects of life for many lone parents and their children.

The number of children in one-parent families varies: nearly half have just one child, while over a third have two.7 Lone parents also vary in ethnic background8 and age, with only 14% under 25 years of age and 24% over 40;9 and they differ
in educational background with 39% having no qualifications compared to 11% who hold A-Level or higher qualifications.\textsuperscript{10}

So lone parents are very diverse, as are their families, yet they are often portrayed as a homogeneous group and are stigmatised as such. Moreover, the stigma attached to lone parenthood is often particularly strong – it has been seen by many commentators as something specific to the UK and incomprehensible to other Europeans.\textsuperscript{11} One of the reasons for this seems to be an enduring belief in the ideology of a ‘male breadwinner’, a significant factor in the UK where over 90% of one-parent families are headed by women. This is only part of the answer, however, as a belief in the ‘male breadwinner’ currently exists in a number of other countries, including Germany, Israel and the Netherlands,\textsuperscript{12} where lone motherhood does not attract the same moral opprobrium.

### Attitudes and policy

In the UK in recent years there has been something of an attack on lone parents, leading to a state of ‘moral panic’. There have been worries about excessive state expenditure on benefits for lone parents, benefit scrounging and welfare dependency, and concerns about the wellbeing of children and the loss of traditional family values with the absence of a male authority figure. In turn, lone parents have been held responsible for growing crime figures and the tendency for young men to behave badly.\textsuperscript{13} Some have even characterised lone parents as part of an ‘underclass’, evoking images of shadowy figures existing on the very margins of civilised society, with lone parenthood seen as part of an attempt by the feckless and morally reckless to secure cheap local authority housing at everyone else’s expense.

The reality for lone parents has, of course, been quite different. Research, for example, clearly shows that lone parenthood is not systematically planned, and that nine out of ten formerly married lone parents had all their children with just one partner. Many have experienced violence within relationships from which they needed to escape, while others look simply to form independent households.\textsuperscript{14} Many lone parents either engage in or would like to engage in paid work, while others choose to dedicate their efforts to their families, particularly when their children are under five years of age. Many also understand that existing gender inequality in the workplace can lead to low wages and poverty; and they fear disruption to continuity of benefits, to the ultimate detriment of the health of family members.

It is this which may make the UK somewhat different from its European partners. Two European countries have developed policy models which tend to favour a particular approach to lone parenting and employment over any other: Sweden and the Netherlands.

The policy developed in Sweden (paralleled to some extent in Denmark) has been referred to as the parent/worker model. This places emphasis on high levels of state-provided childcare and parental leave and a belief that fathers should share in the care of the children. By contrast, the Netherlands, which,
like the UK, has a traditional acceptance of the ‘male breadwinner’ ideology, has developed a ‘care-giving’ model with generous state benefits. What is perhaps most interesting about this is that, despite their differences, both models tend to deliver favourable outcomes for lone parents: no stigmatisation or marginalisation, low levels of poverty and the opportunity to form independent households.

Yet lone parenthood in the UK, as we have seen, is characterised by variety, or heterogeneity, with no consensus on whether they should be solely paid workers or solely carers. One-parent families come from a mixture of backgrounds; most wish to engage in paid work but others are anxious to continue full-time unpaid caring work with their children rather than take paid employment. In recognition of this, the present government’s New Deal for Lone Parents, as part of its ‘welfare to work’ programme, has no element of compulsion to take up paid work. While this is, and looks likely to remain, important for lone parents, there is also a clear need for other flexible policies and benefit reforms to mirror the variety of their circumstances.

Policy and provision need to be flexible and sensitive to the variety of lone parents’ needs. Putting too much emphasis on paid work as the route to full citizenship, paid for by participation, obligation and contribution to the community – despite a welcome focus on providing vocational training and education to prepare for this – has two main drawbacks. First, it assumes that sufficient jobs will somehow materialise, when present evidence on this gives at least pause for thought. Secondly, an emphasis on paid employment might serve to undermine those who are unable or unwilling to become involved. Research shows a figure of around 10% of lone parents on Income Support expressing no wish to enter paid employment: this may cause difficulties for lone parents in the years ahead.

Patterns of paid employment

The employment pattern of lone parents in the UK varies. Statistics show a fall in employment during the 1980s, with decreasing employment rates for lone mothers at a time when the proportion of working married mothers has grown and the number of jobs thought to be suitable for women has increased. Lone mothers with children under five years of age are the least likely to be found in paid employment, while divorced mothers and lone fathers are the most likely. Black lone mothers are also more likely to be in full-time jobs than white lone mothers. Some 20% of lone parents work 24 hours or more a week, 9% 16 to 23 hours, and 10% less than 16 hours, with 4% unemployed and 57% classified as inactive. Lone parents are concentrated in personal service, retail and junior non-manual (53%) and manual (40%) occupations.

The difficulties all parents have in combining paid work and family responsibilities account for the relatively low presence of lone mothers in UK employment figures. A recent comparative study of 20 (mostly European)
countries showed the UK as having the second lowest level of lone-parent full-time workers, after the Netherlands.23

Lone parents face many difficulties when taking paid employment. To begin with, a number of lone parents are not well qualified and do not have previous employment experience. They form part of a growing low-paid sector, and this low pay, when added to the fear of losing the benefits necessary to sustain their families, is a disincentive to taking paid work. This is compounded by potential loss of benefit continuity in the transition to work. It is also aggravated by a system of gender segregation operating in the labour market to the disadvantage of women; this is important for one-parent families, over 90% of which are headed by women.

Women still earn substantially less than men despite legislation on equal pay and sex discrimination,24 with female employment concentrated in catering, clerical, hairdressing, secretarial, sales, check-out, cleaning, personal service and repetitive assembly work.25 Changes in the labour market reflect the reduced bargaining position of all workers, with the work on offer frequently demanding ‘flexibility’26 on the part of employees, meaning short-term, part-time, agency-type working and hours that 20 years ago would have been labelled ‘unsocial’. With childcare costs in some cases greater than the wages on offer to lone parents, they often simply do not have the choice of paid work.

So what are the factors important for lone parents in taking and keeping employment?

**Facilitators and barriers to paid employment**

Recently published research outlines the main factors associated with lone parents who are found in employment:

*Lone parents’ chances of finding and keeping paid jobs are known to be associated with some powerfully predictive factors: having older children, especially older than five years; having fewer children, especially fewer than three; being older themselves, especially over 35 years; being an owner-occupier, especially if the house is not yet paid for; having been married, especially having been divorced too; and having some educational qualifications, especially A Levels or better.*

(Marsh et al. 1997:54)

‘Good health’ and ‘maintenance payments’ are also part of this list.27

It would appear that these factors need to work together to enable lone parents to take paid work, though precisely how and in which combinations is not altogether clear. Research nonetheless tends to support these factors, adding others which often militate against lone parents obtaining paid work. These include lack of skills, education and training; the cost and availability of childcare; the scarcity and location of paid work; the incompatibility of jobs with arrangements for childcare; the attitude of some employers; and the lack of personal confidence.28 Add to this the disincentive effects of low wages and fear of the discontinuity and inflexibility of benefit provisions, and the
magnitude of the task confronting lone parents in taking and keeping paid work becomes plain.

Some factors may be more important than others — in particular the availability, affordability and quality of childcare. Also significant are the payment of child maintenance and the low level of wages\(^1\) where the employment path may lead not to salvation, but to poverty.\(^2\) There have also been interruptions to benefits during the transition to paid work, leading one authority to recommend benefit ‘fast-track’ procedures for new claimants moving into work.\(^3\) Also, the Government’s ‘welfare to work’ strategy needs to include improved access to education and training to compensate for any lack of work experience or educational qualifications and to allow access to better-paid work — something raised in NCOPF’s submissions to the Education and Employment Select Committee.\(^4\)

Yet the cost to the health of lone parents and their families — whether in or out of paid employment — has still not received the attention it deserves. With so many members of the UK population living in one-parent families, this has become a major issue for present and future generations to address. All the more surprising perhaps that so little has been heard from lone parents themselves\(^5\) — especially outside of government reports.

We clearly need to hear the views of lone parents on the issues outlined in this chapter. It is to their voices that we now turn.

### Notes

2. Research into lone parents often excludes widows.
3. Estimates on the percentage of lone fathers vary. The research by Garnham and Knights (1994:4) notes 8% in 1991 whilst the report by MacDermott et al. (1998:13) talks of 7% for 1995. Marsh et al. (1997:10) refer to research which reported one in ten, but they note that ‘sample surveys persistently fail to find them’.
11. Lewis and Hobson (1997:18); though the stigma of sexual immorality attached to divorced and unmarried mothers is eroding (Land and Lewis 1998:143).
12. Lewis and Hobson (1997:27–8) who also refer to the USA.


15 Though both systems are coming under increasing pressure: in Sweden unemployment has been having an impact on lone mothers; while in the Netherlands consideration is being given to treating lone mothers as workers (Lewis and Hobson 1997:4,8,10 and 15).

16 MacDermott et al. (1998:30) note that where lone parents are involved in pilot New Deal areas only 6.2% ‘have been found work.’


21 Marsh et al. (1997:1–12); Bradshaw et al. (1996:13), using a slightly different definition of part-time work as less than 30 hours per week, give 17% of lone mothers working full-time compared to 24% part-time.


23 Bradshaw et al. (1996:9 and 13).


27 Marsh et al. (1997:54–5).


29 Bradshaw et al. (1996:59) who see childcare as crucial, though Marsh et al. (1997:44) see this as a potential problem – ‘a barrier . . . but not a decisive one’; see also Ford (1998:215 and 225) who sees the resolution of difficulties with childcare as a necessary but not sufficient condition, with many other factors also involved. Marsh et al. (1997:xvi) refer to the significance of maintenance payments. Speak et al. (1995:47) refer to low wages and debt (see also Rawlinson and Kempson 1994:1).

30 See also MacDermott (1998:36–7).

31 Marsh et al. (1997:54).


33 Lewis and Hobson (1997:16); though we do note the existence of some studies such as Ford (1998:211).
CHAPTER TWO

The survey

The factors discussed in the previous chapter need further exploration if we are to understand the complex relationship between lone parenting and paid employment. The research studies in existence have been undertaken predominantly by Government-funded researchers and academics. This report faithfully documents the voices of lone parents themselves. We begin by reporting findings from a postal survey. A copy of the questionnaire appears as Appendix I.

The survey and the sample

The findings reported in this chapter are from a postal survey of 200 lone parents conducted in 1997 by staff from One Parent Families and the University of East London.

The survey stemmed from projects which One Parent Families has been running over recent years in the areas of employment, training, benefits, childcare and maintenance. These projects have provided some insight into the attitudes of lone parents to work and parenting, and the difficulties they face in trying to move off Income Support and into work. In conducting the survey the intention was to explore these issues further and to examine which factors were most important. Although there is a growing body of research on these topics, it was thought that a small survey could throw some light on questions not yet addressed.

Questionnaires were sent to 70 lone parent members of NCOPF and 130 lone parents who had attended four NCOPF Employment Options Fairs in Sheffield, Newcastle, Milton Keynes and southeast London. Sixty-four questionnaires were returned from the NCOPF sample and 91 from the Options Fair group, giving an overall response rate of 78%.

Because of the nature of the sampling frame, and relatively small sample size, those responding to this survey may not be truly representative of the lone parent population. Recent research indicates that while three in ten are ready for work now, three in ten are already working near full-time, another three in ten will find work in the future whilst one in ten is never likely to work (our sample may more closely represent the three in ten lone parents who have been classified as ‘work-ready’). Also, comparison of the characteristics of our sample with that of the lone parents in the surveys in the DSS/PSI Programme of Research Into Low Income Families (PRILIF) (Marsh et al. 1997) suggests that our sample is somewhat older and more highly educated than lone parents generally, with a greater proportion working more than 16 hours a week, and a smaller proportion on Income Support, and having a somewhat older youngest child (see Table 1).
Table 1: Characteristics of sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Our Samples</th>
<th>PRILIF Survey 1994</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NCOPF Members (%)</td>
<td>Options Fair Attendances (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>32 (50)</td>
<td>44 (48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated from marriage</td>
<td>6 (9)</td>
<td>6 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed (^i)</td>
<td>3 (5)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried previously cohabiting (^i)</td>
<td>13 (20)</td>
<td>21 (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried not previously cohabiting (^i)</td>
<td>10 (16)</td>
<td>17 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>58 (91)</td>
<td>84 (92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6 (9)</td>
<td>7 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 25</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>7 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–29</td>
<td>5 (8)</td>
<td>17 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–35 (^i)</td>
<td>19 (30)</td>
<td>19 (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 +</td>
<td>40 (63)</td>
<td>48 (53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of dependent children</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>34 (53)</td>
<td>45 (50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>24 (38)</td>
<td>28 (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4 (6)</td>
<td>10 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 +</td>
<td>2 (3)</td>
<td>8 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>30 (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>34 (53)</td>
<td>53 (58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not employed</td>
<td>30 (47)</td>
<td>8 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 16 hours</td>
<td>5 (8)</td>
<td>42 (46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–24 hours</td>
<td>35 (55)</td>
<td>47 (52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–35 hours (^i)</td>
<td>10 (14)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 35 hours</td>
<td>13 (20)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Receipt of benefits</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Support</td>
<td>22 (34)</td>
<td>54 (59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Parent Benefit</td>
<td>52 (81)</td>
<td>58 (64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Credit</td>
<td>8 (13)</td>
<td>21 (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Receipt of maintenance</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receive some maintenance</td>
<td>25 (39)</td>
<td>30 (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest education qualification</strong> (^ix)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>5 (8)</td>
<td>10 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSE / O Level (^ix)</td>
<td>17 (27)</td>
<td>45 (49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Level</td>
<td>15 (23)</td>
<td>13 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree (^ix)</td>
<td>24 (35)</td>
<td>18 (20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although the characteristics of the sample mean that some caution needs to be taken in interpreting these findings, any bias is likely to highlight the difficulties of moving into employment and keeping it, since, if anything, our sample contains a higher proportion of those who might be thought to be better placed to find employment.

**Ethnic group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>60 (94)</th>
<th>80 (88)</th>
<th>140 (90)</th>
<th>94</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black-Caribbean</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
<td>5 (3)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black-African</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3 (5)</td>
<td>5 (6)</td>
<td>8 (5)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes to table 1**

i. The 1994 PRILIF survey (Programme of Research into Low Income Families) is the latest in the DSS / PSI programme of research. It is based on interviews with 880 lone parents in Great Britain (but not Northern Ireland).

ii. Not all % columns add up to 100% because of rounding.

iii. The ‘widowed’ category does not appear in the PRILIF survey.

iv. PRILIF uses the category ‘separated from cohabitant’.

v. PRILIF uses the category ‘never lived as a couple’.

vi. PRILIF uses 34 as the cut-off point.

vii. PRILIF uses 24+ hours per week.

viii. For our samples those only possessing vocational qualifications have been excluded. This category represents approximately 5% of our sample.

ix. PRILIF uses ‘O Level + City & Guilds qualifications’.

x. PRILIF uses ‘above A Level’.

Lone parents have two major responsibilities: one is to provide care for their children, and the other is to provide financially for their families. Their decisions about how to balance these two often competing responsibilities have a considerable impact on their decisions about training, education and employment. Sixteen hours a week is an important cut-off point because a claimant can work up to 16 hours and still claim Income Support. This analysis begins by looking at lone parents’ employment preferences and the reasons why some lone parents feel that they need to stay at home full-time and not take a job.

As was noted earlier, a higher proportion of our sample reported that they were employed for more than 16 hours a week than in larger-scale surveys. The latter can, with some justification, claim to be more representative of the lone parent population as a whole. Those lone parents who were not employed or who were working less than 16 hours per week were asked to indicate their preferences in relation to employment; nearly three in ten said they would prefer to be employed for more than 16 hours per week and this proportion rose to just over half for those wishing to be employed for more than 16 hours a week within the next two years.
While this lends support to the idea that many lone parents would prefer to work, 20 lone parents, or one in five, who were either not working or were working for less than 16 hours a week, expressed a preference not to work more than 16 hours a week within the next two years. They were asked to give their reasons.

The most common reason given (by 15 of the 20 respondents) was that their children needed them to be at home. Some added that they also preferred to be at home with their children. Both of these responses were in tune with the care-giving model found in the Netherlands noted in chapter one. Several mentioned specifically that they needed to be at home with children under five years old. One lone parent said:

*Children need the support of one parent at an early age.*

Another felt that it was particularly important for a lone parent with young children to stay at home because:

*A strong bond needs to form, to ensure that the single parent can provide effective guidance later.*

Two respondents said they wanted to wait until their children were settled into school. One said that she would work if she could obtain a term-time job. The welfare and happiness of their children was clearly at the forefront of many of the respondents’ minds. One wrote:

*I would find it difficult finding someone to look after my child more than 16 hours and my child would be unhappy.*

Another, who was working over 35 hours a week, expressed the pain of working long hours:

*I hate working full-time, I am missing my children.*

One lone parent described the stresses of working on herself and her children:

*I am very tired after a full day’s work. It is very difficult to give time to the children in the evening. Maintaining a bedtime routine is very hard and often I don’t eat till after they are in bed.*

The second most common reason for not wanting a job within the next two years was that lone parents were studying. Ten were in education, mostly full-time, mainly doing degrees. Six of these students had been employed in the recent past, two for over 16 hours a week, the rest for under 16 hours. The motivation to study was described by one student who wrote:

*I am currently in the second year of an Access course at college and I would like to finish and go to university, which will hopefully improve my chances of earning a decent living wage to support my family and also for my own satisfaction.*

Three lone parents wrote about being financially worse off if they worked. Two of these were on Income Support and one, who was working 16 hours a week, was worse off because of the cost of after-school childcare.
Two lone parents gave illness or disability as the reason they preferred not to be employed within the next two years. Lone parents were also asked if they or any of their children had an illness or disability which made it difficult to take on paid employment. 21 of the 128 lone parents who answered this question (one in six) reported that this was the cause.

One lone parent feared being too exhausted or stressed by parenting and employment. Another, who was clearly about to give up searching for work, wrote:

I am applying for jobs at quite an expense every week and I have had no response.

One lone parent planned to run a business and was doing research and slowly setting this up.

Obstacles to employment – the financial hurdle

For those parents who wish to enter employment, the survey results point to a range of obstacles. Perhaps the major one is financial. Lone parents have to decide whether or not they would be financially better-off in work. The problem most commonly reported among those parents either in employment, or who have looked for employment in the recent past, was that the work available simply did not cover all the costs of keeping their family. This was mentioned by 54% of the sample.

Childcare costs

A significant factor in calculating whether parents would be financially worse off is the cost of childcare. This was, indeed, the most frequently reported reason for work not covering costs (mentioned by some 41% of the sample). The introduction of the Working Families’ Tax Credit (WFTC) in October 1999 to cover 70% of childcare costs up to a ceiling for low income earners can therefore be seen as a significant contribution to removing this obstacle to work. However, other frequently mentioned difficulties urge caution as to the effectiveness of this measure by itself. Firstly, a sizeable proportion of parents (39%) cited the difficulty of being unable to give sufficient time or care to their children, others mentioned that childcare was unobtainable (28%) or were not satisfied with the childcare which was available (17%).

Lone parents who were not in employment were asked whether they could obtain free childcare from a friend or relative in order take up a job. The overwhelming majority (67 respondents – or four in five of those replying) stated that they could not obtain free childcare, with only 18 indicating that free childcare was available. The two most common problems were that relatives and friends would not be able to commit enough time (40 respondents), and that the relatives and friends were themselves employed (38 respondents).
Some lone parents felt that grandparents were too old, or were ill, and would not be able to cope on a regular basis.

At the time of the survey a £60 childcare disregard was available to low wage parents through the Family Credit, Disability Working Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit schemes. This increased to £100 for families with more than one child. Very few of the lone parents asked made use of this. A worrying 87 lone parents stated that they had not seen any information about the childcare allowance. Of the 17 who had applied to the scheme and been turned down, the main reason given for this was that their youngest child was over 11 years of age and therefore too old to qualify (5 respondents). Four lone parents were not eligible because they were already receiving maximum Family Credit. There was a maximum amount of Family Credit based on family size and the childcare disregard was not paid in addition to this maximum amount. Instead, it acted to reduce wages, thus increasing Family Credit entitlement. As a result lone parents with the very lowest wages and in receipt of the maximum benefit gained no advantage from the disregard and got no additional help with childcare costs. Three lone parents were turned down because they were not using registered childcare.

It was noticeable that of those who currently had childcare arrangements, the use of relatives and friends (see Table 2) was the most frequently mentioned. For these families to derive any benefit from the Working Families’ Tax Credit, a sizeable proportion of the parents would have to rearrange their childcare and transfer from informal to formal arrangements, with all the attendant practical and emotional difficulties that may involve.

Further analysis of the original data suggests that a high proportion of those in employment have access to free or low-cost childcare, with only 13% of those in employment reporting that they paid more than £41 a week (26% of those working full-time). Of those not in employment a high proportion (82%) indicated that they were unable to obtain access to free childcare.

Childcare is not the only consideration that matters in a parent’s financial calculations: the costs of travelling to work, mortgages and rent, and managing financially for the first weeks of employment all seem to be significant problems for a large proportion of parents, faced with available jobs which are often low paid.

Table 2: What type of childcare do you use?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Childcare</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registered childminder</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-registered childminder</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local authority nursery</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private nursery</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery school</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday play scheme</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After-school clubs</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: If you felt the work available did not cover your costs what were the main reasons?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>As % of total sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mortgage costs</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The work was part-time</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was not qualified for better paid work</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare costs were high</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The costs of travelling to work</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costs of renting</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties of managing financially in first weeks of employment</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Respondents could select more than one category.
Child maintenance

Maintenance, if paid regularly, can be used by lone parents to supplement their wages and meet their children’s costs. In theory, the receipt of maintenance could help lone parents overcome some of the difficulties which they face in coming off Income Support. From October 1999, lone parents have been able to keep all child maintenance paid without it affecting the amount of their WFTC. Therefore, there are new incentives to apply for it.

Marsh et al. (1997:92) talk of receiving maintenance as adding hugely to parents’ incentives to work, although they do not present data which shows this incentive to be working in practice. Our own survey suggests that maintenance is not a significant factor in helping many parents enter employment, a conclusion complemented by the research of Bryson et al. (1997:40) who argue that maintenance may help a limited number, but only where it is a sufficiently large amount. In our sample, the number of lone parents who said receiving maintenance made it easier to be employed were outnumbered by almost three to one by those who said it makes no difference (see Table 4).

So far we have focused on the financial aspects of deciding whether or not to enter employment, but a sizeable number of parents seemed to be concerned specifically with how working would affect their parenting.

Obstacles to employment – parenting

Many lone parents were concerned that the available work would not give them sufficient time for their children. The most frequently mentioned reason was that of working during school holidays (45% of the sample). Working outside school hours and a lack of time off to look after sick children were also frequently reported.

As well as financial and childcare considerations, respondents also mentioned a wide range of additional factors. Some stated that there were few jobs available in their area; others felt that lack of recent work experience jeopardised their chances of obtaining work. One explained that, because she had been unable to offset her childcare costs against wages while on Income Support, she had been unable to gain work experience. When her children were older, lack of recent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of total sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Too long hours</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evening work</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend work</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different shifts</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working during school holiday</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working outside school hours</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was no time off to look after sick children</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: If you receive maintenance indicate which of the following statements is nearest your experience?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Receiving maintenance makes it more difficult for me to be employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Receiving maintenance makes it easier to be employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Receiving maintenance does not affect my ability to be employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: If you felt the work available would not allow you to give sufficient time to your children what were the main reasons?
work experience had prevented her from obtaining a job. Another respondent described a related problem:

Now my children are older and need less attention, I am over 50 and therefore unemployable.

Some lone parents were also caring for elderly relatives and, not surprisingly, felt unable to cope with a job in addition to this extra responsibility.

A number of lone parents were concerned about job insecurity. Their major concern, expressed by 31, was that jobs were temporary. A further 20 had experienced the problem that jobs did not provide fixed hours each week and 15 feared redundancy.

Lack of public transport was a problem for many lone parents who did not own a car. The high cost of public transport, particularly in rural areas, was also a problem especially when considered in addition to high childcare costs for a family living on a single wage.

Some lone parents described the hidden costs of coming off Income Support. They no longer received free school dinners or free dental treatment, and they had to pay Council Tax. Some had built up debts while on Income Support and they had to pay these off when they got a job.

Discrimination was perceived as a problem by some lone parents looking for work. One lone father felt that he was discriminated against because of employers’ attitudes towards male single parents. One lone mother explained:

I felt penalised for being a lone parent, told that I was not in any way suitable for a job because I looked like I dressed as a single mum.

Many lone parents felt that it was the combination of difficulties they faced which caused most problems:

I have to find a job where hours fit in with first the minders, then work, then school. It does take a lot sometimes to fit everything together, but even when you finally do redundancy looms.

Another listed the difficulties as:

Obtaining employment which would allow time for dropping children at school/collection times for children’s illness/holidays/requirements for attending school meetings/functions.

For another it was the combination of the costs of childcare for a young child and the costs of a mortgage, not met by in-work benefits, which caused the difficulties. Distressingly, these were resolved when the woman lost her home and went to live with her parents.
Qualifications, studying and employment

Thirty-three lone parents (21% of the total sample) identified their lack of qualifications for better-paid work as one of the main reasons why they felt that the work available to them did not cover their costs.

An interesting sub-group, although smaller in number, are the 24 lone parents with O Levels or GCSEs and who are working more than 16 hours a week. The majority of lone parents in this group were working between 16 and 23 hours a week and receiving Family Credit (see Table 6). The common factor amongst those of the sub-group who were not receiving Family Credit was that they were working over 35 hours a week. These findings would appear to indicate that for most of the group of lone parents with modest qualifications in this sample, there is a choice between reliance on Family Credit to supplement part-time wages or working over 35 hours a week, which is a considerable time commitment for sole parents.

Table 6: Number of lone parents with O Levels/GCSEs and working over 16 hours a week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Receipt of benefit</th>
<th>Hours of work</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16–23</td>
<td>16–23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Credit</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability Working</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Family Credit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or Disability Working Allowance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24–35</td>
<td>24–35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Over 35</td>
<td>Over 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The lone parents with O Levels or GCSEs and claiming Family Credit overwhelmingly described their main problem as earning enough to cover their costs. Some mentioned that lack of qualifications were a particular aspect of this problem, and of the 14 lone parents in this category, 11 were taking courses as well as working. Amongst this group the desire to improve their situation appeared to be strong, although there were some obstacles in the way, with several reporting problems with the childcare and travel costs incurred in studying. Of the three lone parents in this group not studying two were working between 24 and 35 hours a week and the third had a disability.

Nonetheless, even with this small group there was a variety of circumstances. Although some said that it was difficult to find enough time for their children, only two stated a preference for working less than 16 hours a week. Twelve of the 14 respondents had been lone parents for over three years; six of these had been lone parents for eight to ten years. Only two members of the group received the childcare disregard, four had been turned down and three stated that they had received no information on the disregard.

Of the total of 64 lone parents with O Levels or GCSEs, a further ten were employed for less than 16 hours and 30 were not working. Sixteen lone parents had no qualifications, of those only four were working over 16 hours a week with two working less than 16 hours.
Many lone parents in the sample as a whole had tried to improve their position by taking an educational course or training. Eighty-one per cent said that they had tried to take an educational or training course in the last three years, or since becoming a lone parent if that was less; of those, 61% (95) had begun the course or training. 25% (38) had secured a grant for full-time study.

The most common difficulty encountered by lone parents trying to take a course or training was balancing their parental role and studying, which was a problem for an overwhelming 53% (or 82) lone parents. One explained that:

_ Studying at home is very isolating and a small child is a huge interruption to study, even in the evening._

Availability of childcare, the cost of childcare and the cost of courses were difficulties experienced by a substantial proportion of these lone parents. Others mentioned the cost of transport to the place of study. It is clear that when budgets are very tight any small extra expense can cause major problems.

One lone parent, who had successfully completed a degree and a professional qualification, was still unable to find work and felt that she was overqualified and should not have undertaken the courses because she could not afford them.

### Table 7: Difficulties encountered in taking education courses or training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of total sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Costs of course</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costs of childcare</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of childcare</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing parental role and study</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Respondents could select more than one category.*

### Employment services

Only a small number of lone parents in the sample had used or tried to make use of the various forms of assistance for unemployed people seeking work that are provided by the Employment Service. Job Clubs were seen as the most relevant, attracting 25 lone parents; Job Search Seminars, Job Review Workshops and Work Trials attracted eight, five and three lone parents respectively. The greatest difficulties encountered were availability of childcare, and the hours of the activities, with 10 responses each.

One lone parent described how inflexible Job Club rules were incompatible with the restrictions on her as a lone parent:

_ I wanted to use the Job Club’s typing equipment for a job application form and was told that I had to join the Club. Subsequently I was told that if I failed to attend the Club I would lose my benefit. This is not ideal for a single parent who has to be available at certain times for their child._
Another lone parent felt that:

No consideration was given to women, parents, single parents. It was very intimidating. Run by men for men.

Some lone parents had problems because they wanted to work part-time and:

Job Clubs did not consider part-time work to be a valid option.

Real lives and public policies

These findings, taken together, point to a number of conclusions. The first is that lone parents are far from being a homogeneous category — there are great differences in preferences, personal circumstances and opportunities. Second, lone parenthood presents an often extremely complex set of difficulties. Third, the present dual thrust of government policy towards providing better childcare and greater incentives to work does seem to fit the preferences and address some of the perceived difficulties of a large proportion of our sample. Equally, however, even such a dual policy is likely to fail to help substantial numbers of lone parents and, if applied indiscriminately, may serve further to stigmatise and penalise those unable to find suitable employment or those who wish to put parenting before employment (or as they might see it, putting their children’s needs first).

Notes

1 Millar and Ford (1998:256)

2 Some caution should be exercised when interpreting these results due to the low cell sizes.
CHAPTER THREE

The focus groups

[We] have eaten porridge five nights on the trot and also for breakfast and for lunch... we'd not got anything else in the cupboard!

(R1)

This chapter develops the issues which the respondents identified as the most important, and attempts to give a deeper insight into the attitudes, problems and needs identified by the quantitative data. To this end we make extensive use of quotes from our lone parents.

Methods

The issues were explored by using a ‘focus group’, with modifications or adaptations to its structure to allow for concerns about its use as a research instrument. In this case, two small groups of lone parents (making ten people in all) were invited to discuss the issues, one located in a northern English town and one in a southern town, enabling different geographical areas to be represented. This enabled in-depth discussion with respondents, closer to the conventional one-to-one interview used in social scientific research, but complemented by cross-validation as discussion developed.

The discussions were taped and the questions were answered in a variety of ways throughout as is usual with qualitative in-depth interviews (see Appendix II for the discussion schedule). The overall findings were similar to those from the questionnaire.

Participants

The two groups represented different types of parent – the widowed, the divorced, the never married-never cohabited, the separated from cohabiting and the separated but not divorced. They were of an ethnic mix: two were Afro-Caribbean (one man, one woman), one Pakistani, seven white; there were nine women and one man. Four of the 10 were in part-time, paid employment.

The age range of the parents was 28 to 47; the ages of their children ranged from three to 15 years – nineteen children altogether. The length of time as a lone parent also varied as indicated below in the group profiles.

Northern group

R1 4 years divorced (13 years married) – not in paid employment, had studied for A Levels, now studying for degree full-time.

R2 7 years widowed (8 years married) – no courses taken, in part-time work.
R3  3 years divorced (2 years married) – had just finished a degree, full-time.
R4  5 years, never married – working part-time, had undertaken diploma and technical courses (interrupted because of her work/family responsibilities).

**Southern group**

R5  11 years (5 years cohabited; never married) – not in paid employment, hairdressing qualification not used, now following a course in counselling.
R6  6 years divorced (5 years married) – not in paid employment; had taken many courses and now a course in counselling.
R7  5 years separated (together 10 years) – in part-time work.
R8  3 years divorced (4 years married) – taking an Access course and in part-time work.
R9  3 years (6 years cohabited; never married) – interior design by correspondence, towards a degree later.
R10  2 years (5 years cohabited; never married) – not in paid employment; had completed a number of vocational courses.

**The importance of the family and the need for independent households**

The picture that emerged of these lone parents was one of ongoing struggle and a fierce commitment to their children and the future of them all as a family. This commitment showed itself primarily in their determination to secure a good job (eventually) and to 'come off benefit'. They were adamant that being claimants and lone parents stigmatised and marginalised them as 'undeserving scroungers'. The participants were doing everything they could to reach the point where they would not be targeted by others as failures. They wanted eventually to be in a good job, earning enough to keep their families as fully independent households without being on benefit. They were equally adamant that those lone parents who needed to stay at home should not be stigmatised or marginalised.

They were breadwinners, but breadwinners who suffered because the wages they earned were invariably low. The expense of childcare, essential if they were to work, was beyond many of them, with benefits insufficient to cover these expenses. In the light of these enormous barriers they needed not only considerable commitment – something they all had – they also needed healthy and strong constitutions and the help and support of their friends and relatives. Without this support many of them would have been lost:

*I could never have gone to university if it hadn’t been for my parents. (R3)*

and:

*My mother is disabled and is cared for by my father; they are so proud of what I’m doing, they support me as much as they can, they help with childcare. (R1)*
Without family support, things take longer, plans are delayed, schedules interrupted:

- I am going back to my course soon; I found it too much to carry on with it and work but now my child is at school, I’m going to continue. (R4)
- The trouble is getting to that point – it takes forever. (R10)
- I want to go to work because I want to prove to my children I’m not just a mum – I’m a working mum as well. I want them to grow up with that attitude that mum goes to work, so that they will then grow up with the attitude of wanting to work. (R5)

The family as a concept meant themselves and their children, as one said:

- It’s me, my daughter and my cat, that’s my family. (R3)

Another:

- It’s me and my children, we’re a team and we work together. (R1)

and:

- My family is me and him and it’s very strong. (R4)

Again, R2 this time:

- My family is stronger now – we do everything together as a little unit. (R2)

Finally:

- We make more of an effort now I’m on my own. (R5)

Their lives are hard – a continuing struggle with bureaucracy, health, money and being stigmatised by others. They are proud of their well-behaved and responsible children:

- You have to prove all the time that you can look after them, keep them clean and put a meal on the table; you have to try to be one better than everybody else. (R4)

- The hardest job in the world is bringing up kids. No one appears concerned that you are responsible for this person, how they grow up and how they are respected by society. (R8 endorsed by R5)

They are angered by and resentful of the image of lone parents presented in the media and in some parliamentary circles:

- When ‘they’ talk about one-parent families on the news it is the ones at home claiming all the benefits, with the children running round in dirty nappies . . . 16 kids and about eight dads, they class every single parent as that . . . They say you get pregnant to get a house. I didn’t do it for a house and I didn’t get a house. (R4)

The Yudkin and Holme research of the early 1960s refuted the idea of ‘latchkey kids’ showing that children of mothers at work were more likely to be responsible and mature than those children with stay-at-home mothers:
Lone parents are not all unmarried. Most people are divorced – the marriage didn’t work and there is nothing they can do about it, they have to do their best to bring their kids up. It’s as if ‘they’ think you do it on purpose and are out to get what you can. (R3)

and:

You’ve got to be hard up if you are living on benefit. (R4)

There does not appear to be the same stigma or stereotyping of the absent fathers of the children, and the women are fully aware of the double standards:

We can’t hide the fact that we’ve got them [children]. You can see us walking round with them. You can’t point to a man and say he’s got three kids and is not paying for them – you can’t tell. Men as fathers are invisible! (R1 endorsed by 2, 3, repeated by 4, 5, 6 and 10)

Contemplating lone parenthood: jobs, education and parenting

Wages are not enough and it’s difficult getting flexibility round children because no employers will do that . . . There are some creches but you’re talking about £80 per child – they don’t do it for nothing. (R10 with two children endorsed by R7 with four children)

The lone parents were asked if they work, or want to work or opt to go to college and train for something. Their attitudes change over time. At the break-up of relationships there is a period of confusion, anger, ill health, guilt and worry about the children’s health and future and whether they can cope:

You feel guilty about not being able to give them enough – you want to give them a bit of future. (R10 endorsed by R6)

R1 wanted to stay at home with her young children:

If I’d had enough money I would have stayed at home with my kids . . . it has been such a wrench to go out and do something that would get me a job at the end of it. I was devastated . . . I hated everybody, the Government especially, because I felt so forced into doing what didn’t feel natural to me.

Over time, nonetheless, her children started school, so that:

Now I don’t feel so forced, the kids are at school and I don’t feel guilty at leaving them because they are not there. The guilt at first was unbelievable. (R1)

This lone parent gave up benefit for an educational grant but lost out financially. Her father and disabled mother helped with childcare after school but it was a struggle for them all.

All the parents felt guilty, some very strongly. They got used to this feeling, but emphasised the fact that it never went away. Other respondents had always wanted to work; one had just finished her degree and was now looking for a job:

The sort of jobs I’m looking for are as a graduate now and with enough money to be able to afford childcare. (R3)
The only employment she had been offered, however, were jobs either in an office or in a shop. This is a common problem for women, because the kind of work offered is invariably part-time and unskilled and the hours incompatible with childcare responsibilities. She could, and did, refuse them to wait for better opportunities because she was living with her parents, without whom ‘I would not have been able to do a degree at all’. But she was working toward being independent of them ‘as soon as possible.’

As respondent R9 explained:

The main reason why I’m doing the diploma is that it will let me earn enough to cover childcare costs for four children, one with special needs. I saved up for four years to do this course . . . children are all now at school so I have the day.

Another commented that hours of work were never right:

Employers are no help. (R2)

Balancing lone parenting and paid employment

One lone parent said that she had always wanted to work rather than stay at home and was now working part-time.

I’d like to work full-time but I can’t afford to . . . you lose out on your Family Credit and Housing Benefit. Every six months there is a hassle to get it. (R4)

She had tried full-time employment working from 8.30 am to 6.00 pm when her child was not much more than a baby. She had experienced these difficulties first-hand. This kind of bureaucratic ‘hassle’ was becoming such that its continued recurrence, together with the difficulty of managing everyday problems, produced a lot of strain. At one time:

The hassles with ‘social security’ got so bad I almost gave up work, the money would be less but they’d stop hassling me. (R4)

As another put it:

Any work you do becomes involved with your benefits – if you get work [that] then knocks the benefit on the head, so you have to decide to work or not. (R10)

R7 added:

I’m on Income Support and how to get off it and earn enough to support me and the children . . . it’s a trap . . . I’ve tried every avenue, I want to better myself but can’t.

The low wages, inadequate benefits and expensive childcare, together with lack of maintenance (or its irregularity) were problems enough on their own. On top of these there were health and diet issues which resulted in more feelings of guilt. There was a complex set of factors at play, exacerbated by the absence or irregularity of maintenance:

What’s maintenance? (R3).
It’s Catch 22. (R5)

He earns a lot of money but has never, ever, paid anything towards my two children. (R8)

Only one of the northern group had received maintenance, which at £10 a week was not a fortune. It was collected irregularly by the court, which always had to be reminded to collect it – sometimes months would go by:

I could never rely on it coming. (R4)

Two members of the southern group did receive maintenance, one £10 a week and another £20 a week. R8, R6 and R5 had provided the CSA with details of their ex-partners, but had heard nothing since.

R10 commented:

But it comes off any money in benefits so I’m not really benefiting.

R2, managing on a widow’s pension, commented:

My child allowance comes straight out of the Post Office and goes to pay my poll tax. I object very strongly against using my child allowance to pay my poll tax – but it’s the only way I can do it.

Healthy diets full of fruit and fresh vegetables were unlikely, however much they were wanted, and dieticians’ advice made the mothers very angry:

Dieticians on radio and television say eat more fruit and veg. I say give me the [expletive] money to get them then . . . My kids and I have eaten porridge five nights on the trot and also for breakfast and for lunch. People had difficulty in believing me but it’s true, we’d not got anything else in the cupboard . . . From being reasonably healthy before the break, we have been in and out of hospital, all the family, sometimes it was life-threatening and it all happened in the same year . . . Our diet didn’t help, we’d not eaten fresh fruit or veg in that year, just couldn’t afford it, literally. (R1)

Another lone parent’s family was ill for 15 months with all of them losing weight. As suggested previously by R4:

You’ve got to be hard up if you are living on benefit.

Benefits and part-time work leave the lone parent without the option of buying treats or taking children on outings; they are certainly not able to go out for their own pleasure, because childcare is too expensive. The resulting isolation could produce significant loneliness for lone parents:

You can’t go out because you’ve no money, you’ve got no work, all you have to talk about is ‘this child’ – you need something else. (R4)

That’s right, and you’re left not knowing what you could do – no one tells you anything. (R2)

This also results in a lack of knowledge about benefits or changes to benefits which might be available, such as the £60 allowance for childcare in certain means-tested benefits. This takes the form of a disregard of earnings in the calculation of Family Credit, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. It was
introduced at £40 in 1994, increased to £60 in 1996; an additional £100 ceiling for two or more children was introduced in 1998. This had been used (when it was £40) by one mother in the northern group who said it had been useful for a while, though she had not used it since. Nevertheless, childcare is still too expensive:

| I paid £40 for three days! (R3) |
| There is all this benefit unclaimed but ‘they’ never tell you what you are entitled to; you have to discover this accidentally. (R2 repeated by R6) |

None of the southern group had made use of the childcare disregard because:

| All our children are different ages so it’s no good; it’s after-school clubs and holidays we need it for. (R7 endorsed by R5) |

Information about benefits was not readily or easily available – it seemed to be something they had to find out for themselves. They had experienced obstruction, and they felt that childcare was almost non-existent anyway or was simply too expensive; and their relatives were not a permanently reliable source – when indeed there was a relative to ask.

### Changing expectations

The groups were asked about changes to their own lives and about any social changes that might affect them. They all agreed that:

| Girls [at school] now want careers . . . families are breaking up where the women have finally said, ‘I want something for me. I’m not going to be the little mother sat there bringing up the children and drawing my pension at 65’ – they don’t want it, they want something out of life. [Anyway] women have always worked. (R2 endorsed by R1 and R4) |

State pensions, it was felt, would not be of much value, or perhaps available at all, when today’s school children grew up.

R2 was a lone parent who did want to go back to work full-time but who had a child with a chronic condition which had curbed any career she might have had:

| But she was my total responsibility and she came first. (R2) |

In fact she did work a few hours a week (approximately ten) but it was a variable amount and not worked regularly every week.

The lone parents themselves saw no stigma in being a lone parent:

| We are just families with one parent. (R5, endorsed by R6, R8 and R10) |
| We count for such a large group now. (R1, endorsed by R2, R3 and R4) |
| [and we want] a chance to prove ourselves. (R8) |

They were dismayed at government cutbacks for lone parents which they saw as unacceptable:
It is, or should be, an accepted thing these days [to be a lone parent] . . . you
don’t have to get married. (R4, endorsed by R2 and R3)

They talked about their own motivation to work or study as a way of changing
their own lives. They all regretted not doing all they could have done when they
were eighteen:

| I could have gone on to get the better-grade A Levels, but the motivation just
was not there. (R4) |
| I wish I’d . . . not left school because it would have been easier now. I’m doing a
two-year course in four years. I’d have been well on in my career by now. (R4) |
| I was told during my married life I was stupid and I did it to prove to myself
that I wasn’t. (R3 repeated by R5 and R6) |

A growing determination

The break-up of a deteriorating relationship, with its previous problems of
violence and confusion, seems to bring maturity, responsibility and motivation
into sharp focus. Once through the initial period, lone parents in this position
found that:

| You wake up on the first morning of the rest of your life and think, I’ve got a
child, and you begin to devote some time to that child. Whereas, while you
were constantly mentally and physically fighting with a partner you didn’t
have time to do that. (R3, endorsed by R1) |

Motivation then, or some part of it, together with focus and commitment . . .

| . . . come[s] because you now have different reasons. (R3) |
| With hindsight I would rather not have done what I’m doing now because of
all the problems I’ve got, but having said that, the motivation I’ve got now far
outweighs anything I felt when I was eighteen. (R1) |

They all had a view of their own and their children’s future; some would make
it, others would find the problems simply insuperable. But the ideology put
forward in the recent past about ‘back to basics’ and ‘moral values’ and the
importance of having two-parent families left them very angry.

| It gets to me when on television ‘they’ come on and talk about family values,
let’s get back to family values – I might be a single parent but my children
have reports on them that they are so well behaved and polite and you can
see people thinking – she’s a single parent and she’s got children like that?
It’s teamwork and I emphasise that at home. They . . . help Mummy to do
her studying so she gets her exams; when I’ve come back and have passed
my exams they are chuffed to bits. We’ve got a goal we’re aiming for, we are
all going to [somewhere special as a big treat] – it’s not something you can
do on the dole. I am coming off the dole because I want to support my kids
to do what they want to do! . . . I do things for myself now and I’m not
neglecting them . . . I am coming to terms with being on my own and when
the children have grown up and left home I won’t be left with nothing for
myself. (R1) |
These sentiments were expressed by all the respondents. As has already been said:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>We are just families with one parent. (R5, endorsed by R6, R8 and R10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Because you are one on your own you have to work together with your children – you work twice as hard with your children to deny the stereotype of the lone-parent family . . . children mature, they grow up very quickly and responsibly and learn about life at an early age. (R2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They were all agreed about the quality of the relationship with their children being now so much better; ‘quality time’ is the way they described it. How much they could manage was often in question but the ‘togetherness’ of these parents and children was not in doubt.

### Future prospects and policy

Having considered experiences and difficulties the groups were asked what changes they would suggest to help them in their role as parents. The first priority identified was financial support:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support is what you don’t get as a single parent. If you had it, it would free you up to be able to pay for childcare, college, work, or to do something for yourself. It would open so many doors . . . it is a feeling of being held back [all the time]. When I was on Income Support we couldn’t do anything, I was unable to send the children on school trips [her brother would meet the cost on some occasions]. (R1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We have to pay because if you don’t the whole class can’t go; your children are stopping the rest of the class from going. (R4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The children were asked by teachers for ‘donations’:

| The cost of the trip will be £4.00 and we would like a donation but if we don’t get donations then the trip will be cancelled. If you don’t pay, no one goes. (R2) |

They all thought this a very unfair type of discrimination which, as both groups pointed out, applies also to very poor two-parent families. Yet all were in agreement that living costs for two-parent families were much the same as theirs as one-parent families:

| I have to put the cooker on to cook tea for me and my little boy just the same as if there were a man in the house bringing in another wage – it is the same for heating bills. There’s not many bills that differentiate whether there is one adult or two. (R4) |

All agreed that lower earnings limits for National Insurance should be revised, that women’s wages should be closer to men’s, that childcare provision should be more easily available and affordable and that benefits should be made more flexible to meet their identified needs:
If children learn more in the first five years then they need the stimulation of nurseries. (R2)

They call four days of nursery provision a whole week now. (R2)

Why not like other countries, is it Finland? It should be affordable and available and we would work. (R4)

If we could earn enough money to do these things ourselves we would, no one wants to be on benefit. (R1 endorsed by others in both groups)

Women earn less than men, well it’s wrong, we need to earn . . . (R2)

We’re getting to be an underclass. (R2 endorsed by the others in the northern group)

Concluding comments on the focus groups

These groups of lone parents were very angry at the image of – in their own words:

Feckless youngsters producing babies to get benefits and houses and their being scapegoated because of it:

All we are trying to be is to be a member of society who can hold their head up high and say, look I’ve done this and I’m contributing to society – the ex-partners can walk away and do this; they haven’t got the children, they haven’t got the responsibility, so why can’t the government accept that women in this situation, most of them, want to get out there and be a part of that society – she should not have to justify that she’s done it with all these children. (R2)

We shouldn’t be treated as different because everywhere you look there are single-parent families. (R4 also endorsed by others in both groups)

. . . the attitude that mothers are at home, father at work . . . is just not true any more. (R2 endorsed by R1 and R3)

Their lives are a continuous struggle to remain healthy, mentally and physically, to be both breadwinners and an emotional support for their children – something they often need themselves. This struggle continues in the face of patches of ill health, obstructive bureaucracy in the benefit system and a permanently low income. These lone parents faced an ongoing struggle with independent childcare and inconvenient hours of work incompatible with childcare responsibilities, something true for both female and male one-parent families.

The responsibility of being a lone parent, the only one ‘for’ the family, was felt very strongly:

At times you are torn in two by the responsibility. (R4, with both groups highlighting and endorsing this)
Those who have relatives, particularly parents, who can help with children, are ‘better off’ than those who have recourse only to nurseries and other forms of expensive childcare. One of the respondents in the northern group was in this category, yet life was still a constant headache. The majority of the southern group had much less help.

The situation is eased somewhat when the child (or children) get older. For one lone parent with a teenage child who needed care for chronic ill health, some of the earlier difficulties were over. Another, younger child, had special needs and was likely to need more help and for much longer. But those who have small children under five and of infant-school age do become overwhelmed for that time. The group felt the support from society was mean, miserly and marginalising, doing nothing to recognise their position as self-respecting parents. They felt they had the same basic moral values for their families as had been passed on to them by their original families. They did not see themselves as having failed at marriage:

\[ \ldots \text{the fact that he hit me because he got so drunk had got nothing to do with it – [despite the attitude that] 'you should have stayed with your husband'. (R1) } \]

All members of both groups wanted to work, have a career and be independent of benefit and stigmatisation. A number of them had been able to take up educational courses so that better job opportunities would be available to them, and others had begun educational foundation courses. Their one goal was to earn enough to keep their family themselves and to provide some quality time for them all. For some of the lone parents, their problems were accentuated by children’s ill health and for others by lack of family childcare help.

The nurseries and childcare available were too expensive for any of these mothers to use.

\[ I \text{ paid £40 for three days . . . If I hadn’t got my parents I wouldn’t be at university. (R3) } \]

With R10 and R5 indicating sums of £80 per child for nursery places and £30 for each child at an ‘after-school’ club, the costs were daunting, particularly for R5 who had three children of varying ages.

The lone parents we talked to often lacked knowledge of the benefits available. This was compounded by problems of isolation from sources of advice, something they all agreed was hard to overcome with little or no money. Living on the edge of debt takes a further toll on their determination to ‘get out of it’. They keep going, in spite of the often insurmountable difficulties, by being a ‘team’ with their children and setting goals for their future.

As lone parents they wanted a life for themselves as well as for their children. This reflects the changes that have taken place in society as regards the rights of children and women.

All the lone parents wanted more and affordable childcare for all who needed it. This was the one factor above all others that would help them to do
anything in their future. But this was not all. They also needed flexible hours of work to fit their children’s hours:

| They all need care whatever their age. (R7) |

The northern group also suggested centralising schemes of work and training courses in local areas of the country, with local employers contributing to such schemes. The same group felt that this has implications for governments, who should recognise that lone parents need to earn sufficient money to come off benefits and the need to provide affordable, reliable childcare. If this were the case lone parents would have fewer problems themselves and would no longer be seen as ‘a problem’ for society. Both the children and the parents themselves would be able to have ‘a life’.

In a sense, these ten lone parents, among many others, are the unsung Superwomen (and men) of our time, whose views confirm and reflect the earlier questionnaire responses in this research.
Appendix I

Questionnaire used in postal survey (Chapter Two)

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR ONE PARENT FAMILIES

The information given by you will be held in the strictest confidence and will not be given out to anyone unless we have your permission to do so.

1. (a) Are you?  Female ☐  Male ☐
   (b) What is your age?
   (i) under 25 ☐
   (ii) 25–29 ☐
   (iii) 30–35 ☐
   (iv) 36 or over ☐
   (c) How many children do you have? ☐
   (d) Give your children’s ages _________________________

2. Are you
   (a) divorced ☐
   (b) separated from marriage ☐
   (c) widowed ☐
   (d) unmarried, previously cohabiting ☐
   (e) unmarried, not previously cohabiting ☐

3. How long have you been a lone parent?
   (a) up to 1 year ☐
   (b) 1–2 years ☐
   (c) 3–5 years ☐
   (d) over (please state) _________________

4. Do you receive any of the following:
   Income Support ☐
   Family Credit ☐
   Disability Working Allowance ☐
   Child Benefit ☐
   One Parent Benefit ☐
   Any other Benefit (please state) _____________________________

5. Are you employed? Yes ☐ No ☐
   If yes, how many hours do you work each week
   under 16 ☐ 16–24 ☐ 25–35 ☐ over 35 ☐
6 If you are not employed at present, would you prefer to be employed?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If you are not employed at present, or are employed for less than 16 hours per week, please tick one of the following statements:

(a) I would currently like to be employed more than 16 hours a week ☐

(b) Within the next two years I would like to be employed more than 16 hours a week ☐

(c) I would not like to be employed more than 16 hours a week within the next two years ☐

7 If you would prefer not to be employed more than 16 hours a week within the next two years could you please give your reasons?

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

8 Please describe any paid work you have undertaken within the last five years.

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

How long were you employed? (please state) Weeks __________
Months __________
Years __________

How many hours per week? 5–10 ☐
11–15 ☐
16–19 ☐
20+ ☐

9 Have you looked for paid work at any time in the last three years?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Since becoming a lone parent have you looked for paid work?

Yes ☐ No ☐

10 If you have looked for employment or been in paid work during the last two years, have you experienced any of the following difficulties?

(a) The work available did not pay enough to cover all the costs of myself and my family ☐

(b) I could not give sufficient time or care to my children ☐
(c) Jobs were insecure
(d) I was worried I could be worse off in work
(e) I could not obtain childcare
(f) I was not satisfied with the childcare which was available
(g) Other

II If you felt the work available did not cover your costs, what were the main reasons?

(a) The work was part time
(b) I was not qualified for better paid work
(c) Childcare costs were high
(d) The costs of travelling to work
(e) Mortgage costs
(f) Costs of renting
(g) The difficulties of managing financially for the first weeks in employment
(h) Other

III If you felt the work available would not allow you sufficient time to your children, what were the main reasons?

(a) too long hours
(b) evening work
(c) weekend work
(d) different shifts
(e) working during school holidays
(f) working outside school hours
(g) there was no time off to look after sick children
(h) other
13 If you felt the work available was insecure, do any of the following reasons apply?
(a) jobs were temporary □
(b) fear of redundancy □
(c) jobs did not provide fixed hours each week □
(d) other □

14 In the last three years (or since becoming a lone parent if that is less than three years) have you tried to take?
(a) an educational course □ or
(b) training □
(c) Give the name of the course/training you wished to take

(d) Have you begun the course or training applied for? Yes □ No □

Please describe any difficulties you encountered
- costs of course □
- costs of childcare □
- availability of childcare □
- balancing parental role and study □
- other □

15 Have you attended or tried to attend any of the following?
(a) Job Club □
(b) Job Review Workshop □
(c) Work Trials □
(d) Job Search Seminar □

Please describe any difficulties you encountered
- cost of childcare □
- availability of childcare □
- hours of activities □
- other □
16 If you are not working at present, do you think you could obtain free childcare from:

(a) relative or friend to enable you to take a job  Yes ☐ No ☐
/if the answer is no is this because (you can tick more than one)?
(b) no one appropriate lives nearby  ❑
(c) relatives and friends are already employed  ❑
(d) relatives and friends have their own children  ❑
(e) relatives and friends could not commit enough time  ❑
(f) you feel it would not be satisfactory for your children  ❑
(g) any other reasons

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

17 Have you seen any information about the childcare allowance for working parents (not the nursery voucher scheme)?  Yes ☐ No ☐

Have you ever applied for the childcare allowance?  Yes ☐ No ☐

If you were turned down, what were the reasons?

(a) not using registered childcare  ❑
(b) children over 11 years of age  ❑
(c) already receiving maximum Family Credit  ❑
(d) any other

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

If you obtained the allowance how much do you receive per week?

£1.00–£14.99  ❑
£15.00–£29.99  ❑
£30.00–£44.99  ❑
£45.00–£60.00  ❑

If you have never applied for the allowance, can you give your reasons why not?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

18 If you use paid childcare at the moment, how much do you pay per week?

(a) £0–£10.99  ❑
(b) £11–£19.99  ❑
(c) £20–£40.99  ❑
(d) £41–£59.99  ❑
(e) £60 and over  ❑
What type of childcare do you use?
(a) registered childminder
(b) non-registered childminder
(c) relative
(d) friend
(e) local authority nursery
(f) private nursery
(g) nursery school
(h) holiday play scheme
(i) after school club
(j) other – please state?

19 Do you receive maintenance? Yes ☐ No ☐
Is maintenance reliably paid? Yes ☐ No ☐
If yes, how much do you actually receive per week?
£0–£19.99 ☐
£20–£29.99 ☐
£30–£39.99 ☐
£40–£60 ☐

Do you have? (a) a court order ☐
(b) voluntary agreement ☐
(c) Child Support Assessment ☐

20 If you receive maintenance, choose which of the following statements is nearest to your experience:
(a) receiving maintenance makes it more difficult for me to be employed ☐
(b) receiving maintenance makes it easier for me to be employed ☐
(c) receiving maintenance does not affect my ability to be employed ☐
(d) other ☐

21 Please indicate if you have any of the following qualifications
GCSE/O Level ☐
A Level ☐
Degree ☐
Vocational qualification (please specify) _________________________________

22 Do you or your children have an illness or disability which makes it difficult for you to take paid employment? Yes ☐ No ☐
If you are currently employed:

What is your job title? _____________________________________________________

How much do you earn per week after tax and national insurance?

- £0–£14.99  □
- £15–£39.99  □
- £40–£59.99  □
- £60–£199.99 □
- £200 and over  □

Would you describe yourself as

- White  □
- Black-Caribbean  □
- Black-African  □
- Indian  □
- Other (please state) _____________________________________________________
Appendix II

Schedule used for Focus Groups (Chapter Three)

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Q1 Do you see yourself as basically a working parent or a stay-at-home parent?
   If you had a choice which would you be most comfortable with? BUT might this change over time? Why? How?

Q2 What stops you working or makes it difficult to work?
   ● loss of benefits
   ● school holidays
   ● poor wage or salary
   ● sickness (you or children)
   ● lack of suitable jobs (hours)
   ● lack of any job
   ● receive enough maintenance
   ● inadequate childcare – cost, suitability, availability, other.
   ● children need you
   ● other

Q3 Can, or does, any of this change your ability or desire to work?

Q4 The Government is offering £60.00 per week for childcare to help you to work.
   Has anyone applied for/or is receiving this?
   Does it help or would it help?

Q5 How easy is it, or would it be, to take part in any training or other educational course?

Q6 Do you think there is, or should be, any difference in the status of the lone parent family – are some seen as more deserving than others?
   So far we have discussed many factors which help or hinder you getting a job or doing courses etc.,

Q7 What is (or are) the main reason (or reasons) which affects any decisions made about work, courses etc.,

Q8 If you could suggest any changes for the incoming Government what would they be?
Bibliography


Further reading


The National Council for One Parent Families is the leading national charity working to promote the interests of Britain’s 1.7 million one-parent families. Our aim is to help them to overcome the poverty, isolation and social exclusion faced by so many.

We provide a voice for lone parents on the things that matter and offer information they can trust. We have helped to bring about many positive changes to government policies and public attitudes. But we know that much still needs to change.

As well as campaigning and lobbying work, and providing information and services to organisations working with lone parents, we offer two main support services direct to individual lone parents: the Lone Parent Helpline (0800 018 5026), providing free information and referrals five days a week; and the Maintenance and Money Line, providing specialist one-to-one advice on money matters, three days a week.