Early Findings from Lone Parent Personal Adviser meetings: Qualitative Research with Clients and Case Studies on Delivery

Prepared for the Department for Work and Pensions
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Disclaimer

The views in this report are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect those of Jobcentre Plus or the Department for Work and Pensions.
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Abbreviations and Acronyms

The following abbreviations and acronyms appear in the text of this report:

LP    Lone Parent
PA    Personal Adviser
IS    Income Support
BA    Benefits Agency
ES    Employment Service
WFTC  Working Families Tax
NDLP  New Deal for Lone Parents
LMS   Labour Market System
FTA   Failure to attend
JSA   Job Seekers Allowance
NVQ   National Vocational Qualification
DA    Disability Adviser
DWP   Department of Work and Pensions
Executive Summary

Introduction

Mandatory Personal Adviser (PA) meetings for lone parents claiming Income Support (IS) were introduced nationally in April 2001. This report presents interim findings from the first phase of qualitative evaluation of these meetings. This is part of a national programme which also involves a quantitative survey of participants and an analysis of administrative data on lone parents claiming IS before and after the introduction of mandatory PA meetings. The fieldwork on which the report is based, comprised five District case studies of delivery and 125 interviews with lone parents across a range of different circumstances who had participated in a PA meeting. All elements of the national evaluation will have a longitudinal component.

The objectives of the qualitative research were to assess the effectiveness of current structures and processes of delivery of PA meetings, and to assess the impact they were having on the attitudes and perceptions of lone parents, and consequently on the way they respond and behave. It was designed to provide an in-depth context for interpretation of trends emerging from quantitative elements of research, and provide explanations for which aspects of PA meetings work, for whom, and under what circumstances.

Main Findings

There is a common perception that PA meetings clients will produce fewer job outcomes in the short term than lone parents who have come voluntarily onto NDLP. Such views are being accentuated by the administrative difficulties that have been experienced as a result of high levels of failure to attend, particularly by stock claimants. PAs in several Districts feel that lone parent PA meetings are impacting on their ability to devote sufficient time to their caseloaded clients, and that this will be detrimental to the level of successful outcomes they achieve.

Advisers’ perceptions and expectations about PA meetings clients appear in some cases to be affecting the way in which they are approaching and conducting meetings, and the way in which they are interpreting clients’ reactions and responses. There is less evidence of this in those Districts where District Managers hold and communicate clear views about the importance of the client group, and about the way in which meetings should be conducted.

Observations of meetings support the view that, rather than the strict content, it is the detail of how PA meetings are conducted that can make all the difference; the minutiae of interactions between PA and client. A key measure of this difference lies in the level of successful re-contact achieved with clients (some, but not all, of which is reflected in conversion rates from lone parent PA meetings to initial NDLP interviews).
There are high levels of anxiety among lone parents attending PA meetings. Providing reassurance, getting them 'on-side' and building a rapport, are thus crucial aspects of practice for PAs. To judge by the positive reactions of clients, many PAs are extremely skilled at achieving this. However, the client group contains a majority who have a range of very 'hard to change' attitudes (for example, about appropriate roles for parents and ages at which children can be looked after by others) as well as many who are relying on 'tried and tested' survival strategies that involve the financial 'safety net' of benefits. PAs recognise, therefore, that there is a limit to what can be achieved in one meeting.

New claimants tend to be more job ready than stock claimants, although there is a significant group of stock claimants for whom the timing of a PA meeting comes at precisely the right time to coincide with their own wishes to move back into work. Some can be successfully 'fast-tracked' into jobs. However, those who can be moved immediately into work are a minority, and likely to remain so.

Future improvements in positive outcomes (and ultimately jobs) from lone parent PA meetings depend upon successful engagement and development of a relatively small proportion of clients requiring help with immediate problems and support in development towards employment. Many of these are stock claimants at a considerable distance from the labour market, but outcomes from these clients are most likely to represent genuine additionality for NDLP, rather than 'deadweight'.

**Key Conclusions**

Mandatory PA meetings are working effectively to draw a significant minority of lone parents into support and the labour market, who would not have made such a move of their own accord. Stronger sanctions on stock claimants might be justifiable if they successfully reduce initial failures to attend and expose greater numbers of lone parents more quickly to the information and support that is available to them.

Many clients hold fundamental, and hard to change, attitudes to work and childcare, and it is extremely difficult to identify who they will be in advance of a face to face meeting. Nevertheless, the enforced access to information (and exposure to the Jobcentre) which comes through PA meetings, is leading many to reassess their options and their attitude to seeking help to gain employment.

In these circumstances it is particularly important that no client is 'written off' nor assumptions made about them which can lead to misinterpretations and missed opportunities. There is evidence that this is most in danger of occurring with (long term) stock claimants. Many of these clients are relatively distant from the labour market, need a process of regular contact to keep them engaged, and are likely also to require much in the way of intermediate help such as training and confidence building. It is precisely this aspect of the PA meetings initiative which in some areas is being down-played.
Setting the achievement of some form (any form) of follow up contact as a priority objective for lone parent PA meetings would appear to be good practice. PAs in many areas have established a range of such possibilities, to good effect. There is perhaps room for additional flexibility within the programme around those forms of contact which do not conform strictly to the model for entry to NDLP.

The success of PA meetings hinges crucially on the skills of PAs. The enhancement of PA training at the required level of detailed interview technique needs to be a matter of priority. Ensuring the effective transfer of expertise from experienced PAs to those more recently recruited to deal with the increased numbers of lone parent clients should be a major part of any future PA training initiatives.
This research forms part of a national programme to evaluate the delivery and impact of PA meetings for lone parents. The national evaluation programme consists of several separate but related strands of work. These are:

- qualitative interviews with ES and BA staff (not Jobcentre Plus) involved in the management, administration and delivery of lone parent PA meetings in five selected Districts in England, Scotland and Wales

- observations of a small number of lone parent PA meetings in these Districts with follow-up qualitative interviews with the clients and PAs involved

- a series of qualitative interviews with lone parent participants (also carried out in the five case study Districts) covering a range of 'sub-groups' of 'stock' and 'flow' claimants, including people from ethnic minorities, long-term claimants and people with long-standing health problems or disabilities

- a national quantitative survey of lone parent participants in PA meetings from among both 'stock' and 'flow' claimants

- the analysis of administrative data on lone parents claiming IS, assessing the impact of the meetings through the comparison of outcomes for cohorts from before and after the introduction of the initiative in April 2002.

This report presents interim findings from the first phase of qualitative research with clients and case studies on delivery. A Final Report on qualitative findings will be produced in Spring 2003 after the second phase of fieldwork. This will be combined with findings from quantitative research and analysis of administrative data that is being conducted in parallel, into a synthesis report. The integrated report will draw together the experience, findings and conclusions from all the different strands that make up the overall programme of evaluation research on lone parent PA meetings.

The relationship between the different strands of the evaluation research, and their outputs, are shown in Figure 1 below (solid lines and arrows indicate the direct feeding of research findings into reports; broken lines and open arrow heads indicate the use of findings to inform development and design of other elements of the research to ensure maximum integration).
Figure 1: Links between research strands of lone parent PA meetings national evaluation programme

- Qualitative Interviews With Delivery Staff
- Observations Of PA Meetings
- Client Interviews (Phase I)
- Case Studies Of Delivery
- Interviews with PAs (Phase II)
- Final Qualitative Report
- Client Follow-Up Quantitative Survey (Phase II)
- Interim Qualitative Report
- Interim Quantitative Report
- Administrative Data Analysis
- Interim Reports
- Final Qualitative Report
- Final Quantitative Report
- Data Analysis Final Report
- Integrated Summary Report
Introduction

1.1 Policy background to lone parent PA meetings

Lone parents are a key focus within the Government’s Welfare to Work strategy which aims to promote sustainable employment among those groups facing disadvantage in the labour market. Lone parents constitute one of the major areas for activity within the strategy because the number of families headed by a lone parent has risen from fewer than one in ten to almost one in four over the last three decades. Whilst the proportion of mothers in some sort of paid work also rose over this period lone parents are faced with a number of significant barriers to labour market participation, including:

- inadequate qualifications
- low levels of self-confidence and self-esteem
- financial constraints related to the availability of affordable, suitable childcare, and the difficulty of overcoming the ‘earnings hurdle’ and gaining a disposable income above benefit levels.

Many lone parents are, therefore, reliant on IS as their primary source of income, with its consequent repercussions of poor living standards and a high incidence of child poverty. In order to address these issues, and in recognition of two key factors - that lone parents do not form a homogeneous group, and that the various barriers they face cannot be overcome by any single solution - a combination of policies have been developed, which include:

- improvements to in-work benefits, with the change of Family Credit to Working Families’ Tax Credit (WFTC), which includes a Childcare Tax Credit

- help with the transition into paid employment from benefit through the Lone Parent Benefit Run-on, extended payments of Housing Benefit and Mortgage Interest Run-on

- the development of New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and the introduction of mandatory Personal Adviser meetings.

New Deal for Lone Parents was launched in eight areas as a prototype in July and August 1997, introduced nationally for new and repeat claimants in April 1998, and extended to all existing lone parents on Income Support in October 1998. It is a voluntary programme which aims to encourage lone parents to improve their prospects and living standards by improving their job readiness and encouraging them to take up paid work.

Initially NDLP was directed to those lone parents whose youngest child was aged over five years and three months. Since May 2000 the target group has been extended to include lone parents whose youngest
child is aged three years or over. From October 2001 eligibility has been extended to all lone parents on benefit and to those who work less than 16 hours a week and who do not receive benefit but who want support and advice to increase their hours of work. From November 2001, NDLP has been extended to all lone parents who are not in work or who are working less than 16 hours per week.

The key delivery mechanism for NDLP is the Personal Adviser (PA) whose role is to develop with lone parents an individually tailored package of advice and support and thus facilitate a move into employment. These include:

- providing job search support to clients who are job ready
- helping lone parents to identify their skills and develop confidence
- identifying and providing access to education and training opportunities
- improving awareness of benefits
- providing practical support and information on finding childcare
- providing ‘better off’ calculations and assisting with benefit claims
- liaising with employers and other agencies
- offering in-work support.

To help and encourage as many lone parents as possible to participate in NDLP and take up paid employment, a number of further measures have been introduced since April 2001. Key changes were:

- the introduction of mandatory PA meetings for all lone parents making new or repeat claims for IS and whose youngest child is aged at least five years and three months. The meetings are to take place prior to a claim being processed with a review meeting after 6 months, after 12 months, and annually thereafter
- additional financial help for lone parents entering part-time work (less than 16 hours per week) following participation in NDLP, in the form of child care payments for the first 12 months of work
- an increase in the earnings disregard from £15 per week to £20 per week for lone parents working less than 16 hours per week
- an increased training allowance for lone parents undertaking work-related training whilst on NDLP. The premium has been raised from £10 per week to £15 per week.

Since April 2001 lone parents already in receipt of IS (‘stock’ cases) have been invited to attend a mandatory PA meeting on a phased basis. Two criteria are used to determine which clients are invited:

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

In 2001-2002, stock clients whose youngest child was aged from 13 to 15 years have been called. On the same basis, in 2002-2003, stock clients with a youngest child aged between 9 and 12 years are being called, in 2003-2004, those with a youngest child aged from 5 to 8 years will be called, and from April 2004 lone parent PA meetings will be extended to stock claimants with children aged 0-5 years.

From April 2002 mandatory PA meetings for new and repeat claimants have been extended to new lone parent claimants with a youngest child aged between 3 years and five years three months. From April 2003, new and repeat claimants with a youngest child aged between 0 and three years will have to attend. Eventually, as announced in this year's Budget, PA meetings will be extended to all lone parents.

The lone parent PA meetings aim to encourage lone parents to join NDLP, though participation in the programme itself remains voluntary. Once they have joined NDLP, lone parents receive the package of support described above. But, even where lone parents are not able to, or are unwilling to, take part in NDLP at the point of the PA meeting, the PA might encourage them to consider their long term aims and goals, prepare them for the labour market in the longer term, and make them aware of the services available to them in the future.

The aims and objectives for mandatory PA meetings for lone parents embody those of the meetings provided for voluntary participants on the NDLP programme. The intention is that they should facilitate a move into paid employment by:

• encouraging more lone parents to seek work and supporting them in their efforts to do so

• and/or encouraging them to take up education and training opportunities aimed at improving their chances of moving into paid employment at some point in the future.

Delivery of the lone parent PA meetings initiative will be affected increasingly by the national roll out of Jobcentre Plus. Jobcentre Plus will see the extension of PA meetings to other groups of benefit claimants and places emphasis on priority groups and programmes including lone parents, people from ethnic minority groups, the most disadvantaged in the labour market and those on New Deal. 56 Jobcentre Plus pathfinder offices are already offering fully integrated work and benefit services and there are plans to open a further 225 fully integrated Jobcentre Plus offices between October 2002 and April 2003. Full integration of all ES and BA local offices will take several years, during which time services will continue to be provided in social security offices and Jobcentres as was the case during this research.
1.2 Aims and objectives of the evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation, to which the qualitative research will contribute, is to provide Ministers and policy makers across Departments with information to help in the process of implementing mandatory PA meetings for lone parents in receipt of IS benefit, and to feed future policy development.

The evaluation will concentrate on five main areas in relation to lone parent PA meetings:

- the extent to which PA meetings contribute to changing the attitudes of lone parents to work as an alternative to life on benefit
- the extent to which PA meetings contribute to lowering the numbers of lone parents on IS, and increasing the numbers in (full-time or part-time) work
- the extent to which PA meetings increase the proportion of lone parents on IS who agree to participate in NDLP with the intention of finding work, or finding suitable work-related training as part of a plan to prepare to join the labour market
- the extent to which PA meetings help those lone parents who are unable or unwilling to seek work and/or participate in NDLP now, to move closer to the labour market by undertaking independently arranged personal development activity which may stand them in good stead in the labour market in the longer term
- the extent to which PA meetings help lone parents into sustainable jobs (e.g. of six months duration or longer).

In addition, the evaluation will seek to provide specific information on:

- the use and effectiveness of the training premium
- the use and effectiveness of additional childcare payments for lone parents in jobs of less than 16 hours per week
- the impact of PA meetings on different sub-groups of lone parents (including those who are sick or have a disability, and long term stock claimants)
- issues relating to national delivery of the policy.
1.3 Qualitative research objectives

The qualitative elements of the evaluation have two primary research objectives:

- to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of current structures and processes for the delivery of mandatory PA meetings to lone parents
- to assess the impact of PA meetings on lone parents with regard to their attitudes, experiences, perceptions and how these are affecting the way they respond and behave.

The qualitative research was designed to provide information on clients’ attitudes, motivation and experiences in order to provide an additional depth of understanding to aggregate trends and behaviours made apparent through the quantitative elements of the research.

1.4 Research methodology

The main purposes of the qualitative research were:

- to explore the specific factors affecting different sub-groups among lone parent participants
- to provide a context for the overview that will be produced by the quantitative survey of clients
- to explore at a local level aspects of delivery and practice, some of which are likely to remain hidden within broad, national aggregate data.

The three elements of the qualitative methodology were designed to address key aspects of the process of delivery of PA meetings to lone parents and to explore their relation to each other. Interviews with ES and BA staff, observed PA meetings and interviews with clients were all undertaken within the same five ES Districts in order to maximise the possibilities for ‘cross-fertilisation’ of findings from one aspect of the research to another.

1.4.1 Delivery case studies

Five case studies of delivery were carried out to help understand the impact that implementation of lone parent PA meetings has had upon those charged with their delivery.

The geographical areas for the research were defined by administrative Districts of the then Employment Service (ES). The aim was to explore the delivery and management issues arising from lone parent PA meetings at both a District and Jobcentre level. The ES
District was the most appropriate for the evaluation because of the involvement at this level of the former Benefits Agency (BA) in the processes of referral of lone parent IS claimants, and the centralised administration of appointments booking systems.

Delivery case studies were therefore undertaken in five Districts covering a range of labour market and delivery conditions including high/low unemployment areas and urban, rural and mixed economies. One was in Scotland, one in Wales and three in England. The Districts were not, and had not recently been the subject of other evaluation programmes and were not pilot Districts for other related initiatives at the time such as Jobcentre Plus (since rolled out nationally), which might have confused the picture regarding lone parent PA meetings.

Interviews were conducted with up to 15 staff from both the BA and the ES. Approximately one third were with PAs directly responsible for carrying out PA meetings with lone parents. All interviews were taped and transcribed for analysis. Those interviewed included:

- District Managers
- Operations Managers
- Training Managers
- Adviser Managers
- Claims and reception staff
- Front line Supervisors
- Personal Advisers
- Administrative Assistants.

Topic guides for interviews covered the following areas and concerns:

- local and regional context
- delivery issues at District and Jobcentre level
- operational relations between BA and ES
- management and monitoring arrangements
- structure and expectations of lone parent PA meetings
- delivery processes
- communications
- roles and responsibilities in delivery
- management of PAs
- caseload management and performance targets
- experience of the client group
- perception of meetings and their effectiveness
- good practice and suggestions for improvements.

In order to provide direct evidence of the nature and content of PA meetings, the case studies of delivery included direct observations of a small number of lone parent PA meetings as they were taking place (four PA meetings in each of the case study Districts). Researchers sat in on meetings with the client’s permission, observed the conduct of
the meeting and taped the exchanges between PA and lone parent. Short interviews were carried out with both the client (away from the Jobcentre where possible) and the PA conducting the meeting in order to follow up on issues and to access responses while they remained fresh in the minds of the protagonists.

The observations were designed to provide direct research evidence of how lone parent PA meetings are carried out. In particular, they were designed to help assess the assertions by PAs and clients about the conduct and content of their meetings.

1.4.2 Participant interviews

Qualitative interviews were undertaken with lone parent participants in PA meetings. Interviews were undertaken in each of the five case study Districts. The aim of the interviews was to assess the impact that PA meetings have had on individuals, and how they have affected their attitudes and behaviour. 25 interviews were undertaken in order to achieve coverage of a number of key sub-groups of clients, identified in evaluation of the pathfinder Districts for lone parent PA meetings as being likely to have significantly differing motivations, determining circumstances and responses.

Interviewees were selected and screened to allow for adequate coverage of the following main sub-groups among participants. A minimum target was sought of five from each sub-group in each District (with some overlap between the more general and the more specific categories):

- stock claimants
- stock claimants with claims of longer than five years duration
- new/repeat claimants
- claimants originally deferred
- claimants from ethnic minorities
- sick or disabled claimants.

Letters were sent out to potential interviewees offering them the chance to opt out of the interview process. Agreement was sought from interviewees for a follow-up interview in the second phase of research which will take place during the last quarter of 2002.

Interviews were carried out within five to ten weeks of the PA meeting having been held. They took place in people's homes and lasted approximately one hour. The focus was on clients' experience and perception of the PA meeting itself, its usefulness and relevance, their attitudes towards work and childcare, their perceptions of the barriers and difficulties facing them in getting into work, and their expectations for the future.
Analysis was undertaken in a series of progressive stages from thematic analysis of material using interview transcripts, to summative analysis of themes relating to the key research questions.

1.4.3 Hypothesis testing

Preliminary hypotheses derived from previous research, and tested by these methods, included the following:

- that lone parent PA meetings were successfully meeting their three main aims by means of
  - providing tailor made advice and support
  - influencing lone parents' attitudes to work
  - helping lone parents to address the various barriers to work which they face

- that knowledge, gained through lone parent PA meetings, of the availability of increased training premium, and/or the availability of childcare support (for 12 months in work of less than 16 hours per week), has increased the likelihood of lone parents opting to go onto NDLP and increased up-take of training and/or part-time work among programme participants

- that lone parents are a non-homogeneous group and that they respond to PA meetings in very different ways according to a variety of key characteristics. These characteristic will include:
  - their own age and the age of their youngest child
  - immediate reasons for claiming IS
  - the length of time since they became a lone parent
  - educational and employment history
  - job-readiness
  - attitudes to childcare
  - levels of sickness or incapacity
  - perceptions of what constitute realistic opportunities

- that the work pressures of PAs (and other Jobcentre Plus staff) influence the way in which they approach meetings, the possible outcomes of the meetings and lone parents' perception of them. This might include:
  - PAs' views and attitudes towards the target group
  - the local labour market
  - the adequacy of the operational management, training and information support that they receive.
1.4.4 Verification interviews

Preliminary findings and interpretations from analysis of all interview transcripts were validated through a series of verification interviews. These were carried out by telephone with District Managers and with NDLP Adviser Managers in five Districts with similar contextual circumstances to the case study Districts. Similarities and differences between findings and their operational and delivery experiences were explored and interpretations presented for criticism to ensure that no major factors had been overlooked that might undermine them.

1.5 Structure of the report

The remainder of the report is set out under the following sections:

- section two presents the findings from staff interviews related to the delivery of the programme in the five case study areas, exploring issues of efficiency and effectiveness in the management, administration and execution of mandatory lone parent PA meetings. Suggestions are made about elements of good practice in delivering the initiative

- section three looks at the supporting evidence gained from direct observation of lone parent PA meetings and discusses the value of this methodological tool

- section four presents the findings from qualitative interviews with lone parent PA meeting participants and considers their implications for the key evaluation questions being asked

- section five presents the interim conclusions of the research and outlines how the second phase of fieldwork will be able to add to findings so far.
2 Delivery Case Studies

The structure, management and administration of delivery of mandatory PA meetings for lone parents claiming IS were explored in five case study areas. These areas were ES Districts. The Districts are identified in this report as case study areas A-E. They have a number of differing contextual characteristics, as follows, and were selected according to early indications (June 2001) of their varied levels of success in converting PA meetings into NDLP starts, and initial NDLP interviews into caseloaded clients:

District A: A largely 'inner city' urban area in England with historically high levels of unemployment and high concentrations of social housing, performing below the national average. This District will be a priority area under Jobcentre Plus.

District B: A part urban, part rural District in Scotland, with pockets of deprivation and concentrations of lone parents, performing above the national average in the early months of the initiative - and sustaining this above average performance thereafter.

District C: An urban area of Wales with an extensive rural hinterland with particular difficulties of access and small isolated communities, achieving a steady average performance.

District D: An inner London Borough with a large ethnic minority population, which started by achieving above average performance in the first two months of the initiative but has since slipped to below average. This District will be a priority area under Jobcentre Plus.

District E: An urban District in the English Midlands with a relatively large ethnic minority resident population, performing below the national average in the early months of the initiative but moving gradually towards an average performance.

The implications of delivering the lone parent PA meetings and the impacts of the initiative on all levels of staff in both the ES and the BA, were addressed through qualitative interviews with those involved in the delivery process.
2.1 **The process of delivery**

The process of delivering lone parent PA meetings follows a generic model determined by the programme design, which is the same in its core elements from one District to the next. Operational details varied in only minor respects across the case study Districts.

District Managers are able to exercise limited flexibilities in adapting the business process to suit local needs. In practice this has been in the following areas:

- determining the structure of line management and support to PAs (almost entirely determined by pre-existing NDLP arrangements)
- developing minor modifications to administrative procedures to accommodate PAs preferences and to smooth processes (for example encouraging telephone contact and follow up)
- responding to operational difficulties presented by client behaviours and responses by instigating innovative solutions (such as group sessions for stock claimants).

Variations in practice tended to be highly pragmatic responses to local difficulties, many of which can be viewed as good practice and worthy of consideration for adoption in other areas experiencing similar problems.

2.1.1 **Target client groups**

At the time of the research there were two broad groups of lone parents called to mandatory PA meetings:

- new and repeat claimants making a fresh claim for Income Support benefit
- stock claimants with continuing IS claims initiated prior to April 2001.

Stock claimants are being approached in cohorts according to the age of their youngest child. During the first year of the lone parent PA meetings policy initiative, when the fieldwork for this phase of the evaluation was carried out, the stock claimants approached were those whose youngest child was aged 13 years to 15 years and 9 months (in reverse age order).

There are important differences in the ways that these two groups of clients are approached and meetings set up for them.
Once identified as meeting the eligibility criteria (see section 1.1) **new and repeat claimants** are informed by BA staff that they are required to participate in a meeting with an ES Personal Adviser as a condition of being able to proceed with the processing of their benefit claim.

BA staff then telephone the NDLP administration team to arrange an appointment with a PA for the client. The claimant is informed of the appointment there and then if making a claim in person. In cases where an appointment can not be made for the claimant while attending the BA office, they are telephoned or sent a letter informing them of the time and place of the meeting. If a letter has to be sent, then alternative options for appointments are provided.

**Stock claimants** are identified from BA management information, and lists of lone parents in the relevant cohort (according to the age of their youngest child) provided weekly or fortnightly to the ES NDLP administration team. Appointment letters are then sent out with proposed appointment times. Stock claimants will have received a prior notice letter several months earlier in the year saying that they would have to attend a PA meeting appointment in due course.

The identification of clients to attend PA meetings is generally felt to be working efficiently, although there were some initial problems in several of the case study areas. In one area there had been persistent difficulties in getting the stock claimants details. This had led to very few such claimants being processed in the first six months of the initiative, and to a backlog of cases to deal with towards the end of the financial year, prior to the inclusion of the next lone parent cohort.

The majority of the difficulties, however, relate to early problems with new and repeat claimants not being immediately identified as requiring a PA meeting by BA reception staff. Equally there are a number of instances recounted by staff in which clients turn up at Jobcentres for PA meetings and are sent back to the BA office because ES reception staff do not make the connection between making an IS claim and needing to see a Lone Parent Adviser. These minor problems are said to have been addressed through additional awareness raising and staff training.

### 2.1.2 The three-day requirement

With new and repeat claimants there is a requirement that a lone parent PA meeting should be set up within three days of the claim date (not counting the day of the claim) so as not to unduly delay the processing of benefits.

In the case study Districts this requirement is being met in the vast majority of new claimant cases. Where clients are refusing suggested appointment times, several of the Districts are interpreting the offer
being made within the time limit as sufficient to count as compliance with the rule.

Difficulties have tended to arise mainly when claimants have obtained claim forms from elsewhere (from Citizens Advice Bureaus for example) and have not then been present in the BA office when an appointment was being set up for them. If these clients are not contactable by telephone and require informing by letter then delays can occur, particularly in cases where a claimant's circumstances make it difficult for them to attend the first suggested appointment time.

It has become normal practice for BA staff to attempt to set up an appointment with ES over the telephone with clients still present in the BA office. While this can involve clients waiting some time, it is felt to represent the quickest route and to constitute best practice.

The other main causes of delays are where health problems and long travel distances to Jobcentres make it difficult for clients to attend suggested appointment times and venues. In rural areas experiencing these circumstances, the difficulty is compounded by the lack of permanently based PAs in smaller Jobcentres. This places extra travel burdens on peripatetic Advisers. The use of venues outside Jobcentres, that can be used for lone parent PA meetings, has helped to overcome the problem in some areas.

2.1.3 Waivers and deferrals

It is possible for the requirement to attend a lone parent PA meeting to be deferred for an appropriate period (anything from a month to six months, or until the next review date comes round - originally set at 12 months; from April 2002 this will be at 6 months and then annually after that). Attendance can also be waived altogether. Primarily BA staff take decisions on waivers and deferrals for new claimants (with approval by a Team Leader, Claims Supervisor or other designated decision maker). Within ES, members of the administration team decide whether participation in a PA meeting should be waived or deferred. This decision is informed by information on the Labour Market System (LMS) or in response to clients' objections and/or justifying circumstances when contacted.

Both BA and ES staff declare themselves comfortable with making such decisions. Although it is clearly recognised that a level of discretion and interpretation is required, there are guidelines available that are found useful.

The key criteria for waiving a PA meeting are:

- if the lone parent is judged likely to be off work for only a short period (a few weeks) and has a job to return to
• if the lone parent is seriously or terminally ill (dependent upon the nature of the illness and time off work to date).

Deferral criteria include:

• if a lone parent has been recently bereaved
• if they have given up work to look after a sick relative
• if their case has involved domestic violence or rape
• if they have suffered a recent and traumatic separation.

The area felt to require most discussion, and where criteria are seen as being less clear, is in cases of sickness. However, staff involved refer to the use of "common sense" in making decisions.

Essentially the same criteria are being used by ES administration staff in deferring stock claimants. For stock clients staff feel that there is a greater need to be sensitive to depression and conditions such as ME as problems that clients might face.

In some areas, in the early days of the programme, there had clearly been far higher levels of deferral than was the case six or nine months later. Policy decisions had been taken to redress the balance away from extreme caution and more towards allowing a PA meeting to go ahead and seeing if there was not something positive that could be achieved even under difficult circumstances. Across all case study areas cases of clients attending PA meetings who clearly should have been waived or deferred are felt to be decreasing as systems are settling in.

PAs continue to make a small number of deferrals (though scarcely any waiver) decisions themselves when they meet clients at PA meetings. The general feeling among Advisers, however, is that once a client has actually turned up for a meeting at the Jobcentre it may as well be put to some positive use. They are, therefore, generally reluctant simply to send people away at this point.

There are quite large numbers of clients whose circumstances place them in a 'grey area' in respect to deferral. PAs everywhere are finding it appropriate to have some form of 'half way house' arrangement for such clients. In such cases PAs often conduct a short meeting, begin the process of developing a rapport with the client, and then suggest a further meeting at an appropriate time in the not too distant future at which to continue and go into greater depth on issues.
2.1.4 The booking of lone parent PA meetings appointments

The process of arranging appointments with clients and booking them into PAs’ diaries, is centralised in each of the case study areas. In three of them this is at District office level, in one at regional level, and in the other at an intermediate level encompassing a group of four Districts.

When BA contacts the central administration team to set up an appointment for a new claimant it is usual to ask the client which Jobcentre they would prefer to go to and arrange for their meeting to take place with a PA there. The claimant will be placed on the LMS system and the Adviser at that Jobcentre workflowed to notify them of the interview.

Stock claimant lists are usually divided according to geographical area and clients allocated by administrative staff to their nearest Jobcentre. Once booked in with a PA they are then sent a letter notifying them about the PA meeting. Practice varies in some of the Districts. In one the decision has been taken that, to facilitate the even spread of workload amongst PAs, a booking system will be maintained that allocates clients to available interview slots regardless of whether they are at the nearest Jobcentre to the client’s home. With the payment of travel expenses, and some care not to make people travel excessive distances, this system is felt to be a considerable improvement in efficiency. Some degree of client choice is also maintained wherever possible.

Another measure, found in one District to improve efficiency, is the booking of appointments for times of the day that avoid clashes with school opening, lunch and going home times. This successfully reduces the number of lone parents failing to show up for PA meetings appointments.

Two of the Districts have also made refinements to the process of informing stock claimants of their appointments by seeking to speak directly to all those who could be contacted by telephone, in addition to sending them a letter. This is said to have proven worthwhile, with clients so contacted being much more likely to turn up for their appointment than those who simply received a letter.

Not all PAs are particularly happy with the system of having their appointments booked for them by the central administration team. Complaints include last minute notifications making it difficult for them to plan and schedule in their other work. It is hoped that expected developments of LMS in the near future will solve most of these difficulties.
2.1.5 Home visits and sanctions

Claimants failing to attend a PA meeting are given a further chance to attend an appointment. If they fail to attend both of these, an attempt will be made by ES staff to visit them at their home. If participation is still not achieved then sanctions are applied. In the case of new claimants their claim for IS will not be processed. For stock claimants a fixed reduction in benefits will be imposed.

The threat of sanction on new claimants - the cancelling of their claim - has meant that new claimants are generally attending PA meetings (though not always at a first appointment). In one area, where co-ordination and co-operation between ES and BA is seen to be poor, the District Manager believes that some new IS claims are, however, being processed without a PA meeting taking place. BA staff in other areas complain that they are not receiving faxed confirmations from PAs of meetings having taken place without considerable chasing on their part.

At the time of the research, very few home visits had been carried out. In some areas a deliberate policy decision had been taken to 'hold off' from such visits pending satisfactory resolution of staff concerns over security. It was clear that many PAs are unhappy at the idea of making such visits, partly for security reasons but also because they do not wish to be associated with the sanctions aspects of the process. In one area it was even suggested that BA staff rather than ES staff should undertake them. For as long as home visits are not being undertaken, sanctions on those refusing to participate in a PA meeting cannot be applied.

2.1.6 Lone parent PA meetings venues

The majority of PA meetings take place in Jobcentres, though in some areas outreach venues used for other NDLP activities are also used to deliver PA meetings in order to minimise travel difficulties for clients. This is particularly the case in those Districts with Action Teams where an NDLP Adviser was already attached to that team. For clients with severe mobility problems the option of undertaking the PA meeting at their home is available, though in practice does not appear to be happening frequently.

Most meetings are conducted at the usual work station of the Adviser, across a desk, and within an open plan office. PAs at most, but not all, Jobcentres have the option of using separate private interview rooms for meetings if the client prefers this. However, few clients seem to make such a request and Advisers frequently prefer not to use them either because they often cannot have direct access to a VDU and LMS information on screen when away from their desk.
Some Jobcentres have special family-friendly facilities for conducting work with lone parents, which can be used for PA meetings - especially if clients have younger children with them.

2.1.7 Length of lone parent PA meetings

All PA meetings were originally scheduled to last an hour, and were booked into PA's diaries on this basis. In practice few PA meetings are lasting this long. There are certainly instances where meetings do last an hour, or even longer, especially if they are with job ready clients who are keen to use the LMS system to search for jobs to which they can be matched and applications be submitted there and then. For the vast majority, however, the usual duration is between 20 and 40 minutes.

PAs' experiences have been reinforced by feedback from clients, many of whom are saying that they find the meeting "overloaded" with information that they have trouble retaining. Partly in response to difficulties caused by failures to attend, it is now the norm to book half hour slots rather than hour slots in PAs' diaries. While this can cause the occasional problem of over-running into the next appointment, it tends to be the approach preferred by PAs, who are clear that there is a limited amount that can be achieved in a first meeting with a new client.

2.2 Management and structure of delivery

Delivery of mandatory lone parent PA meetings has taken place within the defining context of the delivery of NDLP, and as an addition or enhancement to that programme. As such, the delivery of PA meetings has not involved establishing entirely new management structures, nor specific and dedicated channels of communication and information within ES.

Much that relates to managing the delivery of PA meetings is being dealt with within existing NDLP delivery arrangements. Typically this entails the management and support of Advisers through a dedicated District based team, run by a Lone Parent Adviser Manager who reports directly to the District Manager. Lone Parent Personal Advisers are sited within local offices and integrated operationally into local activities, although their time is ring-fenced within the NDLP programme.

All the five case study areas are currently being run to this model. However, there have been some recent changes in two of the areas involving a shift towards this more centralised structure for NDLP delivery, and away from a Jobcentre based structure.
There are a number of arguments put forward both for and against each of these approaches. These are primarily concerned with making the most effective use of the available staff resource, on the one hand, and optimising the integration of front line staff activities on the other. Broad issues, therefore, such as the benefits and drawbacks of line managing PAs at a Jobcentre or at a District level, remain essentially the same as they have been described elsewhere.

The structures and arrangements for managing the delivery of the wider NDLP programme form the basis for delivery of lone parent PA meetings. However, there are a number of specific aspects to the delivery of PA meetings which have required either specific attention in their own right or have raised issues among Advisers, concerning the nature of their job and how to approach it, which have had to be addressed.

First, the triggers for calling clients to a lone parent PA meeting - either making a new or repeat claim for IS, or being on a continuing claim with a youngest child of a particular age - have meant that delivery has had to involve much closer, co-ordinated working and co-operation between the two agencies (BA and ES, now combined within Jobcentre Plus) than was previously the case.

Second, the PA meetings for lone parents are themselves mandatory (although the programme they feed into - NDLP - remains voluntary) and the clients being called in to attend a PA meeting can be subject to benefit sanctions if they do not attend. This is felt by many PAs to have affected the nature of the job that they do, and have implications for what can be achieved.

Third, the introduction of lone parent PA meetings has greatly increased the number of advisory meetings being delivered to lone parents, which has resulted in an expansion of PA recruitment. Many new recruits are from different agencies or from different work backgrounds. In some areas staff turnover has significantly increased. The need is felt to exist for supporting new and inexperienced PAs, through specific training related to the delivery of PA meetings, through the facilitation of extensive contact with colleagues and through strong and consistent line management from District level down.

These specific factors affecting delivery of PA meetings are discussed below.

1 NDLP: case studies on delivery report reference ESR85, July 2001
2.2.1 Effective communications

Effective communications are vital to the successful delivery of any programme initiative. This need was particularly strongly felt by Lone Parent Advisers involved in mandatory PA meetings. They can often be the sole NDLP Adviser in a Jobcentre and can feel isolated from other activities unless positively managed and supported.

NDLP Advisers (especially the more experienced of them) are expected by their Managers to innovate and to try new methods and approaches in working towards achieving set aims and objectives. The need for 'sounding boards' for ideas is thus felt, and considerable importance placed upon having the opportunity to share experience with other New Deal colleagues.

PAs also say that they need good quality support information specific to their work and the client groups' needs. The types of information mentioned included:

- information on available local childcare
- part-time jobs with school compatible hours
- potential specialist referral destinations for those with a variety of health, disability, debt and other problems and barriers.

A formalised and up-dated information resource of this kind is not frequently available and is suggested by PAs as an important possible improvement to current arrangements.

One PA went so far as to suggest that there is gap in terms of roles and responsibilities, and space for a specific information and co-ordination role within the NDLP team separate from the role of the Adviser Manager to whom some of these responsibilities currently fall.

Formal communications channels are fairly consistent across the case study areas, and are thought to be adequate to purpose. Monthly meetings of dedicated NDLP teams are held to discuss progress, workload issues and any conflicting needs between different clients. These meetings are supplemented by more or less daily contact with line managers. Informal contacts with colleagues are also widely encouraged and facilitated wherever possible.

Adviser Managers meet regularly (generally weekly) with District Managers, to provide information on outcomes and results and to keep abreast of policy changes. District Managers themselves make regular visits to local offices to keep abreast of the full operational picture. Other forums for information exchange include regional focus groups for initiatives on lone parents (that involve District Managers and seek to review performance and look for ways to improve it) and District level New Deal workshops for PAs.
In addition to ES arrangements, a number of regular joint meetings between ES and BA managers are taking place. These are generally under the auspices of Jobcentre Plus but have lone parents (and PA meetings) as a standing agenda item. Lone Parent Adviser Managers and their deputies liase directly with their opposite numbers in BA on a frequent (weekly) basis to discuss lone parent issues and PA meetings.

Across all the case study Districts lone parents are recognised by District Managers as one of the top policy priorities. As such, issues relating to PA meetings are a standard item on communications agendas. Strong, centralised management structures are widely seen as the best way to ensure that this priority is consistently conveyed and frequently reinforced.

The success of NDLP in the past to generate job outcomes and contribute strongly to performance targets at both office and District level has meant that there has been little evident conflict between the demands of NDLP delivery and the priorities of Jobcentre Business Managers. The perception of PAs, however, is that clients attending mandatory PA meetings are generating fewer short term job outcomes in relation to the time and effort that is required to be put into them. This being the case, there is now greater potential for such conflict, again reinforcing the importance of effective structures for supporting PAs and conveying forceful top-down messages about the importance of lone parent activity.

The existence of an active and engaged District Manager, with a clear vision of what can be achieved from PA meetings, and how it can be brought about, appears to be an important element in successfully delivering the initiative. Forceful and consistent messages from the top down, not just in relation to the overall priority of the initiative and the client group, but also in terms of how the task itself needs to be addressed, play a key role in motivating PAs and in maximising successful outcomes.

2.2.2 Relations between ES and BA

Lone parent PA meetings were introduced at a time prior to the merging of ES and BA and the full roll-out of Jobcentre Plus (within which PA meetings figure prominently in relation to an increasing range of benefit recipients). As such the initiative could be seen as representing something of a test bed for the future, and highlighted the central importance of good relations and effective communications, between the functions of the then separate agencies.

Considerable effort in all the case study Districts has been put into cross-agency recruitment, training, job-shadowing and information
exchange. Staff at all levels have made contact with their opposite numbers in the other agency and have observed them at work and in contact with clients. In some Districts this has even extended as far as BA staff sitting in on lone parent PA meetings themselves. While much of the contact has been specific to delivering PA meetings, it is clear that it has taken place in the wider imminent context of Jobcentre Plus.

In most of the areas these activities are perceived to have built good team work between staff involved in the various stages of the delivery process. At the very least an improvement is perceived over an initial situation frequently beset with misapprehensions and lack of mutual understanding.

There is, nevertheless, a divide between the different work cultures of the two agencies. This is apparent to many lone parent clients, who tend to contrast favourably their experiences with ES staff at the Jobcentre, with their experiences at the BA end of the process.

In two of the case study areas there is still felt to be a lot of room for improvement in relations between BA and ES. One ES District Manager attributes much of this to what they see as the failure of BA counterparts to fully ‘buy into’ the complete Welfare to Work agenda, creating problems for co-operation and joint working on an initiative such as lone parent PA meetings.

Initial difficulties were experienced in all Districts with two aspects of the way BA staff dealt with new claimants: the making of deferrals, and the provision of information to clients about the nature and purpose of the PA meeting. The numbers of deferrals being made by BA staff were often very low in the early days of the initiative – even in some places perceived as not happening at all. This problem had, by and large, been resolved over time.

The other area of concern to PAs is the apparent lack of adequate briefing or explanation being provided to claimants as to what they should expect from PA meetings. This difficulty too has been reduced over time through better cross-agency contact, and through the provision of explanatory leaflets about PA meetings and NDLP that can be given to lone parents at the point of making their claim.

In general, BA staff appear to have needed persuading of the value of PA interviews for IS claimants, and some remain solely focussed on the benefits end of the process, showing little inclination to engage with other aspects – leaving these to ES. One BA Supervisor expressed resentment at having to “play a go-between role” in the PA meetings process.

In spite of this, attitudes are described as changing, especially as positive feedback from clients attending PA meetings start to filter back
to BA staff. Once they can begin to see clients benefiting from the process, they became more engaged and more positive themselves.

2.2.3 Perceived effects on the voluntary NDLP programme

Another concern of PAs and their managers is the perceived effect that mandatory PA meetings are having on their ability to continue to deliver the voluntary NDLP programme to their caseloaded clients. The major concern is that lone parent PA meetings are taking up increasing amounts of available time and “squeezing out” the time required to keep in contact with caseloaded clients and to continue to work with them to achieve positive outcomes.

Some PAs feel that their results from working with voluntary clients are generally very good, and that these results are suffering because of the amount of time they are having to spend dealing with mandatory PA meetings. The perception that positive outcomes from PA meetings clients are harder to come by, and more likely to be in the medium to long term than in the short term, further reinforces this concern.

The problem is not primarily seen as resulting from the high numbers of PA meetings clients with which they have to deal. Indeed, although some urban areas are seen as having disproportionately high numbers of claimants to deal with, the overall perception is that the workload represented by PA meetings is adequately resourced. The problem is, rather, put down to the level of disruption which bookings for PA meetings, and the frequent failures to attend by clients, are capable of causing to PAs diaries, and consequently to their ability to plan and schedule other work.

Of particular concern is the resulting inability to deal adequately with ‘drop in’ enquiries from caseloaded NDLP clients, or to maintain sufficiently frequent contact, for example by telephone, to ensure that clients do not miss opportunities or drift away from efforts to help them secure employment.

A number of measures have been taken in different Districts to try to address these concerns including:

- the allocation of newly recruited PAs to undertake lone parent PA meetings exclusively and as a dedicated resource, with no caseloaded clients for the first six months

- the formal separation of diaries into times devoted solely to either lone parent PA meetings or to caseload meetings with NDLP clients (for example in one area all PA meetings were to be held between 9.30 and 12 each morning – with other NDLP work scheduled for afternoons).
2.3 Key delivery issues

Cutting across all aspects of the delivery of lone parent PA meetings in the Districts studied, are three key issues that are affecting both the efficiency, but also the potential effectiveness of the initiative. These are:

- the high failure to attend rate among stock clients called to a first or second lone parent PA meeting
- the perceptions and expectations about new and stock claimants that were held by PAs and other staff, and their managers
- the crucial importance of the way in which PAs approached and conducted the meetings themselves.

2.3.1 The effect of failures to attend (FTA)

The existing appointments systems are seen as somewhat cumbersome. PAs sometimes struggle to cope with the uneven workloads that lone parent PA meetings can create. These administrative difficulties are greatly exacerbated by the high proportion of claimants (primarily stock claimants) who fail to attend for first and subsequent PA meeting appointments.

The problem of failures to attend is particularly acute in urban areas where large numbers of stock claimants on the BA lists are coupled with the highest no-show rates. The phenomenon is especially evident in ‘inner city’ areas but is also to be seen in the more densely populated centres of other Districts.

Very high rates of failure to attend are reported: between 50 per cent and 80 per cent of first appointments for stock claimants in many areas. This has led to acute problems for the management of PAs’ diaries and the effective use of their time. Much time is being wasted in waiting for clients and there is insufficient predictability to allow it to be used productively for other tasks or with other clients.

Many PAs are concerned that increased workloads have forced them to be more reactive (rather than proactive) with their existing voluntary caseloads, and to be less available for ‘drop in’ clients. For these PAs the level of non-attendance is particularly frustrating. It further tends to reinforce the view that mandatory clients do not wish to attend, are not interested in seeking help to get back to work, and are unlikely to produce outcomes commensurate with the effort being expended to get them into the system.

Successful management of this administrative problem, therefore, is likely to be important not only for the efficiency of the process but also
for ensuring that PAs remain committed to the initiative and ultimately perform to best effect with the clients they see at PA meetings.

A number of different responses have been made to address the problem of no-shows, all of which are claimed to have had some degree of success in one respect or another.

Among the five study Districts the following measures have been tried to reduce the disruptive effects of FTAs and limit damage to work with voluntary caseloads, by:

- allocating shorter initial time slots in diaries for PA meetings (30 minutes rather than 1 hour)
- smoothing out unevenness of workloads by allocating PA meetings clients to specific Jobcentres rather than giving them a free choice
- conducting some PA meetings by telephone (especially in areas with a considerable backlog of stock claimants as the year end approached)
- using administrative staff to carry out PA meetings (an extreme measure in response to chronic staff shortages in one District)
- holding all PA meetings separately from other NDLP appointments (for example only in mornings wherever possible)
- accelerating the stages of the contact process and proposing home visits after the first missed appointment
- holding group meetings sessions for stock claimants.

The last of these responses – the holding of group lone parent PA meetings – is perhaps the most interesting of all. Although strictly against policy, such an initiative was felt to be justified both by the scale of the problem to be addressed, and subsequently by the results achieved using it.

Stock clients are asked to attend a group introductory session, with other lone parents in a similar situation to themselves, rather than an individual PA meeting. The sessions take place at a venue away from the Jobcentre and are conducted by two PAs. The meetings include external speakers and employers in order to emphasise options and flesh out the idea of returning to work.

The basic information about NDLP that would be conveyed at a PA meeting is presented to the group, with an opportunity for questions and answers. Personal details are then dealt with separately for each individual away from the other participants.
The groups appear to have been a considerable success, both in terms of numbers attending and outcomes achieved. A higher proportion of clients invited turn up than would previously have been the case for individual PA meetings (and several have taken the trouble to ring in and explain why they could not make the time – again far from the perceived ‘norm’ for individual appointments). Of those who attend, a very high proportion, five out of eight, have been caseloaded onto NDLP.

An important factor in the success achieved is felt to be the positive group dynamic created among the participants, and the fact that they find it easier to overcome feelings of nervousness and lack of self-confidence with others around them.

2.3.2 Perceptions of the client groups

In all the case study areas new claimants and stock claimants are perceived as distinct and very different groups. This difference is reinforced both by the administrative routes by which they access for PA meetings, and by problems such as failures to attend, which affect the stock group far more than new and repeat claimants.

There are undoubtedly some objective differences between the two groups. Potential sanctions on new claimants for non-participation are arguably much more serious than those for stock claimants. New clients will not yet have a settled income based on benefits, and are likely to include many more job-ready lone parents (albeit with short-term difficulties that have led to an IS claim) and individuals who have recently been employed. On average, stock claimants will be older, and, by definition will have older youngest children than most new claimants. All these factors will affect the way they respond to PA meetings, and the nature of their concerns and difficulties regarding work.

However, these structural differences between these two groups are being overlaid by generalised perceptions and attitudes among PAs and other staff which might affect how clients are being dealt with. The high rates of failure to attend PA meetings, among stock clients for example, has clearly reinforced the view in some Districts that stock claimants are “difficult” and unlikely to produce outcomes. As one of the District Managers explained:

It is not the mandatory element, it is the stock [element] that is really causing the problems …. If we were asked on the ground whether we thought that [PA meetings were] likely to have a huge impact on the client group then we would say ‘no, probably not’ …. If they are already claiming (particularly the stock l
am talking about here) then it is probably not going to be the best use of our time.

Another senior manager said that stock clients are so different as a group that they require a completely separate programme to deal with them – away from NDLP, which they are seen as disrupting. Such views are strongly held by some managers, and inevitably communicate themselves quickly to PAs on the ground.

The danger here is that individuals within the group, who might be in a position to benefit from information and support, will be tarred with the collective brush, dismissed in advance, and the opportunity they represent, missed.

That this may indeed be happening is supported elsewhere. Whilst the distinct differences between stock claimants and new claimants is universally acknowledged, opinion about the nature of those differences is highly diverse – even contradictory - from one District to another. This was found to be the case both among the five case study areas and in the areas in which verification interviews were held after the main fieldwork had been completed.

Stock claimants are perceived in one of two contrasting ways. In some areas they are perceived as being very difficult, reluctant or resistant, and not likely to provide positive outcomes. In other areas they are seen as including those clients willing to think immediately about work, those under greatest pressure to do so, and those able to benefit from the widest range of support options. In this latter view, stock claimants are therefore seen as being very good prospects for positive (if not always short-term) outcomes.

To a lesser extent there are equivalent matching views of new and repeat claimants. Some managers view them as being too close to personal traumas or as being merely short-term sick or tiding over short periods with no income (such as school holidays and even visits by spouses to Mecca) and therefore less likely to provide positive outcomes. Others alternatively see them as being younger, less set in their ways, more job-ready and more likely to be receptive to help and support.

For such discrepant views to exist from one District to the next suggests one of two things;

- either that claimant groups are very different in make up in different areas
- or that pre-conceptions and assumptions about them are being reinforced in practice and are affecting the way PA meetings are being approached and conducted, and clients’ reactions and responses interpreted.
The existence of significant differences in the composition of client groups from one area to another will need to be tested through analysis of administrative data. Qualitative client interviews, however, revealed no strong evidence of the existence of the ‘cultures of unemployment and benefit dependency’ that some staff in BA and ES proposed as existing in urban areas with concentrations of lone parent residents.

The possibility that pre-conceptions and expectations about stock claimants (reinforced by messages from managers) may be leading PAs to mistakenly ‘pigeon-hole’ certain clients, does find some support however – both from the clients’ interviews and from certain follow-up comments on observed meetings (see section 4).

2.3.3 The conduct of lone parent PA meetings

Personal Advisers and Adviser Managers, do not feel that pre-conceptions and prior expectations affect the conduct of lone parent PA meetings. Virtually all say that the key to a successful meeting is based on their ability to observe and listen closely to clients and to pick up on ‘clues’ in their manner and comments as to how far, how fast, and to what depth of detail to pursue matters.

It is this level of operation that receives most comment also from PAs when asked about their training. Interview techniques and how to handle delicate situations are the elements of training most valued by them, and in which some say they would welcome even more guidance and peer support.

In addition to this level of professional skills, it was also strongly asserted in one case study area that a key success factor is the overall approach in persuading clients of the benefits of work and of the support and help NDLP can provide them. This area has above average rates of conversion from PA meetings to initial NDLP interviews. This approach is described as an ‘opting in’ approach, whereby:

- the entire exercise is ‘sold’ to claimants on the basis that they should maximise their entitlement to support
- is based on the assumption that once in possession of full information, all clients will **want** to take part.

This ‘assumptive technique’ is communicated to PAs as a strong top-down message for conducting meetings in general, along with a range of fairly detailed techniques for ensuring the best possible outcomes. Within the District it is clearly supported and applied in practice by PAs, with good results. The approach (which makes a strong case for being good practice in the conduct of PA meetings) includes the following elements:
• making a positive assumption that all clients will choose to opt in

• presenting the lone parent PA meetings and support under NDLP as a set of opportunities and entitlements

• avoiding talk of ‘programmes’ or ‘schemes’ (or the use of ES ‘jargon’)

• playing down the mandatory/voluntary aspect

• presenting the lone parent PA meeting itself as merely the start of a process involving further contact.

One further element of perceived good practice in the conduct of lone parent PA meetings relates to the priorities that Advisers set for desired outcomes. Experience from the first nine months of PA meetings has led to a high degree of agreement among PAs across all case study Districts that there are very clear limitations to what can be realistically achieved in a first meeting with a new client. This is particularly true in the situation where a client is required to attend and has varying degrees of initial understanding as to what the meeting will entail.

Under these conditions, most PAs do not view the mandatory PA meeting as a one-off pivotal event, but as part of an on-going process. Prior contact by telephone is felt to help make the PA meeting itself more productive, and the priority outcome is seen as securing further contact with the client in the near future. PA meetings are variously described as “sowing a seed”, “getting the client on board” and beginning a process of “building trust and rapport”.

PAs apply lessons learned from dealing with lone parents on the voluntary NDLP programme by recognising the importance that regular and frequent personal contact makes in achieving results. This recognition, combined with an ‘opt in’ approach, has resulted in the greatest successes in getting clients to attend an NDLP initial interview. PAs are thus encouraged to be assertive in proposing a follow-up meeting. It is perceived as better to have done this, even if the client does not later turn up, than not at least to have tried.

The elements of good practice supporting this approach can be summarised as follows:

• keeping the lone parent PA meeting short and focussed and using it to get the client on-side and start a relationship with them

• making liberal use of all tools and incentives in order to get clients interested
• having as a top priority to get the client back quickly for a second meeting

• arranging a follow-up meeting on the spot wherever possible

• confirming the date and time of a second meeting in writing

• prompting attendance with a reminder telephone call close to the agreed date.
Due to the practical difficulties of including lone parents failing to turn up for PA meetings, and the very limited extent of the information that could be obtained from them relating to the main research objectives, interviews with clients were conducted only with individuals who had actually participated in a PA meeting. They included a small number of IS claimants who did not subsequently go on to pursue their claim. These were due to rapid changes in clients’ circumstances rather than any impact from the process of being called to a PA meeting.

One of the central questions for the evaluation is what impact participation in a compulsory PA meeting is actually having on lone parents claiming IS. Within this are a number of distinct areas for investigation. The qualitative interviews with lone parents set out to explore the following:

Does the experience of a PA meeting appear to:

- change the attitudes that lone parents hold towards (seeking) work?
- change the attitudes of lone parents towards seeking help to that end?
- increase lone parents’ optimism, motivation or self-confidence about dealing with perceived barriers to work?
- help move them closer to the labour market and employment?

### 3.1 Client experience of lone parent PA meetings

#### 3.1.1 Appointment set-up

PAs and other BA and ES staff assert that the process of setting up appointments is generally running smoothly and efficiently. Client interviews largely confirmed this picture. The overwhelming majority said that their PA meeting was efficiently set up, without undue delay. A similar large majority also felt that it was done with sensitivity and with consideration given to any difficulties they may have had in attending Jobcentres at particular times.

However, the interview sample included many clients who participated in a PA meeting during the early months of the policy initiative. Some administrative ‘teething’ problems were therefore reflected in their experiences.
Perhaps not surprisingly, new claimants are more critical of the appointments process than stock claimants. The fact that their IS claims will not be processed until they have attended a PA meeting means that more is felt to be at stake. Delays, where they had occurred, were thus linked directly to urgent financial matters, and provoked strong criticism.

Among the five case study areas, District D was the most frequently criticised for a lack of efficiency and sensitivity in the interview set-up process. This reflects the acknowledged difficulties with staff shortages experienced in the area. In contrast, clients in District A were almost unanimously of the opinion that the process there had been handled well, and their needs accounted for. In District C several new and repeat claimants singled out the role of BA staff for criticism. In District B, some deferred clients and some long-term stock claimants with particular constraints upon them, praised the use by PAs of the telephone to conduct a preliminary interview.

3.1.2 Reactions to having to attend

One of the defining features of the lone parent PA meetings is that they are mandatory. Both new and stock claimants must attend if their benefit claims are to be processed and their entitlement remain unaffected. This is in contrast to the entirely voluntary nature of the NDLP programme into which claimants are intended to feed.

The reported reactions of clients to having to attend a PA meeting were varied. However, there was a clear divide between new claimants, on the one hand, and stock claimants on the other.

Many new claimants interviewed saw the PA meeting as simply a necessary part of the claims process. As such they were untroubled about having to attend and expressed no particularly strong opinions about it, typically using terms such as “fine” and “OK” to describe their reaction. A few spoke in rather more negative language about being “resigned” to having to attend; equally others saw it as representing a positive opportunity.

Even while often accepting the PA meeting as part of claiming IS, several new claimants felt it was “inappropriate” in their particular circumstances, or said that they had had other priorities than work concerning them at the time. Reasons given for feeling it inappropriate ranged from those relating to the perceived “short term” nature of a claim, to those relating to the need first to overcome an immediate “crisis” in circumstances. Those seeing their claim as short term included several engaged on education and training courses, others on longer periods of sick leave from work and some with employment set up to start in the near future. Perceived crises preventing immediate consideration of work related issues included circumstances such as
relationship breakdown, debt and housing problems. Anxiety was evident among a number of new claimants from ethnic minority backgrounds as a result of confusions and misunderstanding arising from language difficulties.

New claimants were typically focussed on their immediate financial situation at the time. Many saw the PA meeting as an opportunity primarily to discuss benefits issues and to iron out problems with their claims. Their enthusiasm for the meeting was thus arguably misguided, insofar as it did not relate directly to the core purpose of the meeting (to address work options and barriers and offer support in these matters). Although in this regard much could perhaps be better addressed between the client and BA staff, PAs are generally willing to work with this client led agenda, recognising it as an essential step to establishing a relationship of trust with the lone parents. However, PAs are also aware of the dangers of thus being deflected from the work-related elements of the meeting.

Many of those clients whose cases had originally been deferred were among those who felt it inappropriate to have to go to a meeting about work. They variously described their feelings as ranging from “annoyed” to “not feeling up to it” to “it felt like blackmail”.

In a way it freaked me out because … I thought I was going to lose my benefit and I couldn’t understand why … I already had a sick note from the doctor.

Some of these clients appear to have been deferred later in the process (by ES rather than BA staff) and part of their objection is likely to have resulted from a failure to identify them sooner as appropriate deferrals. Once a deferral period had elapsed, few expressed having a problem with attending a PA meeting.

Among repeat claimants were a number who expressed positive views about having to attend a PA meeting, seeing it as coming “at the right time”. Equally, there were a number who said they felt “upset”, “nervous” and “worried” by the requirements to attend, fearing they had done something wrong and that they might lose their benefits even though their fears proved unfounded. These two groups of opinions were both expressed by claimants who had been making repeat claims over a longer period of time. As such they shared many of the circumstances of longer-term stock claimants – a group of clients amongst which both these types of reactions were also found.

Feelings of being pressurised and threatened by mandatory attendance at a PA meeting were most prevalent among stock clients, and particularly so among those with claims of over five years in duration.
I was livid at first. I didn’t know what to expect. I mean I thought they were just going to throw you out or something – you’ve got no choice … but it wasn’t like that at all, she asked exactly what I wanted. It was easier than I thought.

Long term stock claimants were also those most likely to say that a PA meeting was inappropriate to their circumstances. This was mostly for reasons of personal ill health and/or specific caring responsibilities over and above simply looking after their children (for example sick or elderly parents, disabled children and children with behavioural problems). Several thought that the agencies had this information but did not seem to have taken it into account in the way they had approached people in these situations.

At the other end of the scale, a large number of long term stock claimants said they were “pleased” and “positive” about the requirement to attend a PA meeting. Many said that they felt the appointment letter was timely for them to be thinking about getting back into work, and that they were particularly happy to feel that someone was “taking a personal interest” in them.

I was made up, you know, because I thought, oh the Jobcentre you know, I thought they well and truly forgot about me. And when I got this letter saying I’ve got to go to the Jobcentre, I was made up.

Well I thought ‘great’. I think there has got to be a lot of people like me who haven’t worked for a long time. It’s a confidence thing.

Lone parents who are sick or disabled (either recorded as such on the evaluation database or who declared a long term limiting health condition or disability at interview) were a further sub-group of clients who were more likely than others to say they had felt an initially negative response on being told they had to attend a PA meeting.

The high incidence among this group of cases of depression and other mental health problems (such as panic attacks and agoraphobia) goes some way towards explaining this. Fear of leaving the home and having to meet with strangers was frequently expressed. Others were simply indignant that they had to attend a meeting about employment when they felt the agencies involved already had ample evidence to show that work was an inappropriate option for them to be considering at that time.

This overall picture of response among different sub-groups of clients, to the obligation to attend a PA meeting, was broadly evident across all the five case study areas. However, it is interesting to note that in District B, several clients had come away from the PA meeting process
with the clear impression that it was voluntary. This may be evidence of the effect of the particular approach adopted in this area, part of which was the deliberate “playing down” of the mandatory aspect of PA meetings.

3.1.3 Perceived purpose of the lone parent PA meeting

Clients were asked what they understood to be the purpose of the lone parent PA meeting when they turned up for their appointments. Inevitably, recollections will have been affected by what was subsequently experienced. Nevertheless, this will have been the case across the board. Certainly there were some clients who were still unclear about the meeting's purpose even after participating. Many of those with a strong prior impression that the meeting would be about forcing them to work, however, did alter their opinion in the light of what transpired.

Overall, most of the clients interviewed were reasonably clear about the purpose of the meeting. Its work focus was evident to them and they expected the PA to provide “help”, “encouragement” and “support” in getting them into employment. Accurate perceptions along these lines were particularly evidence among clients interviewed in District B. The opposite was the case in District D where only a small number appeared to have understood the purpose of the PA meeting, and a large number admitted that they did not have “any idea”.

Among different sub-groups of lone parent clients, understanding of the purpose of the meeting appeared to be weakest among first time new claimants. The frequent misunderstanding was that the meeting was to clarify benefit entitlement, sort out any difficulties with their claim or provide general financial help. In one case a client said it was “to sort out my life”. The association of PA meetings with benefit specific issues was particularly noticeable among clients interviewed in District C.

The other frequently held misapprehension was that the purpose of the PA meetings was to reduce benefits payments and/or to force people into work. Clients spoke of meetings being “to check up on me”, “to review my claim” and even “to throw me off Income Support”. Others spoke of them as being designed to “push”, “force” or “make people go back to work”. There was evidence that for some this interpretation was accompanied by considerable anxiety. This was a common response from sick and disabled clients who could see no other rationale for having such a meeting.

Stock claimants most commonly expressed perceptions such as these, particularly those with long-term claims of five years or more. Concerns over benefits payments being reduced were most evident in District A. Concerns about being forced into work were particularly
evident in District D, and appear to be linked to a generally poor informative process in the District. This resulted in high levels of uncertainty among clients about the purpose of PA meetings (see above).

3.1.4 Client expectations

Most lone parents said that they had no clearly formed or strong expectations of their PA meetings. This was the case particularly in areas where large numbers of clients also said they did not know what the PA meeting was for. Those that did have prior expectations divided more or less evenly between those with negative and those with positive expectations.

Positive expectations were held by a particularly large proportion of clients in District B and negative expectations by a particularly large proportion of clients in District A. Stock clients everywhere had more positive expectations than did new and repeat claimants, who tended to be negative. This may appear somewhat contradictory given the high levels of non-attendance among stock claimants, though it needs to be remembered that many non-attenders remain outside the system and interviews were all with clients who had attended a meeting at the time of the fieldwork.

Those with low prior expectations of their PA meetings frequently cited poor past experiences with agencies and Jobcentres as the basis for their fears. Words such as “grim”, “formal”, “official” and “heavy handed” were used and, more colourfully, PAs were expected by some to be “dragons” pursuing lengthy and detailed “interrogations”. Many of these clients had assumed that meetings would focus on work and/or benefits but had not appreciated (or presumably been informed) that an important element of the meeting would be the provision of information, support and help. When this became apparent many expressed their surprise and were happy to find their negative expectations largely unfounded.

Among long term stock claimants in particular, negative expectations were clearly often associated with an extreme nervousness stemming from a lack of confidence (both generally and more particularly at meetings with professionals). The concern of one such client who was afraid she would “be seen as useless” was by no means an isolated case. Sick and disabled clients were more likely than others to say that they had attended their PA meeting with anxiety and low expectations.

Clients with positive expectations of PA meetings included those who saw them as a timely opportunity to address work-related issues. These clients entered meetings expecting direct help with finding work.
[I thought they would say] .. ‘I’m going to sort your life out for you, you will have to get back to work’, you know … I was glad, I’ll be glad to get rid of that [benefits] book to be honest with you. It’s a rope around your neck, you can’t do anything once you’ve got that book can you?

I was hoping to get exactly what she said, they sort of do everything they can to help you to go back to work which is exactly what I needed to hear.

Many mentioned that they were hoping to have the range of options open to them extended in the meeting and new possibilities suggested that they had not thought of previously. A small number came away feeling disappointed. This was partly because their high expectations had not been fully met. Several made a point of saying that they would have liked a longer and more detailed meeting. However, most were satisfied with the way their meetings turned out. The same was not the case for those with high expectations relating to training, education and career development. Several clients expected the PA meeting to provide them with the opportunity of exploring further education options that might be open to them and of finding out about training courses that fitted with their own aspirations for future work. One deferred client expected her PA to tailor a package of training around her circumstances and specific needs.

Those who took such expectations to their PA meetings tended to be disappointed by the limited scope and level of training available under the NDLP programme \(^2\). Although some PAs were described as having gone out of their way to help with information on training and education courses to meet clients’ expressed needs (even though these would not contribute to their own achievement targets) most were seen to have been constrained by the limits of the programme. This was particularly true of new and repeat claimants, several of whom were already embarked upon some form of training or education course and who had relatively clear ideas about the kind of work they wished to pursue.

Stock claimants, who tended to be of an older average age, had more generalised expectations of the meeting, with many of them seeking a broad appraisal of their situation. A small number of stock claimants expected their PA meeting to have been longer and more thorough than it was.

I thought it would have been a lot more – I was only there for about five minutes or ten minutes – I thought it would have been a lot longer to explain, if I went back to work, how would the disability allowance work.

\(^2\) NDLP restricts training support to vocational training up to NVQ level 2, for those with no existing vocational skills or qualifications, and in exceptional circumstances up to NVQ level 3.
if I wanted to go back to work – if I could go back to work … But I never got told anything … Even if I couldn’t work, they should have given me the opportunity to know.

### 3.1.5 Client perceptions of PAs

Regardless of their background or circumstances, almost all the clients interviewed had positive perceptions of the Advisers they had seen. PAs were extensively described as “friendly”, “pleasant” and “sensitive”. It was clear that in the great majority of cases good personal rapport had been achieved with lone parents, who spoke of Advisers as calming them down, putting them at their ease and making them feel comfortable and relaxed. Advisers were seen as being “easy to get along with” and “easy to talk to”. A generally informal approach was widely appreciated. Some clients commented specifically on the contrast between their expectations in this respect and their actual experience of someone who was “polite”, “sympathetic” and “respectful”.

PAs also gained praise from many clients for their professional knowledge and abilities, for being “extremely helpful”, “knowledgeable”, “well-informed” and “thorough”, and for providing “valuable practical suggestions”, combined with being “supportive” and “encouraging”.

There was considerable surprise expressed that PAs (and other Jobcentre staff) had been so approachable, positive and helpful. In cases where PAs had clearly gone out of their way to help clients sort out particular problems (for example, with the BA, or with employers or regarding training and education courses) the gratitude expressed was often effusive. Many clients described PAs as “excellent”. A few went further still, using terms such as “fantastic” and “brilliant”.

Clients of all types, and in all areas, had positive things to say about their PAs. There is clearly much very good practice taking place. As with any personal service, however, there is also considerable variation between individual PAs, affected, among other things, by their backgrounds, experience and personalities. There were, therefore, also a small number of negative views expressed about PAs.

Negative comments about PAs’ style and manner were virtually non-existent. More substantial criticisms fell into two broad types: perceptions by some that PAs did not adequately get to grips with their specific personal circumstances; and perceptions by others that PAs had not given them sufficient time and attention.

Some new claimants in particular said that they felt their PA had either not understood their situation properly, or had been “confused by [their] circumstances”, or been “insensitive to [their] needs”. A few objected
to the fact that their PA had not asked them about their situation in sufficient detail to be able to help them. This had caused some clients to feel they had been given inappropriate or inaccurate information.

In several instances clients felt that they had been unable to get the most from their PA meeting because of the approach of their PA. One lone parent felt “intimidated” and unable to ask all the questions she wished to. Others asserted that their PA did not listen and could not answer their questions. Another criticism was that some PAs conducted meetings in a formulaic fashion that limited the exchange of views and the value of the meeting. Some clients said they were promised follow up information which was not forthcoming.

No clients thought that their PA had been too forceful or too pushy with them. Complaints were, on the contrary, that in some cases PAs were felt not to have ‘pushed’ enough. They were described as being “too laid back” in their approach, even to the point of seeming “uninterested” or “bored” and as if they “couldn’t be bothered”. This perception of PAs merely “going through the motions” and doing only what was necessary to get the job done and the task out of the way, was most often expressed by stock claimants (especially those with long term claims), and may reflect staff preconceptions about that client group. Disappointment was expressed at the brevity of some meetings, and the fact that Advisers appeared “rushed for time”, “didn’t go into any depth” about issues, and left the clients themselves to “initiate everything” while they “made no alternative suggestions” to what clients put forward.

Overall, PAs appear to be doing an effective job with lone parent PA meetings and are widely appreciated by clients. Some of the general approval of “nice” and “friendly” PAs was clearly generated by a degree of relief on the part of some clients that they had not been pushed hard about the work option once they had said that they were not ready or were not interested. However, a significant minority of clients complained of not being engaged deeply or extensively enough in the PA meeting process, and of not being taken seriously.

Well they ended up saying ‘well you’ve come, you’ve taken part, you’ve done it and sorry we can’t help you’ …. I thought they might have been able to help me get a few hours a week at something but then I was shunted off onto the Disablement Officer. I felt I was shunted over.

It looked like it’s a really useful service, but when I get there it was kind of treated as a requirement to signing on basically … and she’d obviously written me off as [not needing] the service.
There would appear to be evidence here that, with a small number of clients, opportunities may be being missed. This may be the result of PAs operating with too light a touch in relation to challenging and persuading clients, or of false assumptions being made about some (stock) clients that they will not benefit from the PA meeting.

3.1.6 Perceived main benefits from lone parent PA meetings

Clients said that receiving various types of information was the main benefit resulting from their PA meeting. This accords well with one of the main aims of the policy initiative: to provide enforced access to information to lone parents who might otherwise be unable to gain that access. Whilst scarcely any clients mentioned NDLP by name, they saw the information they had received about different aspects of the programme, and the support it could provide, as central to the value of their PA meetings.

Information relating to financial matters was particularly valued. Many specifically mentioned the usefulness of information on Working Families’ Tax Credit, “better-off” in-work calculations, other benefits information (such as Care Allowance), and benefit run-ons if they were to start work.

A number of clients particularly valued information about education and training courses available locally that they might wish to take up. Strong positive mention was made by a number of clients with long term health problems or disabilities of the value of information, guidance and encouragement relating to opportunities for voluntary working. This was seen as particularly appropriate to their circumstances and their personal preferences for moving closer to the labour market. A small number placed the highest value on information relating to childcare availability and affordability. These were all new claimants, probably because the stock claimants interviewed all had children aged over 13 years.

The second most mentioned benefit from lone parent PA meetings was the provision of support and encouragement by PAs. Some expressed surprise at the level of support provided, but many simply found the opportunity to talk things through with someone to be extremely valuable. A number of lone parents clearly feel cut off and isolated from social communications processes. The opportunity afforded by a PA meeting to break out of that isolation was strongly felt. Several clients spoke of the value of knowing there was someone they could get in touch with if they needed help – someone they knew to be “on [their] side”. Even more emotively, clients spoke of their contact with an Adviser as being “a lifeline” for them, and of having gained a sense that they “wouldn’t be abandoned”.

Closely related to this appreciation of support was the assertion by another group of lone parents that the main benefit they felt they had derived from their PA meetings was increased confidence and motivation regarding getting back to work, resulting from encouragement by Advisers.

It gave me the hope that I want to pick myself up and look for something other than what I was doing before, you know.

Several long-term stock claimants identified the main benefit as being “given a push” or “nudged” in the direction of work which might not have come from anywhere else.

Other perceived benefits from lone parent PA meetings related to more practical outcomes. Several clients particularly valued the help provided in thinking through their “limitations”, constraints and barriers. For some, specific mention was made of the fact that PAs had been able to provide concrete and realistic **options** for clients to consider, as well as help with particular activities like job search, interviews and voluntary work placements. A small number of lone parents attributed their current job to their PA meeting.

However, there was a significantly large number of clients who felt that there were no real benefits from their PA meetings. These lone parents were not necessarily critical or negative about their meeting. They felt that either it had been inappropriate for them in their particular circumstances, or that what they had done since had not been affected by, and was not in any way a result of, that experience.

### 3.2 Changing attitudes

One of the aims of the evaluation is to assess the extent to which PA meetings change lone parents’ attitudes to work as an alternative to life on benefits. Whilst the qualitative interviews with clients provide some evidence relevant to this question, there are a number of caveats to be made:

- the difficulty of establishing a clear ‘before’ and ‘after’ picture in respect of lone parents’ attitudes from a one-off interview conducted several weeks after participation in a PA meeting

- the validity of according ‘pivotal’ and ‘causal’ status to one relatively short meeting (which several clients struggled to remember at all, and which was confused and amalgamated with other meetings in the minds of others)
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• the likely effects of sample bias. For example, if there are lone parents who do not wish to work, feel threatened by the call to a PA meeting and are avoiding attending, they will almost certainly have taken similar steps to avoid inclusion in the interview sample (either by opting out or ensuring they could not be contacted).

The interview sample may thus under-represent some of the more 'extreme' attitudes regarding an unwillingness to work.

3.2.1 Previous work experience

Almost all lone parents insisted that the option of working had always been part of their thinking, even if more in the background at particular times. Very few clients said they had never worked in their lives, though more of those with health problems or disabilities had no work experience and there were others who described previous work as minimal and short-lived. The vast majority of both new and stock claimants had worked in the past, and many were in work at the time they were interviewed.

Typical patterns of work involved stopping altogether on arrival of a first child, or decreasing their hours from full-time to part-time (frequently with 'gaps' during the early years of each child). Many had only ever worked part-time hours.

The type of jobs that lone parents had undertaken in the past (and were currently engaged in) were mostly of a relatively low skill level. Exceptions, requiring professional qualifications, were teaching and social work.

The range of employment included the following:

• chambermaid/hotel work
• shop work/cashier/retail/running a market stall
• factory work/packing/machinist
• cleaning and ancillary work
• catering and food processing
• pub work/waitressing
• hairdressing and personal services
• agricultural labouring
• office, clerical, secretarial and reception work
• care assistants
• tele-sales.

Male lone parents cited experience in other areas, including:

• welding
• construction/joinery/building site labouring
• driving
• machine setting and operating
• garage work
• catering and food processing (flour miller and butcher)
• engineering.

Some previous work experience was recognised as being out of date. Clients with experience of shop-floor work in factories for example, acknowledged that this type of work was no longer available in their area. The length of time some lone parents had been out of the labour market was thus compounded by the need to re-train and re-skill if they were to find work.

More lone parents in the urban areas (Districts A, D and E) said that they had no educational or vocational qualifications to help them with finding work. This was particularly the case for long-term stock claimants. New claimants interviewed in Districts D and E which included a very high proportion from ethnic minorities, also included higher numbers with no qualifications (several interviewees, however, held overseas qualifications not recognised by employers in the UK).

A relatively small number of the lone parents interviewed had an employment related reason for making their IS claim, such as being made redundant or choosing to leave a job because it was unsuitable. Perhaps not surprisingly this was the case for repeat claimants much more often than for other groups of clients.

The timing of the fieldwork meant that some of those interviewed had had a PA meeting in July. For this reason the sample picked up a relatively large number of new claimants whose claim had been triggered by the start of the school/college summer vacation. New claimants included supply teachers and classroom assistants with no income during school holidays, as well as student lone parents. In almost all of these cases the claimants were to return to work or to a course at the start of the next term, but were expecting to look after their children during August.

The teachers and classroom assistants formed part of a sizeable group of lone parents who, since having children, had specifically sought and found work that fitted around their felt need to look after them. These jobs were either intrinsically tied to school hours or could incorporate the parents’ own childcare needs. They included nursery assistants, dinner ladies, childminders and ‘lollipop’ crossing attendants.

3.2.2 Attitudes to working

Not only was there widespread previous work experience among the lone parents interviewed, but the great majority also asserted their intention and desire to work again in the future. The real question for
most of them was when and under what conditions they could see this happening.

Yeah, I would love to go back to work ... when you’re young and you’ve got a family you think it’s great. [Now] they’re all older and independent (except for {name of child}), I’m bored and I’d love to go back.

It’s good timing for a lot of people not just for me, ’cause there are a lot of us [whose] children are reaching that age where, you know, they are independent and you want to go out and work.

The majority of clients were quite explicit that they did not wish to be on benefits longer than they had to be, often felt “uncomfortable” and even “frightened” of living on benefits, and saw work as the obvious and necessary condition of having “a good quality of life”. Not only did most clients say they would prefer to work, many stressed that they were eager and keen to do so. As one new claimant put it: “I will do a job that I don’t really want, rather than be on benefits.”

Amongst lone parents with health problems or disabilities there were many actively considering work (often part-time) in the future. The social advantages of being in work were also stressed by many, who contrasted working with “sitting at home and being bored” and “being at home doing nothing”. Long-term stock clients in particular saw work as a means to greater personal fulfilment and development as well as allowing them to be better off financially.

Against this background of generally positive attitudes to work, there were many who qualified their views with reference to personal circumstances which they saw as preventing them from working, either at that particular time or for the foreseeable future. A number of stock claimants said that living on benefits was the only realistic option they could see for themselves. Caring responsibilities for an elderly relative, sick or disabled child were seen as absolute barriers, even though they would prefer to work otherwise. A higher proportion of clients with health problems or disabilities, compared to other groups pf lone parents, were of the opinion that they would never be able to work again. Several new claimants also cited emotional and health problems (though more often temporary ones) as preventing them from working.

Lone parents from minority ethnic backgrounds did not stand out from other clients in terms of their attitudes to work. However, those from Black African and Black Caribbean backgrounds showed a strong motivation to work, especially those who were new claimants, and there were some indications that a stronger cultural model of the role of women (as carers of children rather than earners) was present in the minds of a number of lone parents from Asian backgrounds.
3.2.3 Proximity to the labour market

Clients who were not working were asked when they expected to return to employment. By far the commonest expectation was that this would be “within the next twelve months”. This was particularly true of new claimants, most of whom appeared to see their IS claim as a temporary response to an immediate crisis and to expect to move relatively quickly into employment.

While a large number of stock claimants thought that they would move into work within twelve months, there were also many that definitely did not expect to do so even within three years. This was particularly found to be the case among those with serious long-term health problems or disabilities. Stock claimants were polarised between these two contrasting expectations, reflecting on the one hand the long term nature of perceived barriers to working for many in this group, and on the other hand the readiness of a significant proportion of the group to move (relatively) quickly into work. The high proportion of stock lone parents whose youngest child was approaching school-leaving age might have accentuated this polarisation. Many recognised this to be a critical time to be considering returning to the labour market. The message that for many such stock clients their IS claim would switch to Job Seekers Allowances (JSA) when their youngest child reached sixteen was strongly reinforced by most PAs at PA meetings.

The key importance of children’s ages in influencing lone parents’ views of the appropriateness (or possibility) of working, was further reinforced by clients’ assessments of the factors on which their entry into employment depended. The attainment of a particular age by the youngest child was far and away the single most mentioned factor.

It was widely accepted that the age at which a child no longer needed their parent to be at home the whole time depended crucially on the maturity, character and circumstances of the individual child. Nevertheless, most clients held a personal view of the minimum age their youngest child would need to be before they would consider employment. These personal assessments were heavily clustered around the school entry and leaving ages of five to six years, eleven to twelve years and fifteen to sixteen years old. New claimants were more likely to suggest five to six years as an appropriate age. Stock claimants were more likely to suggest fifteen to sixteen years (and to a lesser extent eleven to twelve years).

Even at these chosen ages for children, many lone parents said they would not consider working full-time but would want to fit work around school hours. Finding a job with the right hours and the flexibility to allow them to do this was the other main factor that was seen by large
numbers of clients to be determining of whether they would go into employment. It was particularly prominent in the minds of new claimants; much less so among stock claimants.

Other factors mentioned by those expressing the desire to work included the following:

- finding a job of sufficient quality that would pay enough (both new and stock claimants)
- finishing a college course (new claimants)
- sorting out immediate trauma and emotional upheaval (new claimants)
- overcoming the health problems of themselves or their children (both new and stock claimants)
- finding a job that would accommodate a health or disability condition. For example, not too physical, or not requiring a person to be standing all day (stock claimants).

Interestingly, only one client in the entire sample (a new claimant) felt that the foremost single determining factor in her being able to enter employment would be the ability to find suitable childcare. This implies that the automatic assumption among the majority of lone parents is that they will handle the childcare themselves, or within the family, and seek to fit employment around that priority. The most frequently stated determinants being the age of children and finding a job with the right hours, further supports such an interpretation.

Indeed, most lone parents were unwilling to pass care of their children to anyone other than close family or friends. Many felt as great a need to be at home for their children when they returned from school at the age of fifteen or sixteen as they did to be around for them at earlier ages. This was most often stated to be the case by lone parents living on social housing estates in some inner city areas.

Some of the above perceived determining factors for employment were linked for clients with their perceptions of local labour markets. Similar concerns emerged about the availability of suitable work, the quality of local jobs, and the difficulties of finding work with sufficiently flexible hours. New claimants appeared more likely to think that there were jobs available for when they chose to, or were able to, work. However, their main perceptions of their local labour markets were:

- that local jobs were largely unskilled and low paid (particularly in the rural areas)
• that local employers were inflexible about hours and that the few jobs operating on school hours were over-subscribed and generally already taken

• that the local economy supported few jobs and that it was necessary therefore to travel long distances to reach employment opportunities (particularly in the rural areas).

Stock clients shared some of these concerns, but to a lesser extent. They were more likely to have decided that they either could not work, or to have chosen not to, and thus to express no interest in, or knowledge of, their local job market. For those that did, their main concerns were:

• that the jobs that were available were mismatched to their skills, experience and age

• that suitable jobs required travelling out of the area (travel difficulties figured high among barriers to working perceived by those with health problems or disabilities).

The majority of clients interviewed were not particularly surprised to hear that most lone parents do work.

The direct effect of PA meetings on the attitudes of lone parents towards work appeared to have been minimal. Most new claimants were looking to IS benefit as the solution to an immediate crisis that was expected to be temporary. A proportion of stock claimants perceived their situations to offer them no realistic alternative to claiming benefit, while others said they would prefer to work but had difficulty establishing the conditions under which they could. It was precisely in this area – establishing conditions and options and facilitating the practical context for moving forward in line with individuals’ wishes and preferences – that lone parent PA meetings were perceived as having impact.

3.2.4 Attitudes to seeking help

For most lone parents, a single mandatory short meeting with an PA had done little to affect their basic attitudes towards work and benefits. Generally, lone parents wanted to work and did not want to be dependent upon benefits, although many perceived their circumstances to be such as to make this difficult. Asked if participation in a PA meeting had changed their views, attitudes and opinions in any way, the great majority said that it had not. Stock claimants were slightly more likely to hold this view than new claimants. What was recognised in some areas however, was that the PA meeting had for many of them changed, even quite dramatically, many clients’ opinion of the ES. Jobcentres, ES staff and PAs were
praised and attitudes towards seeking help in relation to employment matters had consequently changed for the better.

Clients with the lowest prior expectations of their PA meetings (such as those with health problems and disabilities) were frequently those most favourably impressed in the event, and most changed in their view of the Jobcentre as a source of help and support.

In Districts A and B (and to a lesser extent District C) clients frequently said that their PA meeting had given them a very different, and much more positive, view of the ES, to that which they had held previously. Considerable surprise was expressed at how helpful PAs and other Jobcentre staff had been. The physical setting of the Jobcentre was also favourably compared to impressions and expectations formed from previous contact with the service (often several years ago).

A small number of clients said they had changed their views about the possibility of working (especially working part time) as a result of their lone parent PA meeting. By far the most widely experienced change, however, was in respect of clients’ attitudes to seeking help in finding work. PA meetings clearly had considerable impact on clients, not only through the enforced access to information, but also through enforced exposure to the Jobcentre and the PA role.

In response to the one-to-one personal approach of Advisers in PA meetings, many clients felt that their levels of motivation to seek work, their self-confidence in doing so, and their optimism about finding a suitable course of action, and ultimately a job, had been greatly increased.

The way she made me feel, the way she made me think, you know, think about things after, was most useful I think ‘cause it’s given me a different angle on life if you know what I mean – the talk and all the help. I know I’ll get back into work now – I was in a rut before I spoke to her.

New claimants in District A and District B in particular claimed such an impact, as did stock claimants in District C. Markedly fewer clients in Districts D and E felt the same.

3.3 Moving closer to the labour market

The importance to be accorded to assertions of increased confidence and motivation to seek help will depend considerably on whether such feelings are seen to lead to changes in activity that move clients closer to the labour market, and ultimately into jobs.
3.3.1 Changes in client activities

A link was found between clients who said they were motivated by their PA meeting, and those who described a change, not so much in their attitude to work but in their work-related activities following it. Increased confidence and motivation appeared to have led directly to a variety of activities that clients asserted were different from those they had been pursuing prior to their PA meeting.

It was clearly the case also that such change in activity prompted by PA meetings is taking place among some lone parents from within every identifiable sub-group and category of circumstances, including those with disabilities and those who have been claiming benefits for many years.

Stock clients (and long-term claimants in particular) reported a change in their activities more frequently than did new claimants. More lone parents in District B than elsewhere reported such a change. District B clients were also those most likely to have claimed that their PA meeting had motivated them strongly and changed their view of their chances of finding suitable work.

Pursuing job search, with or without the assistance of a PA, was the most frequently cited change in activity. For some this had already led to a job or to a voluntary placement. This was in addition to the small number in the sample who were already working part-time and claiming IS before their PA meeting. Others were in the process of actively applying for vacancies. Several made specific mention of the fact that they were now applying for a wider range of jobs than they would have considered before discussing options at their PA meeting. Similarly, a significant number of clients had taken up training or education courses since their meeting, and as a result of it. These included both new and stock claimants.

3.3.2 Perceived barriers

While there is much evidence that many lone parents had moved closer to employment as a result of their PA meeting, there were nevertheless a number of perceived barriers which they and other claimants, whose position had not changed, saw themselves as facing.

New claimants tended to perceive fewer barriers to employment than did stock claimants, though many expressed the need to get their immediate ‘crisis’ behind them. Most frequently mentioned as barriers were health and emotional problems that needed to be resolved before work could be considered. In the more rural areas of District B and District C, travel and transport issues also figured large. Other barriers identified by small numbers of clients included housing
problems, debt and the attitudes of local employers towards employing lone parents.

Lack of suitable, available (and affordable) childcare was perceived as a barrier by some new claimants – though not by stock claimants – despite the fact that once actively engaged in job search, and making job applications, childcare was not seen as the over-riding and determining factor in whether they would be able to work or not. Finding jobs with suitable hours was a much more prominent factor. This suggests that, whereas facing the sole care of a child for the first time brings issues of child care to the forefront of people’s thinking, once the decision has been made to work, this will often be pursued in spite of previously identified barriers. Many of those identifying childcare as a barrier also indicated that they felt their child too young to be left in another’s care, or that they were strongly opposed to anyone else looking after their children. In these cases the perceived ‘barrier’ is, therefore, not likely to be one that can be practically addressed without first overcoming these more fundamental attitudes.

Long-term stock claimants were the most likely to identify significant barriers to them working. The two most often identified were health problems and a lack of qualifications and/or work experience. Others included care responsibilities for sick or disabled relatives, the effects of being ‘older’ in the labour market and, for some, a lack of confidence or a lack of basic skills such as language and literacy.

Individually frequent presented barriers such as health and caring responsibilities as immovable and beyond their control. Among those with less ‘serious’ health problems, there was more evidence of flexibility of attitude and a willingness to consider options. A number of lone parents with health problems restricting their ability to work full-time were seeking (or had found) part-time work that they were able to sustain, though in local labour markets with more restricted employment opportunities, such options were unavailable.

A major (and perhaps under-recognised) barrier among long-term claimants was the ‘inertia’ which several years of living on IS had created. This did not manifest itself as a particularly negative attitude towards work. Rather, it was typically a combination of unwillingness to “rock the boat” and an inability to see how the first steps might be taken.

Longer term claimants have had time to develop rational strategies for financial survival to fit their circumstances. Many therefore display anxiety about losing the “safety net” that benefits provide for them. Moving into employment, especially on low wages, is seen as entailing a risk. Most are highly aware of the ‘knock-on’ effects of moving from benefits to employment, especially the potential effect on other sources of income such as housing benefit.
You want to go out and work ... but you still have to be able to pay your rates, and you still have to be able to buy food, and that's what's been keeping a lot of us on Income Support.

This practical, financial concern was clearly evident among both new and stock clients. New claimants, however, were generally more focussed upon their claim and getting themselves “sorted out”, whilst stock claimants wanted reassurance about the consequences of moving off benefit into work. Information about WFTC and benefit run-ons was particularly valued, as was the opportunity for a full “better-off” in-work calculation once possible employment had been identified.

PA meetings were able to offer direct support and information on all these issues, once lone parents had decided to consider the option of employment. Thus, although the meetings appear to have had little impact on some of the fundamental beliefs and attitudes of the target groups, they were able to change lone parents’ perceptions of the conditions affecting any decision to start actively seeking work.

In this respect PA meetings do appear to be moving some lone parents closer to the labour market and employment. Provided that the idea of leaving benefits for work has been entertained beforehand by a client, then the requirement to attend a PA meeting often provides the “shock” out of inertia necessary to make things happen. It is at this point that clients’ appreciation of information, desire for options and need for support in facing the risks, all come together, and PA meetings appear to be able to achieve notable impact.

3.3.3 Personal development, training and education

One of the aims of the evaluation is to assess whether PA meetings help those lone parents unable to go directly into jobs to move closer to the labour market in the medium term. The ultimate test of success in this will remain the attainment of a job at some point in the future. Some of the expected outcomes will become evident in the second phase of fieldwork. In the meantime there are a number of indications of such movement immediately following lone parent PA meetings which can provide an interim assessment.

In addition to the intensified job search activity already mentioned as linked to an increased motivation and confidence, PA meetings also moved a significant number of clients into other activities. The kinds of development activities being undertaken included the following:

- voluntary work and voluntary placements
- work ‘taster’ opportunities
- work preparation short courses.
Work 'tasters' and short preparation courses were being undertaken under the auspices of NDLP. Success was reported both in terms of individual motivation and in terms of networking and support relationships between lone parent participants (such as the establishment of informal childcare arrangements within course groups).

Voluntary opportunities were being accessed through clients' own initiative and with the help of PAs. Although voluntary work was generally recognised as a useful step towards employment, it was not something clients had been widely advised upon. Lone parents with health problems or disabilities made particular mention of the value they attributed to help and guidance from PAs in this area, where such support was forthcoming.

There was a widespread feeling among PAs that advice on voluntary work could appear rather 'abstract' in the absence of immediate and relevant opportunities. The exception was where there existed a specific programme of voluntary placements. In this case PAs were happy to refer those who they felt would most benefit and for whom the nature of the voluntary work was directly related to their expressed preference for employment. In one of the case study areas, such a programme was being run at a local hospital and provided care assistant placements.

It was noticeable that a number of long term claimants were already involved in various types of part time voluntary work, and felt that they had a lot to offer in terms of experience and organisational skills. Indeed there was a strong sense among these lone parents that insufficient credit was given for these skills, either by PAs or by employers.

The other key area of development activity arising from the lone parent PA meetings was that of training and education. As has been noted, there was an over-representation of clients pursuing such opportunities among those interviewed. Many were already engaged on educational courses, including a few on degree courses, to which they returned after the summer vacation. Nevertheless, there were many others who had taken up a course as a direct result of their PA meeting. Courses named included:

- IT training
- women's computer training
- administration NVQ
- flower arranging
- catering
- accounting and payroll training.

Lone parents were generally very positive about the training and education courses they had started. They were seen as opportunities
for getting into the types of work that they were interested in doing. In many cases training was perceived as the chance to “do something different” and to gain work in a different area from that in which they had previously been employed.

Lone parents whose previous work experience had been minimal, unskilled or in occupational areas no longer offering vacancies and opportunities, were able to access vocational training through NDLP. Courses in IT and office administration, for example, were seen as leading to options for work in areas where there were vacancies. Many who had previously done shop and bar work were keen to move to what were seen as better paid and better quality jobs in offices or in call centres.

The desire to seek training as a route to jobs that were felt to be more appropriate to their age, experience and aspirations, was particularly evident among longer term claimants. This was in part a reflection of the lack of confidence many felt in returning to the labour market after several years out of work. It was also a reflection of the desire many expressed to pick up the pieces of their earlier career aspirations, which had been interrupted by having to care for children.

In these and other respects, many of the longer term claimants faced difficulties and had support needs more closely related to their having been out of the labour market for a considerable time, rather than by virtue of being lone parents. Childcare had largely ceased to be an issue for them. The major barriers they saw themselves facing were their age, the apparent lack of credit accorded to their practical experience and organisational skills, and the difficulty finding jobs that would be personally rewarding.

Unfortunately, the PA meeting process frequently led to disappointment for these lone parents. After having their hopes raised of getting help to pursue their chosen route back into employment, many were then disappointed to find that the type of education or training course they were interested in could not be supported under the NDLP programme.

Among lone parents from minority ethnic backgrounds there was a major issue regarding language ability. This was not just about the ability to speak English (with children interpreting at interviews, for example) but also about the ability to read and write English. Where clients can speak but not read or write English there would appear to be a potential need for basic skills courses.

In terms of meeting immediate needs, what many of these clients said they wanted from their PA meeting was a form of “adult careers guidance”. Although such services are available in some areas there was no evidence that PAs were making any such specific referrals. Furthermore, the prescribed content, expected emphasis and
outcomes from PA meetings to which PAs are working, has meant that such guidance, even where PAs are in a position to deliver it, falls outside their remit and cannot be forthcoming.

Some of these restrictions derive directly from the policy design of lone parent PA meetings and NDLP as a 'jobs first' programme. There is, however, an apparent danger that the opportunity presented by some well-motivated long term claimants wishing to return to employment, is currently being missed. The longitudinal elements of the research will provide information as to whether such clients pursue training on their own initiative and seek the specific types of jobs they would prefer, or whether they enter jobs they see as less desirable and which may not be sustained.

3.3.4 Participation on NDLP

A key measure for the success of PA meetings is the level of subsequent participation by lone parents on NDLP, as the vehicle through which employment related services are delivered. Clients were purposively sampled to include numbers of both those who had been caseloaded on NDLP by PAs, and those who had been flagged as attending an initial NDLP interview but who had not gone on to be caseloaded. NDLP entrants were found from all categories of lone parents including from among those with long term health problems or disabilities.

It was noticeable that many lone parents were unaware of their status in respect of the NDLP programme. Very few mentioned it by name unless prompted, and most made no distinction between their first PA meeting and any subsequent appointments with a PA that they may have had. This was in some Districts the result of conscious delivery policy and practice by PAs, though in other Districts it appeared to reflect poor communication of information and to be accompanied by vagueness or confusion on the part of clients.

Few lone parents viewed the process as a clear-cut choice of whether to participate or not. Generally it was seen as a question of whether or not they felt the need to see their PA again, or were persuaded that it would be useful to do so. Most clients did not, therefore, offer specific reasons for not joining the programme, but described more of a 'default' situation in which things were taken no further.

Clients had not gone on to NDLP for a variety of reasons. A small number of the job-ready had gone directly into work found for them at their PA meeting. Others had decided that the support on offer was of the wrong kind (for example, could not contribute to a chosen personal and career development route via other training and education). Still others preferred to pursue employment opportunities themselves - even feeling demeaned by the involvement of the statutory agencies.
The majority, however, had not entered NDLP because they perceived the whole work focus to be inappropriate to their circumstances. Whether the inappropriateness was deemed to be temporary and short term, or more long term (even permanent) depended upon a small number of factors, namely:

- fundamental attitudes about their role as a parent
- immediate and pressing priorities and constraints other than work
- 'trigger' points in their own and their children's lives, and in the structure of the context within which they were claiming benefit.

What all these factors imply - whether in relation to the age of a youngest child, the length of a period of ill-health, or the imminent end of entitlement to IS, for example - is the crucial importance of timing for the success of PA meetings and their impact on clients.

Where the timing of a lone parent PA meeting coincided with favourable conditions under all or any of the above factors, then clients' responses were often positive and immediate. Where they didn't so coincide, there were three typical outcomes:

- the agreement that NDLP would not be considered at that time and the issue left until the re-call meeting in twelve months time (six months from April 2002)
- the agreement that temporary difficulties made it necessary to postpone further engagement for a short period, and a follow up meeting set up for a time at a suitable remove into the future
- the agreement that possible further support depended upon a change in the client's current circumstances and the client invited to make renewed contact with the PA when they felt ready and it was more appropriate to do so.

Once the initial meeting has been conducted, any follow up contact is generally recorded as attendance at an initial NDLP interview. Fixed appointments agreed with PAs (as in the second bullet point above) thus signal entry to the programme.

What was apparent from client interviews was that there were many who fell into the third category and who expressed the intention of getting back in touch with their PA at some point in the near future. The degree to which these lone parents act upon their intentions will strongly affect the achieved levels of entry to NDLP from PA meetings, and will be explored in follow up interviews in the second phase of fieldwork.
4 Observed Meetings

Direct observations of four PA meetings with lone parents were made in each of the five Districts, and interviews were carried out with the PAs and lone parents involved immediately afterwards. In all but one District these observations were split evenly between new and stock claimants. The observations were specifically sought with both experienced PAs and with more recently recruited Advisers. They were carried out with the first appropriate clients to turn up at Jobcentres on the days allocated. In this sense they were not pre-selected and can be seen to represent an essentially random group of clients. Direct observations provided both first hand experience of the conduct of PA meetings, and an opportunity to explore the immediate perceptions of both participants (PA and client) as to what had transpired and what they felt had been achieved.

4.1 Physical setting

The physical setting for lone parent PA meetings varied from Jobcentre to Jobcentre according to the facilities available. The vast majority took place within open plan offices at Advisers’ desks, although there was generally a reasonable degree of privacy created by the use of screens or the positioning of desks in a quiet corner away from ‘through traffic’. Some meetings took place close to busy reception areas or next to job boards being perused by members of the public. Other meetings took place in private rooms, though sometimes specifically to facilitate the observation rather than at the client’s request.

The location of the meetings did not present a problem to clients. There were private interview rooms available, that could be used if they wished, in all but one of the Jobcentres visited. Interruptions by ES staff and by ringing telephones were an annoyance to PAs but where they occurred did not appear to have an impact on the course of meetings.

The lack of privacy was not a major issue for clients at their first PA meeting, at which they were new to the PA. However, several PAs mentioned that once a relationship had been struck up with a lone parent they did sometimes want to speak “in confidence” and would ask for further meetings to be held in an interview room.

PAs were not always keen to conduct interviews in separate rooms away from their desk, as this could mean they did not have access to the LMS system on-screen during the meeting. Whilst the set-up of a PC on a desk separating client and Adviser could appear quite formal,
PAs were generally adept at breaking this down by their approach, tone and manner.

Some Advisers made the point that they preferred holding PA meetings in an open plan area and were keen to give clients the opportunity to see the Jobcentre at work. Clients (many of whom had not visited a Jobcentre for several years) expressed pleasant surprise at the new environment. This contributed to them taking away from the meeting a positive image of the service – something which was an explicit aim and intention for many PAs.

### 4.2 Format and content

Advisers appeared to follow a relatively set format for meetings, covering the required topics and following standard guidance. Almost all started by establishing whether the client understood why they were there, and what the meeting was about, going on to check personal details and gather information about children, current activities and work histories. At an appropriate moment (determined by responses or questions from the client) PAs tried to ascertain future plans for employment, what sort of work might be sought and what difficulties or problems could affect what was done, and when. Information about available help was run through, with the degree of detail depending largely on whether clients had shown particular interest, or the PA had judged particular items to be especially relevant to their circumstances and attitudes. PAs drew meetings to a close with attempts to persuade clients to join NDLP or agree to other forms of follow-up contact. If this was not forthcoming then the arrangements for review meetings were explained.

To this extent the content of meetings was predictable and the topics covered very similar in outline in all cases. What was noticeable, however, was the frequently highly skillful way in which PAs interwove more probing questions around the ‘rote’ content and negotiated and drew out individual clients in response to indications of possible positive ways forward. There was much good practice in evidence and an abundant display of excellent communications skills and interviewing techniques.

With a number of clients PAs made an early and firm judgement in the meeting that they were job ready and spent a significant amount of time engaged in job searches on-screen in an attempt to job-match clients there and then. In a few cases this extended to ringing employers and arranging interviews for jobs on the spot, though submitting clients to jobs at their first PA meeting was said not to be particularly common. In at least one District, PAs were being told by their managers that this was not considered best practice. In another the opposite message was being conveyed – that the primary aim was to get anyone into a job, as quickly as possible.
The longest lone parent PA meetings observed were those where on-screen job search was undertaken extensively after an initial exchange of information. One lasted well over an hour, though in this case the client became irritated at not being able to see the screen easily, and at not getting responses from the PA to the full range of her circumstances and concerns before the job search began.

Other aspects of some meetings that took up a lot of time were detailed discussions (with new claimants) about their IS claims and lengthy explanations about the purpose of the meeting and the fact that it was mandatory but NDLP was voluntary. While the latter frequently appeared to be errors of judgement that lost the client’s attention and contributed to complaints of “information overload” and “too much information”, the former were explained by PAs as conscious attempts to get clients “on side” by dealing directly with their primary and over-riding concerns about money.

Words such as ‘voluntary’ and ‘mandatory’ were used by some PAs although it was not clear that clients had understood them. Other ES ‘jargon’ was best avoided too. Indeed some PAs deliberately refrained from naming the NDLP programme itself, instead talking of help and support that was on offer in a general way. Approaches to which clients appeared to respond most readily were couched in terms of “getting the help that’s on offer to lone parents to find work” rather than signing up to “the NDLP scheme”.

4.3 Meeting client needs

In most of the meetings PAs displayed great skill at building rapport with clients. Opening exchanges were often extended, informal and very loosely structured, as PAs worked to allay anxieties and get across to clients that they were “on their side” and there to help. What this entailed in many cases was a willingness to listen to what clients were most concerned about and to talk this through (and even to offer practical assistance) as a demonstration of good faith and in the expectation that this would pave the way for greater trust, and hence greater progress, further down the line. In some cases concerns were over benefits and BA paperwork, in others rather more related to the purpose of the PA meeting itself (such as concerns about children and health issues).

PAs generally showed great sensitivity to the problems and concerns of clients and considerable awareness of the likely effect on clients’ receptiveness to information of their emotional and mental states.

Several clients observed were arguably claimants whose PA meeting should perhaps have been deferred. They included several with quite severe disabilities and others with jobs but off sick from work or
otherwise on temporary, short-term claims. PAs responded well to these clients, not allowing themselves to be disconcerted by the circumstances, running through whatever checks they could, such as receipt of WFTC for those in work and offering open invitations for clients to contact them with any further queries.

Although some lone parent participants interviewed expressed concerns about poor or non-existent referrals from PA meetings to specialist services, those meetings that were observed showed such referrals working well in at least one of the Districts (District B) – particularly referrals to Disability Advisers (DAs). PAs were very positive towards clients with disabilities. Full discussions were undertaken around whether they wanted to work, what they felt they could do and whether particular training would be useful. Only then did PAs suggest clients see a specialist DA who could determine the next moves.

The observations demonstrated, above all, the crucial professional role of PAs in being able to pick up on signals from clients (verbal and non-verbal) and to respond in such a way as to maximise chances of finding positive lines of discussion and ultimately positive outcomes. The importance of this skill, particularly for dealing with such a diverse client group, was most evident when it was lacking. There were a number of examples in which seemingly important comments were not picked up or developed by PAs. These included clear indications of particular perceived barriers or avenues of interest (such as low pay, training and voluntary work) that pointed to support possibilities not subsequently discussed, and thus persuasive opportunities missed.

This would appear to constitute an important element for future PA training, and reinforces expressed interest from PAs themselves in training in interview techniques and the use of role-play to explore practices. It also points to the potential that exists for transferring skills from more experienced to less experienced PAs. More experienced PAs were much less likely to miss such ‘cues’ than those relatively new to the job.

4.4 Persuasiveness

The observation of lone parent PA meetings in progress was a particularly valuable opportunity to explore how persuasive PAs were able and willing to be with clients regarding work and the encouragement to seek help towards employment.

The approach of all those observed, without exception, was essentially non-confrontational. Clients’ comments after meetings suggest that such an approach is generally very effective. Those arriving at the meeting expecting to be pressured into doing something they would rather not do were clearly relieved, those seeking information felt able
to ask the necessary questions, and those who were particularly nervous of formal contacts and lacking in self-confidence were put at ease.

This did not mean that PAs always accepted at face value clients’ assertions, that they could not or did not want to work. They frequently returned to such issues on a number of occasions during meetings, reiterating questions in the light of information that may have been new to the client. In this way the approach was maintained that the PA meeting was about offering support. The ‘challenges’ that were made to clients’ positions were made in terms of the help available to them that might make their situation easier or lower some of their perceived barriers.

The best PAs observed were able to quickly ‘distil’ the information that was forthcoming from clients and identify the most likely way forward, and the help relevant to encouraging that move. This inevitably involved building a complete picture of the client’s position and ‘homing in’ on the most potentially productive point of application.

PAs were also clear about the boundaries of their responsibilities, and which potential confrontations were inappropriate to their role. Suspicions were expressed by PAs after two of the meetings observed, that the clients may have been working already or otherwise making fraudulent claims. They were clear, however, that unless real evidence of this was to come to them it was inappropriate to raise such suspicions. PA meetings had always to be conducted in good faith.

The other area in which PAs recognised strict limits to their ability to question or challenge was in relation to health and disability issues. Questions of the appropriateness of medical certification of problems lay with doctors and an assessment process beyond their remit. Issues of disability, and the degree to which this prevented or limited work, were clearly seen as the specialist realm of DAs, although PAs were working effectively alongside DAs to combine their different types of support and expertise.

4.5 Ensuring follow-up contact

One area in which PAs displayed particularly strong persuasive skills in many cases, was in seeking to ensure follow-up contact with clients. For many PAs this was their explicit priority for an outcome from the meeting. Any follow-up contact which would help to engage clients further in a process of ongoing help and support was viewed as positive by these PAs, whether it was to be entry to NDLP or agreement to be re-contacted by telephone.

There were a range of such outcomes achieved from the observations, which included the following:
• submission to a job vacancy with agreement to contact PA if clarification needed on in-work benefits

• entry to NDLP with an appointment fixed for initial interview

• agreed appointment for a (non NDLP) follow-up meeting to go into more detail than currently possible, or to allow time for immediate problems to be sorted out first)

• appointments with Disability Advisers (DAs) - including joint meetings involving a DA and the PA together with the client.

These different forms of follow-up contact can be seen as representing the stronger end of a gradation in terms of their likelihood of engaging clients in a support process towards employment. Beyond these were two ‘weaker’ possibilities:

• the issuing of free-phone and direct line telephone numbers to clients with an open invitation to re-contact the PA should they change their mind, or their circumstances alter, or if they have further queries about available help

• a ‘default’ outcome involving merely informing clients of the automatic recall meeting that they would have to attend in 12 months’ time.

From the limited number of meetings observed there appeared to be clear differences in the achieved outcomes, measured against this scale, from one case study District to another, irrespective of differences attributable to different levels of experience of individual PAs.

In the Scottish case study area, District B, PAs were operating under clear and detailed instructions from the District Manager about the approach to be adopted, the ‘selling’ technique to be used (assumptive method), and the importance of a medium to long-term view of process towards employment. All four observed meetings successfully achieved further contact. The two new claimants entered NDLP and the two stock claimants agreed to attend meetings with a Disability Adviser.

Techniques of persuasion regarding follow up were particularly evident in the District B meetings, though much was conveyed through tone and manner. The emphasis on personal help and the positive relationship between PA and client was the basis for much that was apparently being achieved. Emphasis was constantly being placed on this aspect rather than the impersonal detail of programmes and schemes, as is illustrated in the following exchange:
PA: So what do you think about the NDLP - would you like to be one of my clients?
Client: Yes
PA: Because even if you don't get this job... any job that comes in that I think you are suitable for, I will phone you up.
Client: That's fine.

Once a positive personal relationship had been established and the idea of further help accepted, Advisers pushed hard to ensure follow up contact. Dates and times for meetings were set there and then and agreement reached that the PA would be in touch as a reminder nearer the time.

PA: Would you like to make an appointment to come back and see me under NDLP and we can discuss all your options and see what's happening...?
Client: Mmm...
PA: Would you like to make an appointment now? Or would you like to make the appointment when you're ready?
Client: Whatever's best.
PA: It's entirely up to you...
Client: I'll just make it now - I might as well make it while I'm here.
PA: Good idea, aye. Next week?
Client: That's fine
PA: What time suits you best?

[PA rings the NDLP administration team, books a day and a time, gives out an appointment card with a free-phone number on it as well as her own personal card]

A similar pattern of persuasion was evident with stock claimants, even though disabilities appeared to make the chances of a job outcome far from certain. Emphasis on what help might be available, and on the specialist knowledge of the Disability Adviser, were interspersed with gentle probing about attitudes to working and what work had been done in the past. The idea of making an appointment with the DA was gradually built up to, eliciting positive responses to questions along the way. A meeting was then arranged and confirmed that could act as a 'stepping stone' to further contact with the PA.

PA: What do you think about getting back to work?
Client: Well, I would like it...its just...
PA: What's been stopping you?
Client: The arthritis really... in my hands, so...
PA: Have you tried any jobs?
Client: No - I was going to try...
PA: Right, so you have thought about it?
Client: Aye.
PA: Have you thought about what you would like to do if it was possible?
Client: No.
[PA explores if any other problems or barriers, and goes into details of benefits including Disability Allowance]
PA: I'm thinking of looking at this on a two-pronged attack! Would you like to come in for an interview?
Client: Well…
[PA suggests other aspects such as training that she might want to discuss]
PA: I'll get this [form] in … and put your phone number so I can keep in touch with you…
[PA talks through a number of leaflets she gives to the client and outlines possible incentives for working part time]
PA: I think your first problem, correct me if I'm wrong here, is finding exactly what you can and cannot do.
Client: Mmm…
PA: Is that right?
Client: Aye.
PA: And on that basis I think the best thing would be to get you [to see the] Disability Adviser, would that be alright?
Client: That's fine.
[PA later picks up on further possible interest in voluntary work and offers to initiate the follow up].

In contrast to this, two of the other areas (Districts A and E) only secured re-contact with one client each out of four, and all but one of the stock claimant meetings outside District B either resulted in agreement that nothing further would be done until the 12 month review or at best that the client could contact the PA should they change their mind.

In these areas it appeared that judgements were being made early on in proceedings that there was little that could be done for the client and therefore no point in attempting to establish further contact. Some of the meetings took on a rather negative tone, with Advisers themselves suggesting that support available was probably inappropriate. This reinforced doubts in clients' minds rather than emphasising the more positive or open aspects of their situations.

As I say… New Deal for Lone Parents has been running a couple of years - and hopefully it will just
carry on anyway, so it might not be the right time for you at the moment…

There were instances in which the decision that nothing could be done appeared perfectly justified and meetings were ended relatively quickly and with no attempt at arranging follow up prior to review. However, in a number of meetings (and seemingly more often with stock claimants) this was far from being the case. One client even felt that her PA meeting had been a de-motivating experience because the PA had not worked alongside her enthusiasms and had effectively reinforced certain barriers rather than helped to work around them.

Another found that she had to initiate an enquiry as to how she could make further contact with the PA because it was not being offered to her. The PA had taken at face value the assertion at the start of the meeting that she was "happy for the moment" on benefits, and had assumed that what she wanted was to be left alone until annual review. Although very subtle, there were indicators through the meeting that the client might actually be thinking otherwise on which the PA did not pick up.

This difference in approach to follow up contact seemed to define the different approaches evident from observed meetings. In two of the Districts (B and C) there was an evident commitment to ensuring follow up of some form as a priority with all clients. For this reason the immediate outcomes from meetings were spread across a range of intermediate stages designed to keep in touch. In the other three areas outcomes were more starkly divided with very little between, on the one hand those going directly into NDLP, and on the other hand those merely informed of the recall process at the end of their PA meeting.

It was also evident that PAs in the first two Districts were operating in a context that encouraged a longer term view of outcomes. Indeed, none of the PAs expected to be able to achieve much in a first interview with a stock client, hence the emphasis on follow up contact. One PA judged at least two or three meetings to be required to get most stock clients to open up sufficiently.

Whether or not this context derived from a direct management 'steer' to pay particular attention to individual development within the initiative, or whether PAs in some areas have lighter workloads because of the way resourcing has been based on previous entries to the voluntary programme and therefore can afford more time for regular client contact, is unclear. Nevertheless, PAs in these Districts were operating with a clear view to the processes of getting clients from where they were starting out into eventual employment, and not just looking at short term outcomes. They were also, by virtue of this, focussed on the idea of sustainability in relation to any employment outcomes to be achieved.
PA: You'll probably get work, really quite quickly.
Client: Yeah, Ah ha…
PA: Most of the lone parents that come in … to the meeting I can arrange, get work in a few weeks.
Client: That's what I'm hoping yes.
PA: You can be choosey … nothing will happen to your benefit …
[………]
Client: You see, I don't want to jump into and out of jobs……
PA: No, no … I would rather you took six months to get a job you want than do it in six days and then think 'oh, I'm leaving, I can't stand it'.
Client: Yeah, mm
PA: …you want a job you'll be able to live with and enjoy.

4.6 Some missed opportunities

The observed meetings provided additional supporting evidence to the client interviews that under certain circumstances lone parents were coming to PA meetings with expectations and potential that was not fulfilled. Some stock claimants in particular are missing out through a combination of factors, including:

- unjustified assumptions being made in advance about their "difficulty" and "unwillingness"
- inexperiencel leading some PAs not to recognise vital clues during meetings and thus to miss opportunities to get clients 'on board' and provide them with support
- an over-emphasis on one aspect or another of the initiative preventing opportunities being recognised in other aspects.

A clear example of the first two of these factors involved a client whose meeting was characterised by how little she spoke. The PA did all the talking. There were only monosyllabic answers most of the time from the client, who was not invited to ask questions or offer her own opinions and whose one expressed interest (in the possibility of training) was not picked up or developed by the PA. The meeting was brought to a speedy conclusion with the PA expressing the view that the client was not receptive to what was being said. The client, on the other hand, explained afterwards that in fact she was simply extremely shy and nervous and that this had been mistaken for lack of interest. She felt very dissatisfied that she had not got more from the meeting.
The third factor can be illustrated by two different types of over-emphasis. Both appeared to lead PAs to miss opportunities with clients. In one District a particularly strong emphasis appeared to be given to the 'jobs first' aspect of NDLP and PA meetings, and issues such as training and preparing people for work who have been long out of the labour market did not seem to be fully discussed or developed with clients. PAs were very focused upon trying to achieve short-term job outcomes. So much so that once a client had expressed any interest in returning to work, all other aspects of the programme (training, voluntary options, confidence building and personal development) seemed to be dropped from the frame of reference.

In one observed meeting this resulted in a lengthy search for jobs on-screen while the client became visibly irritated that her questions (about getting trained so that she could apply for jobs with better than minimum wage pay) were not being answered and her main concern was being ignored. What appeared to be an opportunity to meet the clients own wish to use the time before her son reached sixteen to prepare herself in advance for entry to the labour market, was here over-ridden. This training and preparation 'window' for stock clients was generally well recognised in other Districts.

The other approach that was seen to limit potential success in some cases was the tendency of PAs in particular Districts to make the assumption on behalf of clients that the only significant factor in making work decisions was whether they would be significantly better off. While this was the primary concern of many clients it was not always the case. Other motivating factors could come into play and PAs did not always recognise this. In one particular instance a PA had advised a client not to take a part time classroom assistant's job because she would not be sufficiently better off. This in spite of the fact that the vacancy was at her child's school, she was highly motivated to go into this line of work and had been offered the job, and had thought it a good ‘foot in the door’ to a full-time post in the future.

These observations point to an important lesson for the evaluation. The clients who appear to be missing out through this combination of factors are, by and large, stock claimants who it can be argued are either at some distance from the labour market or in a position where they are relying on the lone parent PA meeting initiative to galvanise them into some action after a relatively long period on benefits. As one PA in London put it:

[PA meetings are] best for those who can't help themselves, and those who don't realise they can help themselves.

In this sense any outcomes gained from this group of clients are more likely to be additional than are outcomes from new claimants and the more job-ready.
For a programme such as NDLP, with a high degree of acknowledged 'deadweight' amongst its outcomes, these clients represent a key opportunity to add to its overall effectiveness. The relatively small size of this group of clients with potential (albeit often in the longer term) to be helped into employment, makes it all the more important that none of the opportunities they represent are missed.
5 Interim Conclusions

The first phase of qualitative research for the evaluation of PA meetings has enabled a picture to be established as to how the initiative is currently being delivered, how it has been received by lone parents, what impacts it is perceived to have had to date, and what issues have been raised for further investigation.

5.1 Conclusions

Mandatory lone parent PA meetings are working effectively to draw a significant minority of lone parents, who would not have made such a move of their own accord, into support and closer to the labour market. Once contact has been made, PAs are confident that their skills of communication and persuasion will have an impact with a significant minority of claimants, and help move them faster and more securely into work. This confidence appears, for the most part, to be well founded.

Although there is little evidence of clients' fundamental attitudes to work and childcare being changed, the enforced access to information is leading many to reassess their situation and their options. Enforced exposure to the Jobcentre and to the role of the Adviser is successfully motivating clients and changing their attitude to seeking help in finding work. It is also making them more comfortable with the environment and so more likely to use the Jobcentre again in the future.

Almost all lone parents said they would prefer to work than to have to depend upon benefits, but many of them have powerful reasons why they feel unable to do so. Fear of losing the financial 'safety net' represented by benefits is of particular significance. The value of timely in-work calculations as reassurance that lone parents will be better off despite the risks of making a move into work, can scarcely be over-emphasised. It is nonetheless important that this factor is not allowed to obscure other motivational and developmental factors that can play a part in decisions to take a job.

Lone parents claiming IS present with a great diversity of circumstances. Many have serious long-term difficulties with health problems, care responsibilities and debt. Many others have short-term crises to overcome involving relationship breakdowns, bereavements and sickness. There are relatively large numbers who perceive one or more of these factors to represent an absolute barrier to considering work. Many also hold very firm opinions about the role a parent should play in relation to looking after their children, and about the age their youngest child needs to reach before they, as parents, go out to work.
For many these attitudes and fundamental positions are frequently unassailable and closed to persuasion. However, it is extremely difficult to identify in advance who will hold these views and who are most likely to benefit from the PA meeting intervention. All apparently self-evident groupings such as new and stock, sick and disabled, or long term claimants, include some lone parents who will want to work 

**despite** problems and barriers. Any of these are capable of being persuaded to reassess their position and attitude to seeking work in the light of full and up to date information. They are, however, a minority, and likely to remain so.

In these circumstances it is particularly important that clients are not 'written off' through the application of negative general labels, nor assumptions made in advance about the likelihood of their responding positively, as this can lead to misinterpretations and missed opportunities.

Two related aspects of delivery which may be having such an effect are the increased workloads for NDLP PAs as a result of lone parent PA meetings, and the administrative difficulties caused by clients failing to attend appointments. Some PAs have expressed concerns about the nature of clients coming to them compulsorily, and about the comparatively low levels of job outcomes they can expect from stock claimants who are seemingly reluctant to attend a PA meeting.

There is also a widespread feeling that dealing with PA meetings clients has had an adverse impact on PAs' ability to deal effectively with their voluntary caseloads of lone parents on NDLP. This, for some, has reinforced the view that PA meetings are a less productive use of their time than meetings with voluntary lone parent clients.

Among Advisers, negative perceptions of PA meetings clients, and especially of stock claimants, are being reinforced by the knock-on effects of administrative difficulties caused by failures to attend, and in some Districts also by the views and attitudes of managers. There are indications that these perceptions may be affecting the way PA meetings are being approached and conducted. Comments from some clients, and evidence from observations that meetings have been too short, formulaic, lacking in detail and information, and not challenging enough to spur them to action, support such a view.

Measures to secure reductions in the number of clients (particularly stock claimants) who fail to attend PA meetings appointments might pay dividends if they were to successfully lessen negative labelling that can prejudice the conduct of meetings, and expose more lone parents sooner to information and support. Raising the level of potential sanctions on non-attenders might be one such measure to consider. There are potential dangers in thus raising the stakes if the anxiety caused proves counter productive, or if potential detriment to children means sanctions are not applied and lose credibility. Also, as
sanctions were not being applied at the time of the research there is as yet no evidence regarding their efficacy. However, there would appear to be little to be risked on the part of PAs from being more forceful and insistent with clients once they are in a PA meeting (without losing the advantages of a sympathetic and friendly approach).

The key to maximising the impact of lone parent PA meetings lies in how they are conducted to recognise and respond to client need, thereby not missing any of those with the potential and motivation to move towards employment. The training of PAs takes on a particular importance in this light. The numbers of PAs newly recruited to handle the workload represented by lone parent PA meetings means that there is a large proportion of NDLP PAs operating with relatively little experience. An important issue for ES is how the abundant experience and evident skills of the more experienced can best be transferred to these more recently appointed PAs.

The number of lone parents for whom the timing of a PA meeting perfectly coincides with circumstances that make them most receptive to help, will be relatively few. For this reason it is crucial for PAs not to view meetings as one-off events but to make every effort to link them in to an extended process of contact and support wherever possible. There is clearly a need to cultivate clients for the future, once those that are relatively easy to help into work have been moved on.

In very many cases PAs have adopted such an approach instinctively, based on their experience of NDLP caseloaded clients. They have taken a plethora of additional measures both before and after the PA meeting, to establish and maintain contact. This does not always extend to constituting a formal and notifiable entry to the NDLP programme, rather an informal 'review' process at not too great a remove in time. The recognition of the importance of ongoing process, and regular and frequent contact with clients represents an important aspect in successful delivery of lone parent PA meetings. In many ways this has prefigured the change in policy to shorten the automatic recall period from twelve to six months from April 2002.

There are likely to be benefits from more persistent challenging of the reasons behind individual decisions not to work, and from being more insistent about securing follow up meetings. Such an approach appears best suited to ensuring that no clients 'slip through the net' who may benefit from intervention. These clients (who require the greatest levels of skill from PAs) represent the best opportunity for increasing the overall effectiveness and impact of PA meetings in the future. They are also the most likely to represent additionality for NDLP when they are eventually moved into work.

There is a high degree of basic uniformity in the delivery structures for lone parent PA meetings, based on the existing management arrangements for NDLP, with which they are closely integrated. The
preference for District level team management of PAs has been further strengthened by the introduction of mandatory PA meetings, which have increased the workload and raised additional issues of effective time and resource management.

Whilst the Jobcentre Plus agenda has facilitated the operational integration of PAs within local offices, the establishment of strong top-down communications and management structures has been recognised as necessary for maximising the prospect for positive outcomes from PA meetings. These structures are valued by PAs for the opportunities they provide for contact with other colleagues and exchange of experience and good practice. They are valued in ensuring a consistent high level steer to the teams, regarding the importance of PA meetings, and the approaches to delivering them. Active and engaged District Managers, with a clear vision for the initiative are able to exert an important positive influence on the conduct of PA meetings.

Co-ordination of activities between ES and BA is generally seen as working well, and has been helped by moves being made in preparation for the merger of the two agencies. Early difficulties have been overcome in most areas through extensive liaison, inter-agency training and job-shadowing, which has been well-received by staff on both sides. There are still Districts in which the perception is that BA has yet fully to 'buy in' to the welfare to work agenda. However, positive feedback from clients about their PA meetings is helping in this regard.

Clients frequently contrasted their experience of the two agencies to the advantage of ES, though in several areas they were not entirely clear about the different spheres of interest and responsibility between them. There is still some way to go before clients experience a 'seamless' service.

5.2 Issues for phase II of the research

The qualitative research has been designed to include a longitudinal element, with a second phase of interviewing in the final quarter of 2002. Lone parents and PAs will be re-interviewed in phase II to get a clearer picture of medium to long term outcomes and any changes in perceptions of the programme of mandatory lone parent PA meetings among those participating.

Key areas to be pursued in phase II will include the following:

- how individual outcomes over the 9 – 12 month elapsed period compare to clients’ expectations at the time of their lone parent PA meeting and shortly afterwards
• what circumstances have changed in that time which have affected clients’ motivations, intentions and actions

• the level of follow-up contact and help clients have experienced from PAs, including whether those with open invitations to re-contact Advisers actually did so at any stage

• the extent to which perceived gains in terms of motivation, self-confidence and optimism at the time of a first PA meeting have been sustained, led to positive outcomes, or been undermined with the passage of time

• whether those encouraged to participate in activities to move them closer to the labour market have moved on into part-time or full-time work

• to see if those entering employment after their lone parent PA meeting have accessed in-work support from PAs, whether jobs have been sustained and if not for what reasons

• whether clients’ views about barriers to working and their attitudes both towards seeking work and towards seeking help to that end have changed and if so, for what reasons and in response to what circumstances.

By the time of the second phase of research a number of those lone parents interviewed in phase one, who are still claiming IS, will have been recalled for their 12 month review interview. It will therefore also be possible to compare their experiences of this with the first PA meeting, and to explore any perceived differences. The opportunity will exist also to question PAs about these regular review meetings and whether they are significantly different in their execution than the first meetings.

The longitudinal perspective of phase II will also permit exploration of the process of on-going support provided to mandatory PA meeting clients under the NDLP programme. Particular reference will be made to the take-up of the training premium and the childcare subsidy for those working less than 16 hours per week, and whether availability of these has affected clients’ choices about work activities and the types of childcare used.

Finally, the second phase fieldwork will provide the opportunity to question clients directly in relation to preliminary findings from the first quantitative interviews, and to seek explanatory supporting evidence for findings and emerging patterns at the level of individual circumstances and motivations. Findings from the other strands of the overall evaluation (a quantitative survey of clients and analysis of administrative data) will be tied in with the qualitative findings, and
each will inform subsequent phases of work in each of the different areas.
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