

Research report

Families and work: Revisiting barriers to employment

by Nadia Bashir, Richard Crisp, Tony Gore, Kesia Reeve
and David Robinson

Department for Work and Pensions

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Nadia Bashir, Richard Crisp, Tony Gore, Kesia Reeve and David Robinson

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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	vi
The Authors.....	vii
Summary	1
1 Introduction	4
1.1 Background.....	4
1.2 The focus of the report.....	5
1.3 The structure of the report.....	6
1.4 The research approach.....	6
1.4.1 <i>Re-analysis of interview data</i>	6
1.4.2 <i>Additional interviews</i>	6
1.4.3 <i>Analysis of additional interview data</i>	7
2 Full-time parenting and decisions about returning to work	8
2.1 Introduction.....	8
2.2 Full-time parenting.....	8
2.2.1 <i>Sense of responsibility: Exercising choices</i>	8
2.2.2 <i>Sense of responsibility: Commitments and pressures</i>	11
2.3 A lack of employment opportunities.....	13
2.4 Attitudes towards work.....	16
2.5 Factors encouraging a return to work	19
2.5.1 <i>Age of children</i>	19
2.5.2 <i>Availability of informal childcare</i>	21
2.5.3 <i>Financial need</i>	22
2.6 Conclusion.....	22
3 Job search: Important considerations.....	24
3.1 Introduction.....	24
3.2 The geography of job search.....	24
3.3 Preferred hours.....	27
3.4 The need for flexibility	31

3.5	The availability of work.....	34
3.6	Finding work.....	37
3.7	Conclusion.....	41
4	Easing the transition into work: Transitional and in-work benefits	43
4.1	Introduction.....	43
4.2	Ensuring that work pays.....	43
4.2.1	<i>Initiatives and supports</i>	43
4.2.2	<i>Knowledge and understanding</i>	44
4.3	Support with the transition into work	46
4.3.1	<i>Initiatives and supports</i>	46
4.3.2	<i>Knowledge and understanding</i>	46
4.4	Advice and assistance about moving into work.....	49
4.4.1	<i>Initiatives and support</i>	49
4.4.2	<i>Contact with a PA</i>	49
4.4.3	<i>Help received</i>	50
4.4.4	<i>The experiences of lone parents</i>	52
4.5	The relationship between benefits and work.....	54
4.5.1	<i>The financial viability of work</i>	54
4.5.2	<i>Housing and the financial viability of work</i>	56
4.5.3	<i>Benefits payments and the move in and out of work</i>	57
4.6	Conclusion.....	60
5	Experiences of work.....	61
5.1	Introduction.....	61
5.2	Positive experiences of work	61
5.3	Negative experiences of work.....	62
5.4	What makes work possible	66
5.5	Conclusion.....	70

6	Conclusion.....	71
6.1	Introduction.....	71
6.2	Returning to work.....	71
6.2.1	<i>Key findings</i>	71
6.2.2	<i>Policy implications</i>	72
6.3	Searching for work.....	72
6.3.1	<i>Key findings</i>	72
6.3.2	<i>Policy implications</i>	73
6.4	Easing the transition into work.....	73
6.4.1	<i>Key findings</i>	73
6.4.2	<i>Policy implications</i>	73
6.5	Experiences of work	74
6.5.1	<i>Key findings</i>	74
6.5.2	<i>Policy implications</i>	74
Appendix A	Profile of interview respondents.....	75
References	80

List of tables

Table 4.1	Awareness of different in-work benefits and support.....	45
Table 4.2	Awareness of a selection of back-to-work benefits.....	47
Table A.1	Profile of interview respondents.....	76

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Summary

Introduction

In recent years, considerable effort has been put into supporting parents to make the transition into work. This study was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to explore whether these incentives were helping parents to overcome the barriers known to impede their engagement in the formal labour market.

The report is based on fieldwork conducted in 2009. However, the concluding chapter considers the significance of the findings in light of proposals for the introduction of the Universal Credit and other reforms of the tax and benefit systems proposed by the Coalition Government.

The research approach focused on two main tasks. First, the re-analysis of data from a previous study commissioned by DWP and delivered by the same team (Fletcher *et al.*, 2008). This involved revisiting transcripts from in-depth, qualitative interviews with 67 parents, paying particular attention to the interaction between parenthood and work. Subsequently, a series of additional interviews explored issues of relevance to the follow-on study that had been left untouched or remained unclear following re-analysis of interview data from the original study. Twelve repeat interviews were conducted with parents who participated in the original study, and 38 in-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with new respondents.

Full-time parenting and decisions about returning to work

The decision to stay at home to look after children was often reported to be a conscious choice, in order to enable parents to provide the care and support their children need to develop emotionally and educationally. Staying at home was also sometimes presented as a necessity in order to fulfil responsibilities, including looking after children with health or behavioural problems; responding to cultural expectations about the role of mothers; or looking after the household. These factors were not always perceived as barriers to work. Looking after sick or disabled children or conforming to cultural pressures was often accepted as part of being a parent, rather than being framed more instrumentally as a constraint on labour market engagement.

Some parents explained decisions to stay at home in terms of a lack of employment prospects. This was sometimes attributed to personal barriers such as poor health and a lack of suitable childcare. Respondents also highlighted a shortage of appropriate work, with concerns centring on the limited financial gains associated with a return to work and the lack of part-time work that could fit around nursery or school hours. There was also a widespread reluctance to use formal childcare. However, despite the value placed on parenting, the prevailing view across both lone and two-parent households was that it was important to work because of the personal benefits it provides and the positive example it sets to children. The key decision was when rather than if it was appropriate to return to work.

Job search: Important considerations

Four themes emerged as key influences on experiences of searching for work:

- **Constrained job opportunities** – This related both to limitations on the feasible geographical scope of job search (or commuting), and to the restricted hours that primary carers (usually mothers) felt they were able to work. In many cases the two combined with reliance on public transport links to constrain the number and range of job opportunities open to mothers. Thus, most women reported that they were only interested in part-time work that they could fit around the school day, given their responsibility for dropping off and picking up their children. This meant that the competition for such jobs was intense.
- **Work experience and confidence** – A number of women thought that motherhood had served to distance them from the labour market, even though they were now making strenuous efforts to find work. Those who had children at a relatively young age reported that they had little or no training or work experience before having their first child. Even mothers who had some previous experience of work said that being out of the workforce for many years while caring for young children had negative consequences when they started looking for employment again.
- **Gendered roles** – Most of the women interviewed explained their position in relation to the labour market with reference to their role and responsibilities as a mother, no matter how determined they were to find a job. In contrast, hardly any of the men who were interviewed made any reference to issues of childcare and parenting responsibilities when discussing barriers to work.
- **Family and household support** – For those women who lived in a two-parent family or in multi-generational households (for example, living with parents), the availability of support with childcare duties improved the viability of finding and retaining paid work. However, this did not necessarily open up the option of seeking better quality jobs. Rather, it meant that they were more disposed to regard the generally low paid, part-time, often casual, work that was on offer in a positive light.

Easing the transition into work: Transitional and in-work benefits

It has long been acknowledged that some people in receipt of benefits are fearful about coping financially with the transition into work and do not necessarily recognise paid employment as a financially viable or realisable option. In response, a number of policies have been introduced in recent years in an attempt to help ease these worries. These have concentrated on ensuring that work pays; supporting the transition into work; and providing advice and assistance about moving into work.

These initiatives were found to have had only limited impact on the concerns of parents about leaving out of work benefits and the financial uncertainties they associated with being in work. In part, this reflected the limited awareness, knowledge and understanding of these initiatives among the parents interviewed. This finding points to the importance of any reform of the tax and benefit systems ensuring that the ways that work can pay are more obvious and easier to understand. However, even people who were aware of the complex regime of initiatives, benefits and supports designed to help people to move into work reported concerns about the financial risks of being in work. This finding suggests that previous efforts to ensure that substantial financial benefits are associated with moving into work have failed to convince.

These findings support the case for moving to a single system of working-age benefits, in a bid to minimise the confusion inherent in the present system and make it easier for individuals to ascertain whether they would be better off in work.

Experiences of work

Parents who had returned to work associated various positives with being in employment. These included social benefits such as the sense of purpose, independence and self-esteem work afforded, as well as the opportunities for social contact. Some parents reported gaining financially from returning to work. Some of the parents who had returned to work recounted negative experiences. These centred on the loss of quality time with children; a lack of time for domestic chores; difficulties with benefit payments; and a lack of flexibility from employers making it difficult to balance parenting responsibilities and work commitments.

Several factors were reported to support a return to work and to aid job retention. These included working part-time, support from family and friends, the flexibility of employers and job satisfaction. This finding suggests that the ability to balance work with parenting responsibilities is underpinned by the structure of employment opportunity within local labour markets, as well as the personal resources an individual can draw on within their own social networks (informal social capital).

Policy implications

- Policies to make affordable childcare more readily available help some parents return to work. Any overall reduction in the availability of free places could undermine policies to encourage parents to return to work.
- For mothers, the return to work is shaped by their ability to find work that fits around nursery or school hours or, alternatively, to access trusted sources of informal childcare. Childcare policies will have little impact on this group. Instead, policy will need to further encourage employers to offer employment with ‘family-friendly’ hours that fit around the nursery or school day.
- The requirements of Lone Parent Obligations (LPOs) do not always align with parental views about the appropriate time to return to work, in terms of the age of the youngest child. Enforcing LPOs will involve overriding the concerns of some parents about what is best for the wellbeing of their children. As a result, employment advisers working on the frontline may well find this a difficult policy to administer.
- Policies seeking to encourage parents back into the labour market by ‘making work pay’ will clearly, therefore, ‘speak’ to some parents, but will not necessarily counter the strongly-held views that some other parents hold about their role and what represents an appropriate time to return to the labour market.
- Combining parental responsibilities and work demands access to local employment opportunities. For this reason, many parents talked about wanting to work in schools, either as midday supervisors or teaching assistants. Any reduction in non-teaching posts in schools is likely to impact negatively on parents, particularly mothers, with pre-school or school-age children who clearly value this type of employment opportunity.
- Lone parents who want, or are required, to look for work are likely to benefit from training or work placements designed to reintroduce them to the workplace environment. One option would be to stipulate that contractors delivering elements of the Work Programme for lone parents offer training and work placements, as was the case under the New Deal for Lone Parents programme.
- Judging by responses to this study, the move to a single system of working-age benefits, in the form of Universal Credit, has the potential to provide greater transparency and certainty about the financial implications of moving into work. The proposed reduction of high marginal tax rates for a large proportion of parents returning to work may also help to alleviate some of the concerns that parents have about the financial gains of moving into work.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In recent years, government efforts to tackle worklessness have targeted particular groups that are more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive. One such group is lone parents. Initiatives designed to encourage and support lone parents into work have included mandatory Work Focused Interviews (WFIs), which are a condition of benefit receipt for lone parents. Since 2005, most lone parents who attend a WFI have been required to complete an action plan agreed with a Personal Adviser that helps the lone parent concentrate on their longer-term goals, setting steps they can take to prepare themselves for work (Finn and Gloster, 2010). More recently, changes were introduced requiring lone parents with younger children to actively look for work. Previously, lone parents claiming social security benefits were not required to look for work until their youngest child reached school leaving age. From 2008, lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over were no longer entitled to Income Support (IS) solely on the grounds of being a lone parent (Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), 2007). Those able to work were instead eligible to claim Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and were required to be available for, and actively seeking, employment. From October 2010, lone parents have not received IS if the youngest child is seven or over. The Welfare Reform Bill announced in the Queen's Speech to Parliament in 2010 is likely to further reduce this age to five from 2012.

Various other interventions have been introduced in a bid to tackle child poverty and support parents to move into work. For example, Child Tax Credit (CTC) was introduced as a means-tested allowance for parents and carers of children and young people, which is payable regardless of whether parents are in or out of work; 15 hours of free early learning for three- and four-year-olds was made available, which could take place in nurseries, playgroups, preschools or at their childminders; local authorities (LAs) were obliged to ensure the provision of sufficient childcare for working parents; and various back-to-work and in-work rights and supports targeted at parents were introduced (for example, time off, right to request flexible working and Job Grant). Initiatives were also introduced in a bid to support social tenants into work, including the Enhanced Housing Options approach. This recognised that many people enter social housing without skills or a job and sought to connect people with advice and support about skills, in-work benefits and jobs to help set them on the path into work, and ensure social housing provides a genuine platform for opportunity (Communities and Local Government (CLG), 2008).

As a result of these initiatives, the UK is reported to have among the strongest work incentives in the personal tax and benefit systems of any major economy (Freud, 2007). This report draws on research commissioned by the DWP in 2008 to establish whether these incentives were helping parents to overcome the various barriers known to impede their engagement in the formal labour market.

1.2 The focus of the report

This report explores the relationship between work and parenthood within the lives of a sample of parents with dependent children living in low income neighbourhoods. Analysis was framed by attention to the various barriers identified by previous studies as impeding access to employment. These included:

- the gendered nature of parental responsibility, mothers being more likely than fathers to be the primary carer and less likely to be in work;
- being a lone parent, research revealing that lone parents have lower rates of economic activity, higher rates of unemployment and, as a consequence, are at greater risk of poverty;
- reconciling work and childcare, a challenge that is informed by availability, attitudes toward and use of (formal and informal) provision;
- perspectives on the responsibilities of parenthood and associated duties;
- concerns about the transition into work, thoughts about the financial viability of work and readings of the associated risks;
- awareness of and attitudes toward in-work benefits;
- attitudes toward part-time and full-time work;
- availability and suitability of work.

(Barnes *et al.*, 2008; Hales *et al.*, 2007; Miller and Ridge, 2001; Ridge and Millar, 2008.)

In exploring the enduring significance of these barriers to work, analysis tended to focus on the situations and experiences of mothers. This reflected the fact that, while parenting responsibilities rarely impinged on the relationship male respondents had with work, all the women interviewed explained their relationship with the labour market through reference to their role and responsibilities as a mother. This was true for lone parent and two-parent families from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, living in different locations, neighbourhood types and housing tenures. This finding reflects the gendered nature of parenting roles and responsibilities in the UK, most lone parents being women and women typically being the primary carer in two-parent families.

Another important caveat regarding the focus of this report is that it reviews the various initiatives designed to help parents to overcome known barriers to work that were in place when the fieldwork took place in 2009. Questioning did explore the thoughts of interviewees about proposed and forthcoming changes, including the fact that from October 2010 lone parents would not receive IS if the youngest child is seven or over, but analysis was completed before the general election of 2010 and subsequent proposals for reform of the tax and benefit systems. However, the concluding chapter does consider the significance of the findings in light of proposals for the introduction of the Universal Credit and other reforms proposed or introduced by the Coalition Government.

1.3 The structure of the report

The report is organised around the discussion of the key phases of the transition back into work:

- **Chapter 2** considers the decisions that parents make about staying at home and the factors encouraging a return to work, including the age of their youngest child and the availability of various supports, including childcare.
- **Chapter 3** explores the kind of jobs that makes work a viable option for parents. Factors considered include geography, preferred hours, and the need for flexibility around childcare responsibilities. Experiences of trying to find appropriate work are also considered.
- **Chapter 4** explores knowledge, awareness and experiences of the various benefits and initiatives that seek to support the transition into work and help people when they are in work.
- **Chapter 5** reflects upon (positive and negative) experiences of work among the parents interviewed and considers what factors make work a viable and realisable option.

A final chapter draws out key conclusions from the study and reflects upon their significance to contemporary policy debates.

1.4 The research approach

The research approach focused on three main tasks:

1.4.1 Re-analysis of interview data

This study was commissioned as a follow-on to a DWP study that sought to explain the relatively high levels of worklessness within the social rented sector (Fletcher *et al.*, 2008). This study concluded that the reasons for relatively high levels of worklessness within the social rented sector were many and complex, but found little evidence to suggest that social housing serves as a deterrent or barrier to work. The original study involved in-depth, face-to-face qualitative interviews with 107 social tenants living in eight low income neighbourhoods across four case study LA areas (Derby, Islington, Peterborough and Sheffield). More than half of these respondents were a parent with at least one dependent child and 13 out of 30 private rented tenants were a parent with at least one dependent child. The transcripts from the interviews with these respondents were re-analysed, with particular attention to the priorities of the follow-on study and the interaction between parenthood and work. Inevitably, the scope and content of the interview data reflected the focus of the original study, which centred on exploring possible links between social housing and worklessness. The particular implications of parenthood on attitudes towards work and relationships with the labour market were not themes explicitly explored during interview. Still, re-analysis of 67 interviews yielded some interesting and important insights, although a number of questions remained unanswered. The challenge for subsequent stages of the research programme was to fill these gaps.

1.4.2 Additional interviews

A series of additional interviews explored issues of relevance to the follow-on study that had been left untouched or remained unclear following re-analysis of interview data from the original study. Two approaches were adopted to securing additional interviews. First, 12 repeat interviews were conducted with parents who participated in the original study. These respondents were purposively sampled to include parents in a range of household situations and with different employment histories. Second, 38 interviews were conducted with new respondents who had not taken part in the original study. These new respondents were accessed through housing and employment-related

services providers, including advice centres and social landlords, as well as through snowballing techniques. Effort was put into ensuring that the profile of new respondents included men and women in different household situations, from different ethnic backgrounds, with children of different ages who were in and out of work (see Appendix A for a profile of respondents).

In total, 46 interviews were conducted in Derby and Islington. These were two of the four LA districts where fieldwork had been undertaken during the original study. The team had full contact information for respondents who took part in the original study in these two locations and also had a productive working relationship with local agencies who were able to help facilitate access to additional respondents. The sample was boosted by interviews with four parents living in Sheffield, another of the case study areas in the original study. The team, therefore, undertook a total of 50 in-depth, qualitative interviews with parents.

The interviews were guided by the use of semi-structured interview schedules that sought to explore perceptions of labour market opportunities within the context of the various personal and structural factors that constrain or enable participation in the labour market. Separate interview schedules were drawn up for the new and repeat interviews and for people in and out of work, but each contained a set core of questions that collected profile information and explored:

- respondent's recent and ongoing experiences of employment;
- views about factors rendering work un/viable;
- experiences of and attitudes toward childcare provision;
- perceptions about what it means to 'be a good parent' and the implications for work; and
- awareness and understanding of transitional and in-work benefits.

Interviews also explored possible links between housing tenure (living in social housing and the private rented sector) and work. No evidence was found to suggest that living in social housing was a barrier to work, although relatively high rents in the private rented sector and the inflexible and unsupportive attitude of some private landlords were found to make it difficult for some people to manage the financial unpredictabilities of being in insecure, casualised work. Some positive incentives were found to be associated with being a social tenant (security of tenure, sub-market rents and the supportive attitude of some social landlords), but these did not overcome barriers to work (such as parental responsibilities and the availability of suitable employment). These findings confirm the conclusions of the original study (Fletcher *et al.*, 2008) and are not explored further in this report.

1.4.3 Analysis of additional interview data

Full verbatim transcripts of all additional interviews (repeat and new interviews) were entered into computerised data analysis software (NVivo) and then categorised and analysed in detail. Themes guiding analysis included:

- work histories;
- the correlations and relationship between caring and parenting responsibilities and labour market engagement;
- transitions into work and resilience factors;
- factors distancing people from the labour market;
- the use of employment- and training-related services provided by difference agencies;
- the way in which personal characteristics (e.g. family structure or the age and number of children) impacted on decisions about work.

2 Full-time parenting and decisions about returning to work

2.1 Introduction

This section presents evidence on the perceptions and experiences of full-time parents in relation to:

- the factors that contribute to decisions to look after children full-time;
- attitudes towards work, including the perceived benefits of paid employment;
- factors which appear to influence decisions about returning to work.

This section focuses mainly on the accounts of respondents who were not in work at the time of interview, but also includes some respondents in paid employment who reflected on past experiences of being a full-time parent.

2.2 Full-time parenting

Staying at home to look after children full-time is a natural and expected development after childbirth that is clearly recognised through maternity and paternity rights in the UK. Framing it as a ‘decision’ in this section is not to suggest, therefore, that it is simply one of many options in this early phase but, rather, to indicate that different parents make different choices about work as children grow up. Exploring the reasons why parents remained at home to look after children full-time suggested that this phase of parenthood was guided by two main factors. The first consideration was a sense of responsibility towards children or, to a more limited extent, managing the household. This sense of responsibility was expressed both as a conscious choice to ensure the wellbeing of children as well as, in some cases, a necessity to fulfil caring responsibilities for sick and disabled children or to carry out domestic chores. The second consideration contributing to decisions to stay at home was the perceived lack of employment prospects or opportunities in the labour market. Both of these considerations are discussed in the sub-sections which follow.

2.2.1 Sense of responsibility: Exercising choices

A number of respondents explained decisions to look after children full-time in terms of meeting their perceived responsibilities. In some cases, this was expressed as choices guided by moral outlooks that included:

- a desire to see children ‘grow up’;
- a belief in the importance of ‘being there’ to meet children’s emotional and social needs;
- a feeling that looking after children should be the sole responsibility of parents or close family, often combined with a reluctance to use formal childcare.

A recurrent theme was the desire to witness children's development:

Safia: *'I think it's more important than anything in this world at the moment because if you don't give that time and love to your kids you're neglecting them in every way really, you're not seeing them grow up and then they want that love and care.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with parents; youngest child under one year old)

This quote illustrates the strength of feeling that many parents reported about being present at home as children grow up, with some people even equating work with 'neglecting' children. The importance of 'being there' was also expressed in terms of being present to meet children's needs and to promote their educational and employment prospects:

Rachel: *'My kids are my life and I want to be there, I want to be the one that they come to when they're sick, I want to be at school, the one that they see, I don't want it to be someone else. I want them to have someone there that they know, that they're safe, be there for them and take care of them, help them with homework, generally just being there...if you have a specific routine with them they know that you're going to be there and pick them up and they know that you drop them off so it's mainly about their routines and keeping them happy, if they're happy in school they get a better education and they can get a better job in life and not be stuck around the house.'*

(25–34 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

As this quote indicates, staying at home can be seen as a way to provide stability, routine and support so as to support the emotional and educational development of children and, ultimately, help them get a better job.

This notion that full-time parenting is beneficial to children was also expressed in the way some respondents contrasted the wellbeing of their children with the experiences of children whose parents work:

Interviewer: *'What effect do you think it has on your children, the fact that you are there for them, that you stay at home and look after them?'*

Sarah: *'It gives them a big effect because they're very happy, they're rarely naughty, they're siblings, they have their arguments but I've seen some parents, they're working all the time and not around enough for their kids and their kids. I've seen their faces and they've been upset, "oh my mum works, not spending enough time with me"...I don't believe in wasting the minutes away from your children.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child two years old)

Mandy: *'I like spending time with my kids...my kids go to museums, we do activities, we go to the council-run fun days where you learn and do arts and crafts, they wouldn't be able to do any of that if I was working and I think that's the bond we need. My other sister works, she don't spend no time with her kids, their grades are appalling, both of her boys are appalling, they just go from child minder to child minder to buzz club. I don't want my kids like that, I want them to have the best we can give and if that's me staying at home then that's me staying at home.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

Explicit here is a strong sense that work can have a detrimental effect on children as it denies them valuable time with parents, and can hinder their personal and educational growth. Indeed, one view that emerged strongly among a number of parents was that staying at home had an important supervisory function in keeping children safe and out of trouble. One parent, for example, emphasised the importance of being at home after school to encourage her son to take part in activities such as swimming, karate and football, which served to divert him away from the potential influence of gangs:

Ella: *'He's getting more boisterous, backchatting, changing. Especially at this age, you have to be there to see what's happening to them. I'm so scared about what's going to happen when he goes to secondary school. I don't want him to get involved in gangs. I see the boys [from the secondary school] on the bus and I think "oh my god, I don't want him to behave like that".'*

(25–34 years old; unemployed; lone parent; only child nine years old)

Again, this example suggests that some parents believe duties to children are best exercised by remaining at home, with going out to work being regarded as irresponsible given that doing so can expose children to a number of additional risks.

These cultural preferences for staying at home to 'be there' for children often originated from personal experiences of parenting in childhood, as the following two examples illustrate:

Tracy: *'I think every child needs a parent there for them, I hear so many stories about kids going home on their own, going home to an empty house, having to cook their own dinner, that's not right. My parents were there for me, one of them was always there for me and that's what I want for my children because it didn't do me any harm having my parents there during the day and doing things for me.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child eight years old)

Vicky: *'Yeah my mum did it herself, she never passed us onto anybody else, she never had a babysitter, never left us with anybody and it's the way I am with them.'*

(25–34 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child under one year old)

These are evidently deep-seated cultural values passed down through families, and it is notable that the importance placed on full-time parenting endures even if there is no longer any 'breadwinner' in the household, as in the first example above.

A second recurrent theme that emerged in discussions about staying at home was the notion that looking after children is the sole responsibility of parents or close family. Parents saw themselves as duty-bound to look after their own children and, in many cases, did not want to entrust that responsibility to others by leaving their children in formal childcare:

Rachel: *'You bring your child into the world, you do it yourself, you don't pass them off onto other people and pay someone else to do it.'*

(25–34 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

Sharon: *'I don't trust [childcare], there's too many things you hear, even family, the ones she stays with is me mum and sister, you're hearing too much on the news about all these people...Me oldest one, she's under a lot of counselling and cos she's had a lot of abuse with her dad, domestic violence and all that, so she needs me more, the youngest one is petrified of men, don't know why but...So I've got the issues with all that, so it's better to be there than pass them on to anyone and letting them suffer, so I'd rather stay at home with my kids.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child four years old)

In the latter case, there is a strong mistrust of childcare that appears to stem from a desire to protect children from any further emotional harm following exposure to domestic violence in the past. These suspicions of formal childcare provision thus reinforce a belief that full-time parenting is the most responsible approach to bringing up children. As Chapter 5 on experiences of work goes on to show, many parents will only return to work if informal childcare from family or friends is available.

It is important to note that the moral responsibilities to stay at home to look after children cut across household types, with both lone and two-parent households vocalising the importance of full-time parenting. Indeed, one lone parent now working part-time articulated a view that lone parents had the right to look after children full-time without fear of approbation for not being in work:

Debbie: *'No I liked being a mum, I liked putting the dinner on the table, that's what I want to do. If I was with a rich partner who said 'don't ever work a day, bring your children up', you wouldn't be frowned upon, [but] because you're on Income Support you're frowned upon, why? My children went to clubs, I took them out, I tried to teach them to read and write, I'm as good as anybody else, I just haven't got any money. Am I going to be punished because their dads have walked away and aren't sharing in the childcare, aren't sharing in the fee to bring them up?'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; lone parent; youngest child three years old)

In this particular case, there is a tangible frustration that those holding negative perceptions of non-working lone parents do not recognise what the interviewee sees as the universal right of all parents to stay at home and look after children regardless of financial means. There is a clear view that this should be a moral decision based on what is best for the welfare of children rather than contingent on the ability of each household to support themselves without recourse to state benefits.

2.2.2 Sense of responsibility: Commitments and pressures

Responsibilities for looking after children full-time were also explained in terms of commitments or pressures that made it necessary, rather than simply morally desirable, to stay at home. These included:

- fulfilling responsibilities to look after children with disabilities or behavioural issues;
- the need to undertake domestic chores;
- cultural expectations from spouses or the wider community not to work.

Whilst these factors were often described as involuntary or unavoidable pressures, they were not always regarded as barriers to work; some individuals appeared willing to actively embrace these roles.

Looking firstly at responsibilities towards children, a small number of parents were caring for sick or disabled children full-time and felt unable to contemplate a return to work:

Denise: *'I just need to sort my daughter out and then I can look into it but they keep saying 'go to these back to work interviews' but I'm not in that position at the moment...'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child 2½ years old)

Zia: *'I've got a young disabled child, I'm a full-time carer so that's why I can't go into employment, I've got a back problem which I'm not fit to go to work as well... As long as he's OK, I'll start to search for work but it's a long-term plan...at the time I'm only thinking for myself, what I can do best for him because he's the one that's got the most need and at the moment I'm in crisis and he's got a single parent. I'm separated from my husband so he needs me more than before.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; only child 10 years old)

These quotes indicate that caring can be viewed as a full-time occupation in itself, precluding a return to work. Whilst the second interviewee indicated a potential interest in finding employment, this is balanced against the more immediate need to fulfil caring responsibilities. Moreover, as the last example demonstrates, caring responsibilities can combine with other pressures such as personal ill-health and relationship breakdowns to act as additional barriers to work.

Some respondents also identified the need to look after children with behavioural or emotional problems as a factor in decisions to stay at home. One lone parent explained, for example, how her son's behavioural issues at school prompted her to undertake community work as the unpredictable and time-consuming nature of her son's difficulties meant she could not commit to regular paid work:

Tania: *'He hated school and didn't want to go, that was a serious problem because you spent two hours every morning trying to get him to school. You'd know that he'd probably come home in the afternoons cos you couldn't even think about getting a job, which is why I started the community stuff because that, you could do it or you couldn't, it's much more flexible. I don't think I would have coped with a job then...you've got to concentrate on them, get them sorted out and then think about me...trying to get him to make his way in the world really, that seems more important, because I've always got time [to find work] once they've finished.'*

(45–54 years old; working full-time; divorced; youngest child 16 years old)

A second consideration in decisions to stay at home was the view that going to work would not leave enough time to carry out domestic chores as in the following case:

Sana: *'When I wake up the first thing I do is get my 16 year old ready for school and send him off, then I take the younger one to school and tidy up around the house, [then] I have to go and get the shopping and then it's nearly time to go and pick him up from school. I just have time to wash the dishes and do some cooking and that's how I look after the household and do the chores...you can only do one, either go out to work or fulfil your household duties, you can only do your household work or go out to work, not both.'*

(35–44 years old; permanently sick/disabled; lone parent; youngest child age unknown)

Staying at home and looking after children is presented as a way of avoiding an unmanageable 'double burden' of paid work and housework. This was particularly true for lone parents, who had no other adult to assist with running the household.

A third practical consideration cited by respondents was pressure from spouses or the wider community to stay at home and look after children as part of cultural or gendered notions of the role of women. One woman of South Asian background who left her husband after 12 years explained how the expectations of both her husband and the wider South Asian community prevented her from going out to work:

Ameena: *'They want you to stay at home, have loads of kids, cook and clean for the husband, look after the in-laws which I couldn't do because I went to university. I did my degree, the last thing I wanted to do was put that away in a file and put it away. ...they think if you're working full-time then you're a bad mother because you're not looking after the children and it's always like, "when I was your age I looked after my kids" – thing is, times have changed.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child age unknown)

Another interviewee in London of White British background also explained how her husband preferred her not to go out to work:

Nicola: *'My husband wants me at home...he's scared I might meet a new man [laughs], bit jealous I suppose, I don't know, he likes me at home. I'm quite happy at home, I suppose I'll only come in moaning saying I've been at work all day and I'm tired, as I usually say looking after the kids.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child 1½ years old)

These examples illustrate that individuals respond differently to the expectations of other household or community members. Whilst some resist these pressures in order to realise aspirations to work, others are prepared to assume domestic roles as full-time mothers. Either way, it is clear that cultural expectations can play a powerful role in shaping the way in which work and parenting is balanced.

2.3 A lack of employment opportunities

Alongside a sense of responsibility, the other most commonly cited explanation for decisions to stay at home related to a perceived lack of employment prospects or labour market opportunities. This included personal barriers such as poor health and a lack of suitable childcare as well as negative assessments of the availability of appropriate work.

Looking firstly at personal barriers, health played a role in preventing a small number of respondents from returning to work, as noted above in the case of Zia and in the following example:

Mark: *'I'm on this ESA [Employment and Support Allowance] benefit, it's like a disability thing...I'm on a programme where I think by nine months from now when I finish this programme, I'll be back on Jobseeker's Allowance and then I'll obviously look more because with me being on this thing now, I can't go out and just get a job straight away like that.'*

(45–54 years old; unemployed/on government scheme; living with partner; only child seven years old)

Some respondents also raised childcare as an issue in terms of cost and availability as well as mistrust of formal childcare providers. Cost was the most commonly cited problem in relation to childcare with 19 respondents raising it as an issue, as in the case of Michelle:

Interviewer: *'Can you think of any changes in your situation or circumstances that would make it easier for you to find work and be in work?'*

Michelle: *'[If] childcare were free, cos it is so expensive, and more jobs...it is really expensive, when you work that out and bills and everything else you're not left with nothing, I think it's about 30 quid, it's not a lot really.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child eight years old)

One caveat, however, is that some parents did not seem to be aware of, or factor in, potential sources of financial support for childcare. This lack of awareness is revealed in the following reflections from one lone parent on how the government could do more to support childcare costs:

Cassie: *'Some people charge about 120 quid a week, it's terrible...it's not fair to parents to have to pay all that money out. I think there should be something done about that part of it with government, they should pay all of it or something because if they want people to work and they've got children it's not easy.'*

(35–44 years old; permanently sick/disabled; lone parent; only child 13 years old)

In addition to problems accessing affordable childcare, another issue raised frequently was the lack of formal childcare that covered the non-standard hours demanded by some jobs. As one respondent explained:

Zia: *'I'd like to work in a children's home...[but] most children's centres want you to be very flexible when they rota people on shifts so that's just a no go...after school club finishes at 6pm, starts at 7.30 in the morning, apart from the price of it, Working Tax Credit help out a bit but you still have to pay 70 per cent, but they're not open till 10 at night so if you've got a split shift from 2 till 10 you can't do it... Childcare in my area is available, after school club, but only till 6pm so I couldn't think of working as a care assistant again for example.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; only child 10 years old)

Whilst these examples indicate that some respondents saw the cost and availability of childcare as barriers to using such provision, it is important to emphasise that these concerns were only identified by a minority (nine) of the 50 respondents. Indeed, only three individuals identified childcare problems as the main or only barrier to work. Moreover, it is important to consider, as other research has shown (for example, Bell *et al.*, 2005), that childcare issues only become a tangible barrier to work once work is regarded as a viable option and other constraints removed. In this research, for example, one interviewee discussed the prohibitive costs of childcare but went on to reflect that, *'part of me, I like spending time with my kids'* (35–44 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child 1½ years old). Any barriers to accessing formal childcare may, therefore, be secondary considerations in returning to work when set against perceived responsibilities towards children or, indeed, negated by the mistrust of formal childcare identified in Section 2.2.

Alongside personal barriers to employment, a lack of appropriate work was the other factor that seemed to contribute towards decisions to remain at home and look after children. This tended to coalesce around two concerns: a lack of employment that could be undertaken during school or nursery hours; and a perception that work was likely to provide little, if any, financial gain, compared with existing benefits.

Several respondents expressed a desire to work part-time during school or nursery hours to obviate the need for childcare, but claimed that such employment was scarce, as Denise observed:

Denise: *'Yeah they have [Work Focused Interviews at the Jobcentre] every six months for the lone parents and they say what they think you should do and I keep saying to them "I want something from them hours, have you got anything with schools, have you got anything...?" "No". I say "well it's pointless because you're wasting your time and you're wasting mine".'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child 2½ years old)

It is important to note that finding appropriate part-time work was even more difficult if, as in Denise's case, young children were still only attending pre-school facilities on a part-time basis as part of Early Years provision.

Alongside these concerns about the lack of work with appropriate hours, a number of respondents expressed a belief that work would pay little more, if anything, compared to being on benefits:

Safia: *'Minimum wage is £5.52 I think or £5.90 something like that...after you've earned your money and everything at the end of the week you've got tax and national insurance number, what you're left with is £200, where are you supposed to put it? So that's why I think just sit down.'*

(35–44, unemployed, youngest child four months)

Tracy: *'At the moment for me to go into full-time work I would be probably £5 a week better off than what I am now. My rent is sky high, about £135 a week and when you look at the Council Tax on top of that, travelling, all that kind of stuff it's really not worth it at the moment...the government help pay for child minders [but] I think you're left to pay quite a bit of it as well...so it's like you're being given it with one hand and having it taken away with the other so no.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child eight years old)

It was notable that Tracy felt that work remained financially untenable even when back to work support such as In-Work Credit (IWC) was factored in (see Section 4.5.1).

In a small number of cases, concerns about the financial viability of work were directly related to the negative experiences of friends with children who had returned to work as in Sharon's case:

Sharon: *'My mate done it [went back into work] and whatever she gets goes straight out, she's no better off...'*

Interviewer: *'What did she go back into?'*

Sharon: *'Like clerical, and she's more experienced, mine would only be shop work or something like that...she's got her mum that looks after her son, drops him off at school and picks him up, but even she's thinking of going part-time cos she says she's not spending no time with her son and what money she's getting is going straight out. She's still in debt and everything, so it's not worth it unless it's a really high paid job, it is really hard.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child four years old)

In this case, the perception that work does not pay in the low-wage segment of the labour market where she is likely to find work, alongside the perceived 'stress' of arranging childcare and reduced time with children all serve to encourage Sharon to remain at home. Similarly, Carol discussed fears of struggling financially if she returned to work after observing the difficulties faced by a friend when time-limited back-to-work benefits came to an end:

Carol: *'What's happened with a lot of my friends, [one] went to work part-time about three years ago, she loved it because she got her unemployed money, her wages as well and £60 per month for going back to work, but that stops after two years you see, or a year, and that's when she found it really difficult to pay part rent because that £60 was taken away, so now they're trying to get her into full-time employment which she doesn't want to do.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

This shows how the loss of the short-term return-to-work incentives including the £60 per month IWC (see Chapter 4) can be keenly felt. Both of the last two examples also indicate that decisions to stay at home are being influenced, in part, by the difficulties encountered by peers in returning to work. These are not abstract fears but concerns rooted in the practical and financial difficulties experienced by friends who made the transition back into work.

To make sense of limited expectations of financial gains, it is important to remember that many respondents have low levels of skills and have worked, or would seek to work, in low-paid segments of the labour market such as retail, care work, hairdressing and catering. Moreover, the desire to accommodate work with parenting responsibilities often prompts individuals to only consider part-time work, which further limits the potential monetary gains to be made from returning to work. It seems, therefore, that decisions to remain at home are being shaped by the limited returns anticipated in low-wage tiers of the labour market. The sum of these concerns is that many parents do not believe there are sufficient incentives to warrant a return to work. It is important to note that these are perceptions of likely gains. The actual experiences of some, though not all, respondents who are working or have worked in the past, recounted in Section 5.2, shows that it can ease financial pressures and provide for 'little extras' although the precise gains do vary according to household circumstances.

It is interesting to note, however, that for some parents, decisions about returning to work are ultimately seen as a moral rather than a financial choice. In the following example, the desire to see children develop clearly outweighs any financial considerations:

Interviewer: *'Do you think things like [in-work benefits] would make a difference if you were thinking about going back to work?'*

Sharon: *'Not really cos it's not going to help with [looking after] the kids and [school] holidays and things like that...you can have all the money in the world but it still wouldn't help spend the quality time your kids need growing up so I'd rather have that time.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child four years old)

Time spent with children is, for some, valued more highly than financial gains. This suggests that policy interventions to increase the financial rewards of work may have little purchase on the minority of parents whose moral view of the importance of full-time parenting dominates.

2.4 Attitudes towards work

At the same time as emphasising the importance of parenting, a number of respondents also stressed the potential benefits of work. This had three dimensions. Firstly, work was seen to provide important opportunities for personal fulfilment including independence, social contact and self-esteem. Secondly, parents wanted to act as a role model to their children by inculcating the value of paid employment through their own example. In this sense, work was seen as an important

responsibility too. Thirdly, and finally, a few mentioned the financial advantages brought by increased income, particularly in terms of the 'extras' it might allow them to buy for their children, such as treats, trips and holidays.

Looking firstly at opportunities for personal fulfilment, respondents cited a number of potential gains, including independence, self-esteem, better mental health and social interaction:

Helen: *'I think there's a lot more reasons to work [than money] because life goes on, your child needs to know that you are an individual and you do your own things... On an emotional level I think it's better as well because you can become very under confident and very isolated and anything you feel emotionally it rubs off on your children so that's like a massive factor why.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; lone parent; youngest child six years old)

Farah: *'Mostly I'm just thinking if I going to job...you can meet other different people... it's lots of different things and you're out of the house and you're getting fresh air and different things, it makes a lot of difference in your life...'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with parents and partner; youngest child eight years old)

Another respondent noted how mixing with adults at work would help to provide her with a valued identity beyond being a parent:

Denise: *'[If you are working] I do think you don't feel like you're just a mother, you just feel like you are Denise and you meet people, sometimes they just say 'that's Keira's mum' you've never got the identity of just you, you're just a mum so it is nice to think you're speaking to adults...'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child 2½ years old)

The second benefit associated with work was the possibility it provided to act as a 'role model' for children by demonstrating the need to work for a living, as the following examples illustrate:

Lesley: *'I think it is important [to be in work] because especially as the child gets older it proves to them that you work and it teaches them because they look up to you so if you don't work in their head they think it's OK not to.'*

(16–24 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child under one year old)

Ameena: *'I don't want to be unemployed because I don't think that reflects a good personality on my kids, I don't want them to think I'm going to sit on my backside and be on benefits and that was the biggest reason [I went back to work] because there were times when I was unemployed and my kids went to school, they wouldn't eat their free school dinner because they were too ashamed so I couldn't do that, I thought OK even if I earn less I will work.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child age unknown)

Despite the evident strength of the work ethic that these exchanges reveal, many respondents tempered their comments by emphasising the need to achieve a balance between a job and parenting:

Julie: *'My priority is my children, but also part of being a good mum is a good role model as well so it's important to me to have a job but it's got to be a way that I can manage my home life as well as my work life.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child two years old)

Finally, whilst a lack of financial incentives was frequently cited as reason not to work (see Section 2.4), the potential boost to household income was sometimes identified as a potential benefit of moving into employment. For some, particularly those with large families, this was expressed in terms of being able to make an additional contribution to the household's outgoings (and by implication not getting into debt), as in Carol's case:

Carol: *'I'd love to get out there and look for a job, my daughter's three now so it's not that much longer before I'd be able to start, she'll be going nursery...If it's to help pay my bills and help my partner pay the bills then I'll do it.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

For other respondents, it held the promise of enabling their families to do things that they were unable to afford at present. However, for some this posed rather a stark choice with any additional luxuries achieved at the expense of time available to look after children:

Helen: *'I think you either sacrifice the time that you spend with your child and then you're able financially take them somewhere nice for holidays or you have that time with them, it has to be one or the other.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; lone parent; youngest child six years old)

This once again illustrates the importance placed on 'being there' and how financial incentives are weighed up against moral positions on parenting.

Despite these comments about the financial benefits of working, positive expectations of the benefits of work typically focused on non-financial benefits. Rather than a means of substantially increasing their income, work appeared to represent a way of asserting independence, increasing confidence or setting a positive example to children.

Finally, one notable finding was that parents often combined a strong belief in the value of work with a belief in the importance of 'being there' to look after children. This left some parents striving to achieve an appropriate balance between the work and parenting, as the following quote illustrates:

Rachel: *'No because I'll hopefully look for work when I know they're settled in, but I still need to find a job that fits round them, it'll be hard but I'll find something...I've got friends that drop their kids off at school and they go out to work, everybody's different, some mothers love being with their children, some mothers love going out to work as well as being there for the kids.'*

(25–34 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

Another woman, Wendy, who worked occasionally as a relief worker at a school canteen expressed a desire both to return to a more permanent working arrangement whilst continuing to spend time at home with her young daughter:

Wendy: *'I do want to go out to work but I'm just enjoying being relief whenever they need me and I like to be round my children. If there was a case where there was a job for me and it was to do part-time, I would go and do it because at the end of the day I should, as a role model you've got to show your children work is the best thing but basically for me I just want to be able to do little bits what I can and still try and be outside and inside the home.'*

(45–54 years old; unemployed; living with partner; only child seven years old)

Such views show that a strong belief in the value of work can co-exist with a desire to stay at home to look after children. Indeed, respondents felt a moral compulsion to do both, and often faced a difficult struggle to balance the two. Many individuals reconciled the issue by suggesting part-time work could enable them to combine parenting and employment. This suggests that views about parenting and work are very much about balancing both roles, rather than polarised perceptions about the value of each activity. As the next section shows, this position left many parents reflecting on when rather if they should work.

2.5 Factors encouraging a return to work

A number of respondents looking after children on a full-time basis outlined an intention to work. These decisions about returning to work were influenced by a number of factors including: the age of children; the availability of informal childcare; and financial need.

2.5.1 Age of children

Of these factors, the age of children was the most commonly cited consideration influencing a return to work, although there was a wide range of opinion about the best time to restart labour market participation. Some respondents with access to good formal childcare or support from families were able to think of a return to work in the first year after their youngest children were born as in the following example:

Interviewer: *'What age should the youngest child be before they should be expected to in your opinion?'*

Grace: *'I think the same as I did with [my daughter], you've got to spend that first half a year with them I think to get them into a nice routine and you'd have that bond and get to know each other, I think that's essential really.'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; living with partner; only child two years old)

Another group thought that it was better to wait until at least one of their children was old enough to attend nursery school. A small minority stated they would start looking when children were eligible for a free part-time place, although they did recognise the severe limitations in terms of job opportunities for the short hours that they would be available. For this reason, respondents in this group, such as Carol, were thinking of looking for work when at least one of their children became eligible to attend on a full-time basis when they reached the age of four:

Carol: *'I'd love to get out there and look for a job, my daughter's three now so it's not that much longer before I'd be able to start, she'll be going nursery...'*

Interviewer: *'What sort of age do you think that you'd be comfortable?'*

Carol: *'When she starts full-time nursery, not part-time.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

Rachel made a similar point, as well as commenting that her partner's support would be important for her to be able to combine work and parenting:

Rachel: *'The nursery's just five minutes, it's not too far but then next September it'll be better cos she'll be there as well full-time.'*

Interviewer: *'Do you think that'll make your situation a bit easier for you?'*

Rachel: *'Yeah and the baby'll be one, if I go to work and their dad don't he can go to father and toddler groups with him and stuff like that so I don't mind.'*

(25–34 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

A third group of respondents were more resistant to the idea of working during their children's pre-school years, with the age of five (or when they had started primary school) quoted as the minimum. Wendy's comments were typical of this group:

Wendy: *'Like I say I prefer to spend the first five years with my children because they grow so much and they do so many things in the first five years of life, it's trying to not miss anything but being able to go out to work because that's what life is all about, working and earning a wage and everything...now my [youngest] daughter's in school I'm tending to look for part-time work so basically not full-time work because I want to be able to be there for my kids.'*

(45–54 years old; unemployed; living with partner; only child seven years old)

There were some respondents who suggested that they would only consider returning to work once the youngest child reached secondary school-age:

Interviewer: *'Do you have an age in your mind that your youngest would need to be before you thought about going back to work?'*

Sharon: *'That's when she's at secondary school, cos me other one goes up not next year, year after, but even her, I'm with her cos she's so quiet and I know she's going to need a lot of work so I think it just depends on the individual, cos the youngest one's stronger than the older one so she might be ready a lot sooner that I can leave her with a friend and she'll be happy.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child four years old)

The age of children was not only a factor informing the decision about when to return to work but also appeared to impact on the number of hours that parents were willing and able to work. Two respondents who were in part-time work suggested that they would consider moving into full-time employment when their child moved to secondary school:

Debbie: *'[I'll look to go full-time] probably when the boys are in secondary school... because you can't leave them, if I left them at primary school you'd have social services knocking on the door, "you've left them on their own to cook their own tea'. ...come 12, 13, 14 you might want to leave them for a couple of hours, it's quite acceptable to leave them for a couple of hours then but at five it's silly, they're only just going into school.'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; lone parent; youngest child three years old)

Marcia: *'I'd probably like him to be in [secondary] school so I go back full-time and you can always get someone to pick them up after school, cos their dad only works from morning till afternoon so he could go and grab them from school.'*

(35–44 years old; working part-time; living with partner; youngest child five years old)

In contrast, one woman explained that she did not return to work until her eldest child was 16 years old and could, in her view, be left on her own:

Tania: *'Once [my daughter] finished school I wanted a job and to do stuff, but before that I filled up my day doing community stuff cos I could spend five days a week doing that and quite often did so I was really busy and out doing that first.'*

Interviewer: *'So your daughter turning 16, was that for you a crucial point?'*

Tania: *'Certainly because my neighbour, the minute her daughter was 16 all her money stopped and it was like I don't want to be there where you've got to start it all at 16, I need to be thinking before so if I do need to train do it while she's still at school and you get it all free and you've got the time to do it rather than being pressured into doing whatever they send you on.'*

(45–54 years old; working full-time; divorced; youngest child 16 years old)

These findings reveal a lack of consensus about the appropriate point to return to work, in terms of the age of the youngest child. This suggests that the impact of the Lone Parent Obligations (LPOs) which (from October 2010) requires individuals to actively seek work once their youngest child reaches seven, will vary depending upon the disposition and outlook of parents. For those willing to consider work by the time their child enters primary school, LPOs may make little difference as they may well have entered the labour market or started the process of job search before it becomes a mandatory requirement. In contrast, this obligation will conflict with the desires of parents who would prefer to postpone a return to work until their children are older and, for example, have transferred to secondary school.

2.5.2 Availability of informal childcare

Many parents were reluctant to use formal childcare for moral or financial reasons. As a result, the availability of informal childcare provided by a family member or friend who could look after children outside school hours assumed greater importance as a factor facilitating a return to work. Respondents in two-parent families sometimes talked about how juggling parenting responsibilities with their partner served to render work a viable option. Rachel reported that this would involve her partner working unsocial hours so that he could look after children when school finishes:

Rachel: *'Well [my partner] and I would switch if he had to work nights I'd find a day job where he could be here for the children, we'd work it between ourselves, the two of us.'*

(25–34 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

Some respondents suggested that family members outside the household could look after children if they moved into work:

Interviewer: *'Do you have people around you who could help out as well in terms of childcare?'*

Sana: *'Yeah my mum [looks after] my sister's [children] and that cos she works. She only lives next street down...[my mum] has my eldest every other weekend...My sister could do it now and again as well, there is a few people that could do it.'*

(35–44 years old; permanently sick/disabled; lone parent; youngest child six years old)

2.5.3 Financial need

Some respondents reported that financial necessity prompted them to return to work:

Ameena: *'We split up and he left me in debt of £100,000 and I was forced to work and bring up the children on my own.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child age unknown)

Gemma: *'[My daughter] was a month old. I went straight back to work. Money, that's the only reason why [I went back], if it wasn't for that I wouldn't have gone straight back because I missed out on a lot going to work in the morning and it was horrible leaving her.'*

(16–24 years old; working part-time; lone parent; only child two years old)

A small number of respondents also reported that moving into work would enable them to afford 'extras', such as holidays. However, financial considerations did not emerge as a key factor prompting parents to consider or pursue a return to work. The limited importance of financial considerations appeared to reflect two factors. First, many respondents were not convinced that a return to work would improve their financial situation (see Chapter 4). Second, financial incentives were secondary to the perceived wellbeing of children, which served to elevate the importance of the age of the child and the availability of informal childcare.

Finally, two other considerations emerged as important in informing the decisions of some parents about returning to work. First, some parents, such as Steve, did not want to claim state benefits:

Steve: *'I just woke up one day and said "I don't want to be on benefits any more" cos the way you get treated on the benefits system is, I didn't like the feeling of being, I was not in control, there's certain things that go off in the benefits system where they make you feel second class.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; living with partner; youngest child seven years old)

Second, some parents reported wanting the mental stimulation that came with work, a comment that reinforces the conclusions drawn above that for some parents paid work provides an element of personal fulfilment that is not available through parenting alone:

Nicola: *'I used to work as a care assistant with old people, about 13 years ago now... Or [I could] do home help, anything really, just keep my mind busy.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child 1½ years old)

2.6 Conclusion

This section reveals that the decision of parents to stay at home to look after children often had a strong moral foundation. These responsibilities were often expressed as a conscious choice to enable parents to witness their children grow up and to provide the care and support they need to develop emotionally and educationally. It is also clear, however, that staying at home is sometimes presented as a necessity to fulfil responsibilities that include looking after children with health or behavioural problems; responding to cultural expectations about the role of mothers; or looking after the household. It is important to note that these are not always perceived as barriers to work. Looking after sick or disabled children or conforming to cultural pressures may be readily accepted as part of parenthood, rather than framed more instrumentally as constraining labour market prospects.

Some parents explained decisions to stay at home in terms of a lack of employment prospects. This was sometimes attributed to personal barriers such as poor health and a lack of suitable childcare. Respondents also highlighted a shortage of appropriate work with concerns centring on the limited financial gains to be made by returning to work as well as the lack of part-time work that could fit nursery or school hours. One important finding is a widespread reluctance to use formal childcare. In some cases, it was simply considered too expensive, but there were also strong moral objections. Many parents saw looking after children as their sole responsibility, or that of immediate family.

Despite the value placed on parenting, there was a prevailing view across both lone and two-parent households that it was important to work because of the personal benefits it provides and the positive example it sets to children. While financial gains are important for some, they are generally a secondary consideration. On balance, respondents had strong moral positions on both the importance of looking after children and going out to work. The two positions were not incompatible as a return to work was considered by nearly all respondents a natural phase in parenting dependent children. Accordingly, the key decision for parents centred on when rather than if it was appropriate to return to work.

3 Job search: Important considerations

3.1 Introduction

The interview evidence on attitudes to work amongst those who have decided to stay at home and look after their children revealed that the majority had thought long and hard about how they might combine paid employment and parenting (see Chapter 2). There were very few examples of interview respondents ruling out a return to work, at least in the longer term, and those who did based their decision on reasons other than being a parent (e.g. long-term limiting health problems). Overall, then, those we spoke to shared an overwhelmingly positive ethos about the benefits of working.

This desire to connect with the formal labour market was inevitably also at the forefront of the thinking of another group of respondents, namely those who were already seeking a paid job, or who had recently taken up paid work. This section focuses on how they were going about these first steps back into the labour market, and their experiences of job search. It does this by examining a number of different aspects of the process, grouped under the following headings:

- the geography of job search;
- preferred hours of work;
- the need for flexibility;
- the availability of work; and
- finding work.

3.2 The geography of job search

Fitting in with the daily routines and needs of their children, and the extent to which support was available to meet these tasks, inevitably played a large part in determining the geographical scope of respondents' job search activities. For the majority their guiding aim of fitting work around the demands of parenting duties placed fairly narrow limits on the location of potential workplaces. However, there were some differences between the two main interview localities (Derby and Islington), associated with their contrasting public transport networks. There were also a few respondents who were able to consider applying for vacancies over a wider area than most.

By far the most common response to our question 'Where would you be prepared to work?' was the local area. Various reasons were given for this, including familiarity.

Interviewer: *'What sort of areas would you want to work in, would you want to work locally or would you be willing to travel further?'*

Safia: *'No I would prefer locally.'*

Interviewer: *'Why is that important to you?'*

Safia: *'Because it's most I'm just used to here and most of the people I know in Derby and when I go out to work somewhere else and if I try to see new people sometimes I get so nervous and I don't know what's going to happen here, how are the people like, that makes a lot of difference for me.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with parents; youngest child under one year old)

For the most part it was a question of convenience in terms of taking the children to school or nursery in the morning and picking them up again in the afternoon, and maximising the time in between. For Debbie, who had already found a part-time job, it was also a matter of retaining enough energy to do domestic chores:

Interviewer: *'Why's that, why's it got to be local?'*

Debbie: *'Just childcare and time management, I can't work the other end of Derby and then have to travel home for an hour and pick my son up and then my day might not finish till half past eight but my day now finishes at half past seven because I've got to pack up, make tea, wash up, you can't do it, you'd be a walking zombie.'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; lone parent; youngest child three years old)

Maureen in Islington saw a local job as giving her time to spend with her children every day:

Interviewer: *'Would location be important to you in terms of where you worked?'*

Maureen: *'Yeah definitely cos the last thing I want is to be working out of London or miles away from home because it means even less time with the kids.'*

(25–34 years old; full-time carer; lone parent; youngest child two years old)

The same respondent thought that proximity of workplace to children's schools and family home was vital in case of emergencies such as accidents or sudden illness:

Interviewer: *'Are there any other reasons why you would be looking for work more locally?'*

Maureen: *'Well I mean if the kids were to have an accident at school or something like that then I need to get there ASAP so that is a big [factor].'*

Others viewed the necessity to look for local job opportunities more in financial terms, emphasising the need to restrict travel costs so that taking up paid employment remained worthwhile in monetary terms. Indeed, because of this Pauline in Derby had even turned down a job offer before taking up her current part-time post:

Pauline: *'[I was looking for work in] Derby yeah, I didn't want to travel because the travel took too much time. I did get a job [further away] but it was about a 40 minute drive and when I worked out putting that on top a minimum wage I was going to work for less money, I couldn't even though I wanted a job I couldn't because I would have been worse off.'*

(45–54 years old; working part-time; lone parent; only child 16 years old)

Similarly, Vicky admitted the need to search over a wider area in order to increase her access to job opportunities, but at the same time recognised that the scope for doing so might be limited by the financial outlay involved:

Vicky: *'Yeah [I'd want to work] near where I live cos I don't drive or anything, it would have to be local...[but] there's no places [where you can work] round [our] area, only Sainsbury's to get a job so wherever you go you've got to go further...you've got to get a bus journey and it's going to cost you more money.'*

(25–34 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child under one year old)

As already noted, despite the increased cost a few respondents were more prepared to travel further afield for work. Whilst this mainly involved men, some women whose youngest child was now over 16 were also prepared to commute over longer distances. In one case the wider job search horizon was based simply on previous experience.

Interviewer: *'And what are your hopes, to work nearby or are you willing to go a bit further afield?'*

Steve: *'Well it doesn't bother me where I work, my partner's from southern Ireland, so moving around, I did it anyway with my past job so it wouldn't bother me if it's local or a little further afield.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; living with partner; youngest child seven years old)

This also underlines the importance of having a partner at home in enabling Steve to look for work over a wider area. Living in a two-parent household was equally crucial for women in this regard as well, albeit contingent on male partners' availability and willingness to play their part in childcare. For example, such involvement would help Carol in Islington to widen her job search horizons:

Interviewer: *'What sort of areas would you want to work in? Do you want to stay close to home or would you be willing to go further afield?'*

Carol: *'Well it depends, as long as I can...take the boys to school and come back then it wouldn't fuss me too much, my partner could always pick up the children because he don't go work till later on in the evening, until about six, maybe seven o'clock that's the times he goes to work so he could pick the boys up as long as I leave that place about five o'clock then that should be all right.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

The existence of good transport links to a range of surrounding places was also essential in encouraging people to consider opportunities across a wider geographical area, although taking advantage of these links remained contingent on other factors. In this regard there was a notable distinction between Derby and Islington respondents. In Derby the radial bus-based public transport system posed much greater restrictions than the more varied network-style provision in London. This meant that Islington respondents like Sarah felt that travel times of up to an hour were acceptable:

Interviewer: *'What sort of areas would you want to work in, would it have to be nearby, would you be willing to go further afield?'*

Sarah: *'I think it would probably have to be quite local, or no more than an hour away because even when my son goes to nursery I've still got to be there for him and for others as well and at the moment I've got children at college, secondary school, primary school, everywhere.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child two years old)

Helen expressed a similar view:

Interviewer: *'What's the longest journey you could do and still make it work?'*

Helen: *'North London I think, anything over the river might be difficult for time but I'm not sure, it depends on the transport links, if you're going by tube it's not too bad.'*

Interviewer: *'Would you want it to be under an hour for example?'*

Helen: *'I think about an hour.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; lone parent; youngest child six years old)

This compared to a maximum of 30 minutes in Derby, as Grace explained:

Grace: *'...I travel to work where I work now, my partner and I don't drive so I catch the bus to work and it takes about half an hour to get there...It wouldn't be worth it to go much further...'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; living with partner; only child two years old)

Several respondents also recognised that having access to a car for work journeys would help to widen the geographical scope of their job search. However, for many it was more an aspiration than a reality, as Grace in Derby outlined:

Grace: *'I filled that [my driving licence application] in because I want to learn to drive then that would be easier for everybody if I can do that and that would help with work aspects as well because I can help with different jobs and stuff.'*

For Ian, the need to be on hand in case of emergencies involving his children meant that having a car enabled him to look for jobs anywhere within Derby, but not further afield:

Ian: *'I'm looking to work in Derby where I can get transport and go in so I don't want to work too far because we've got family so we can't go too far so if you're driving you go to Nottingham take me half an hour to get over there so if I got a job in Derby, I need to take about 15, 20 minutes.'*

(25–34 years old; working full-time; living with partner; youngest child age unknown)

Conversely, for those relying on others who have a car, a job coming to an end could result in a narrowing of subsequent job search, as in the case of Asif:

Asif: *'Before, I worked in Nottingham and Beeston but got lifts from friends and colleagues to get there and back, that work finished, now I look only in Derby for job, I don't drive or have car and don't know if people will be there to give a lift...'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; living with partner; only child two years old)

3.3 Preferred hours

The desire to 'be there for their children' emerged as a pervasive theme, not only amongst those who have decided for now to stay at home (as discussed in Chapter 2), but also as a key consideration for those looking to take up paid employment. This was most strongly reflected in both the number and timing of the hours that they could make themselves available for work.

As has already been noted, many parents, particularly mothers, were looking for part-time jobs that could fit around their children's school hours. A secondary feature of this for some was being able to retain sufficient energy after work for childcare duties and domestic chores, as Maureen explained:

Interviewer: *'Would you like to do it full-time or part-time?'*

Maureen: *'I think part-time, I think I'd be too tired to look after the kids if I done it full-time, it would be really hard.'*

Interviewer: *'Is that the only reason you'd want to do part-time?'*

Maureen: *'Yeah because painting and decorating is really physical as well so if I was to do nine to five and then have to go home and cook, clean, make sure the kids are ready for school in the morning, bath them, it's a lot, very tiring.'*

(25–34 years old; full-time carer; lone parent; youngest child two years old)

It was not just lone parents who felt like this. Vicky, who was living with her partner, also saw part-time work as the most manageable option for both of them:

Interviewer: *'In terms of work what would your consideration be, would you want it to be part-time or full-time?'*

Vicky: *'Part-time probably.'*

Interviewer: *'Why's that important?'*

Vicky: *'To be with my kids really, we'd both have to take part-time up.'*

Interviewer: *'So in terms of your schedule right now how easy would it be for you to fit a job into that schedule?'*

Vicky: *'A full-time job no chance, part-time one I'm willing to try.'*

Interviewer: *'Do you think it'll be doable?'*

Vicky: *'You know when I worked at the co-op it was six till half eight in the morning, could do that perfectly because as soon as I get home he goes to take the kids which we managed perfectly last time.'*

(25–34 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child under one year old)

Similarly, for those with young children attending nursery or primary school for part of the day, the timings within which they could effectively fit a job were restricted. Farah, a mother of two living with her parents in Derby, made this clear:

Farah: *'Because the children...are in school and if I have anything late in the evening that wouldn't be suitable for me..., [so] between 10 and two that would be a good time for me if I can find one.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with parents and partner; youngest child eight years old)

This in turn led them to search for a limited range of posts, often directly connected with children's daytime activities such as a midday meal supervisor, a teaching assistant or a childminder. Keira and Brenda, both lone parents in Islington, summed up the idea well:

Keira: *'I always thought the perfect job would be dinner lady just because I'd go in after them and I'd finish before they finish, other than that there's not really much that I can think of that is just during the day I could be out and pick them up by half past three.'*

(16–24 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child three years old)

Interviewer: *'What kind of work are you looking for?'*

Brenda: *'Something during school time, I want like a midday meal supervisor.'*

Interviewer: *'You've done that before haven't you?'*

Brenda: *'Yeah so I've been trying for that, or nursery class teacher and anything basically that fits in with the kids' hours.'*

Interviewer: *'So that's the most important thing to you is it?'*

Brenda: *'Yeah definitely I'm not doing a nine to five job where I'm not at home for the kids when they come home.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; lone parent; youngest child five years old)

According to Denise, another lone parent in Islington, there was also an additional appeal of becoming a childminder, namely that you could stay at home and be looking after your youngest child or children at the same time:

Denise: *'Probably I don't really know what I'd want to do. I don't want to know if I'd want to go back to training to be something to do with child minder because then you've got them in the house and you're doing that so maybe that would be better for me, doing child minding, going on a course for that because then they can pick 'em up at six or half six and that's your day, you're not doing any evenings or...'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child 2½ years old)

In line with the findings of Chapter 2, most respondents were well aware of the difficulties involved in fitting paid work in with daily childcare tasks. Julie, also a lone parent in Islington, outlined some of the limits that shaped the way that she would like to balance the need to meet parental responsibilities with the desire to set their children a good example:

Julie: *'...but also it's the hours and I only want to work term time so, therefore, it's going to be school or college and I don't want to do full-time nine to five because I've done it before with my youngest son...he's only six, I'd be dropping him at eight and not picking him up till six and I just think that's too long a day for a youngster, ...my priority is my children, but also part of being a good mum is a good role model as well so it's important to me to have a job but it's got to be a way that I can manage my home life as well as my work life.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child two years old)

However, some recognised that working on a part-time basis or in 'mini-jobs' involving just a few hours each week might not be worthwhile in financial terms. They responded to this by seeing it either as a major constraint to them going back to work, or as a prompt to search for full-time work. Lesley in Islington summed up the dilemma well in the following exchange:

Interviewer: *'If you got some part-time work where would that fit in, what would be the best hours?'*

Lesley: *'That's the thing, my best hours would probably be between, well I get him dressed around nine so between 10 and I'd have to be back by five to do his night routine. It's not long hours, that's the problem.'*

Interviewer: *'Do you think the kind of job that you might be able to get at the moment would, the pay would be high enough to make it worthwhile?'*

Lesley: *'That's the thing, with the hours that I can personally do I don't reckon it would be enough to pay all the bills plus all his clothes and his milk, I don't reckon it would be enough because it's not cheap having a baby and they grow out of all their clothes and that's not including stuff that I need so it all depends really because 10 till five isn't a lot of hours.'*

(16–24 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child under one year old)

On the other hand, for those living with a partner it was much easier to consider full-time work, particularly for males like Martin in Derby:

Interviewer: *'Did you want to do that full-time or part-time?'*

Martin: *'Preferably full-time.'*

Interviewer: *'Why would you have preferred full-time?'*

Martin: *'Because with six children a part-time wage wouldn't go too far.'*

Interviewer: *'So you did your calculations to see what would make it worthwhile?'*

Martin: *'Yeah and it was the full-time.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

Only a very small number appeared to be aware of the '16 hour rule' in relation to their benefits entitlement (this issue is explored in greater detail in Chapter 4). Denise in Islington was one of the few, and she was not too sure about the limit:

Denise: *'...so it's trying to get something to do that's 10 o'clock till two so I can drop 'em and pick 'em up...They were just saying to me that I'd get childcare thing and if I work no more, I think it was 17 hours or something, then it shouldn't affect my benefit or something they were saying.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child 2½ years old)

Not surprisingly, most respondents saw little choice other than to rule out any jobs that required working unsocial hours. Tania, a divorcee in Derby already working in a full-time job, set out the reasons:

Tania: *'Yeah cos I wouldn't do nights and things like that so there's a lot of jobs you wouldn't even consider because there's certain ones where you have to do nights and I wouldn't, there's no childcare at night anyway, you've got to rely on somebody else to look after your child and I don't think I'd be happy doing that, so that would cut you out of quite a lot of the jobs, certainly some of the factory jobs and things like that and the care work ones where you've got to do overnight, so yeah I just wouldn't consider it.'*

(45–54 years old; working full-time; divorced; youngest child 16 years old)

Another Derby lone parent, Pauline, had tried working non-standard hours and found that it was counterproductive:

Pauline: *'I'd had jobs and it was working till 12 o'clock at night and it had a knock on effect with me 14 year old.'*

(45–54 years old; working part-time; lone parent; only child now 16 years old)

Wendy, also from Derby, had originally trained and worked as a chef before starting a family, but now found it difficult to combine the two:

Interviewer: *'So to actually use the skill and expertise and training you have is actually difficult because of the kind of requirements for doing that work?'*

Wendy: *'That's right because as a chef you're doing the lunch time and then in the evening, if you're working in a hotel sometimes some of the guests will want something early hours of the morning and I've known chefs where they sleep on site which you can't...'*

(45–54 years old; unemployed; living with partner; only child seven years old)

However, there were some cases where unsocial hours were not seen as an impediment. However, both Grace and Sean were freed up to do this by the provision of childcare by other household members.

Grace: *'Yes it's fine and it gives me chance, because I get to spend the whole day with her and then I go off in the evening so it's OK. Yeah because sometimes I think my other jobs were 9 to 5 and by the time I get home if I'd had her in those days then in the evening she would have been going straight to bed after she'd had her tea so I wouldn't have spent any time with her so I think it's OK how I work now.'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; living with partner; only child two years old)

It is also interesting to note that, while the woman (Grace) frames her work commitments in terms of having contact with her child, the man (Sean) makes no reference whatsoever to childcare duties.

Sean: *'I could work any hours, I'd gladly work 48 hours a week if not more...I'd do shifts yeah, split shifts, days, mornings, when I were at Fletchers [bakers] I loved this as well, I'm not a morning person but when I were there my shift started at six in the morning and it finished at two in afternoon which meant that I had all afternoon for myself, as long as I was in that bed by half past 10 sleeping I was OK...I'd do that again, that were good, I enjoyed that.'*

(25–34 years old; unemployed; living with partner; only child one year old)

3.4 The need for flexibility

Another important consideration for those seeking a paid job and wondering how it could be combined with their parental duties was the degree of flexibility afforded by employers. This also featured as a major determining factor in job retention for those already in work. There were three aspects to this.

The first was around having set start and finish times, to fit with school, nursery or other childcare hours. Only those who were able to bring some flexibility to their childcare arrangements were in a position to work beyond those times. Even those that could make alternative arrangements at short notice preferred to limit or to avoid overtime working, as Wendy in Derby explained:

Wendy: *'...it's like my manager today has asked me to go till four o'clock and I've had to drop my youngest off at nursery and ring my friends, it's only half an hour between half past three and four but somebody's got to watch them for that half an hour because the school she goes to is out of the catchment area he doesn't get picked up or she could have gone to that out of school service.'*

(45–54 years old; unemployed; living with partner; only child seven years old)

The second and most often quoted aspect was the ability to take time off at short notice when a child was unwell and unable to attend school (or had to be collected earlier than normal, to be taken home). As Farah in Derby observed, that might mean taking days off work, not just the time to collect them from school or nursery:

Farah: *'If the children are not well and then I need to ask employer that I need to take a couple of days off because my children they are not well, and these are things that need to be considered as well, it depends on the employer as well, how he's going to cope with it.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with parents and partner; youngest child eight years old)

Even those who had partners or family members who helped in looking after the children were usually the ones who would generally have to respond to such a situation. This might simply be because their workplace was closer, as in the case of Wendy, a mother of a seven year old who lived with her partner:

Interviewer: *'So say if your daughter was ill and you were working and she couldn't go to school what would you do?'*

Wendy: *'I would stay at home because my first priority is as a mother.'*

Interviewer: *'Would you ask your partner to help out?'*

Wendy: *'I would ask my partner if I knew he was available but he's, my partner, he tends to work out on the motorways as recovery so he's on call 24/7 and it's not every day but he never knows when he's going to be called out.'*

(45–54 years old; unemployed; living with partner; only child seven years old)

For Wendy, the possibility of having to get to school at short notice was also a further reason to restrict job search to her local area:

Wendy: *'...this is one of the reasons why I worry in case I get a call from the school saying my daughter's ill, the time to get back, I don't want it to be too long, if we had a car then fair enough but while I'm not driving I want to be able to [get there quickly]...because you fear the worst when you have a phone call saying your daughter's ill or she's had an accident.'*

For Helen in Islington, this issue was another good reason for trying to find a job in the education sector:

Interviewer: *'What about things like if your daughter's not well?'*

Helen: *'Well, if she's not well I'd have to take time off whatever, I wouldn't be able to compromise with that at all. And I think schools are pretty understanding about that, if anywhere.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; lone parent; youngest child six years old)

The third aspect of being granted flexibility in a job was the need to be able to fit work around the school holidays. This was a particular issue for lone parents with little in the way of additional childcare support, as Sharon in Islington pointed out:

Interviewer: *'What about if she's back at school and she's working six hours a day would you think about part-time work?'*

Sharon: *'I don't mind doing, as long as it fitted around the kids I wouldn't mind doing part-time work but then it would have to be, it's also the holidays, it would have to all fit in with the holidays and everything.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child four years old)

Even those living with a partner thought that they would have to find a job that allowed them time to look after the children during school holidays. Both Wendy in Derby and Nicola in Islington thought that was a key reason why working in the education sector would be attractive:

Interviewer: *'The other thing I guess is school holidays?'*

Wendy: *'That's it, that's one of the reasons why the school job, because I haven't got to be looking for somebody else to have the children and I'm at home with them.'*

(45–54 years old; unemployed; living with partner; only child seven years old)

Nicola: *'Well someone in the same job as you. Lots of people are looking for school jobs that fits in with the holidays as well.'*

Interviewer: *'Would that interest you?'*

Nicola: *'Well yeah but it's just finding someone to look after the kids during their time off, I've had the odd day but if they've had lots of time off that wouldn't be good would it?'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child 1½ years old)

There were some respondents who remained optimistic that they could find jobs that would offer them the flexibility they needed. In general, those that thought this was targeting specific types of job which they knew would dovetail with school days and hours, or employers who they knew would be sympathetic to their parenting responsibilities. Julie in Islington was a typical example:

Interviewer: *'Would you require a certain type of employer?'*

Julie: *'I suppose there'd have to be a level of understanding about responsibilities that I have outside of work and I suppose a lot of that would be maybe an employer who actually does have children of their own and understands those difficulties maybe, that would be ideal.'*

Interviewer: *'Can you think of any particular employers that come to mind who have that sort of ethos?'*

Julie: *'I think, I know my friend worked at the job centre, but she'd been there a long time when she had her child and then she did school hours basically but I don't know if they'd offer that if you went straight in. I think there are those kind of organisations would, they do, I suppose they want other employers to be flexible and take on parents, they have to lead the way don't they, they can't go 'well you've got to do it but we don't have to'. I suppose schools, colleges, they would be the main areas really.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child two years old)

However, a few respondents were rather dubious whether there were job opportunities available that offered this level of flexibility. Some thought that openings for the type of job they had in mind – such as teaching assistant – were declining, and there were few alternatives. Others like Muna in Derby thought it would vary according to different employers:

Muna: *‘Well I know there are some employers out there who say that when your children have got holiday then you can book time off but then you can book annual leave to take that time off but what about other time off when your children are ill, you can’t book that in advance because you don’t know when your child’s going to be ill, then you have to take time off just in an emergency, but I don’t think that employers would be understanding of that, they say that when other people see what you’re doing then they’re going to get influenced and they’re going to do the same and then their business gets ruined. That’s what I think, I haven’t worked yet but that’s what I think about it.’*

(25–34 years old; part-time student; lone parent; youngest child six years old)

Only one respondent (Martin in Derby) thought that having flexibility in their job was a bad idea. It may be significant that this was an unemployed male living with a partner and their two children, and a firm believer in the ‘male breadwinner’ family model:

Interviewer: *‘Do you think you’d require any sort of flexibility from an employer?’*

Martin: *‘No and I don’t agree with this time sharing thing, flexi hours in companies, I like things to be on time and planned and if you’ve got flexi hours which companies now have to offer I believe or consider, or offering people part-time hours, it leaves the business structure very rocky. If your business is scheduled to open at nine o’clock and you’ve got 10 staff all on flexi hours and they all decide to turn up at 10 o’clock your business isn’t open, you can’t run a business like that, it doesn’t work.’*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

3.5 The availability of work

So far this chapter has focused mainly on the ways in which respondents were positioning themselves in terms of their job search and a return to paid employment (i.e. the supply side). However, a key component in the decision to follow this path lay on the opposite side of the equation, namely the availability of suitable jobs within easy reach of where they lived (i.e. the demand side). This had a number of different facets, including:

- the volume of job vacancies being generated in the local economy (either overall, or in the specific sectors being targeted by respondents);
- the extent of competition from other job seekers for these vacancies;
- the extent to which the employers advertising these posts were prepared to offer them on a part-time or flexible working basis.

Of course, amongst prospective job seekers it was as much their perception as the reality of these matters that shaped their subsequent behaviour. Thus, it is interesting to note that, in spite of the effects of the economic recession, there were mixed views about the health of the local labour market. Some were quite positive, like Martin in Derby:

Martin: *'...if you look back 12 months ago it's not been a very good thing for work, there's not been much there...To be honest it died off a hell of a lot more in April, the jobs market absolutely dried up in April, but it's starting to improve again and hand on heart I think there's more jobs out there now than what there were six months ago...[I'm looking in] admin, logistics, anything in the public sector which is the worst sector at the moment but yeah that sort of thing...'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

Helen in Islington was equally upbeat, even though she was restricting her search to a single occupation:

Interviewer: *'How easy do you think, once you're qualified as a teaching assistant how easy do you think it'll be to actually get a job?'*

Helen: *'I think it'll be reasonably easy, easier than most jobs to get at the moment.'*

Interviewer: *'Is that because you personally have got connections already or you just think...'*

Helen: *'I just think there's quite a few jobs out there for teaching assistants, more than anything else at the moment. It's the easiest thing to get into at the moment.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; lone parent; youngest child six years old)

Others remained positive but recognised the extent of the competition:

Interviewer: *'So the type of work that you want to do, are there opportunities available to you?'*

Julie: *'I think they are, I've had a bit of a look...but obviously there's a lot of mums out there, single mums and mums with partners at home and people want those jobs so every time you're going to see a job like that there's going to be so much competition.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child two years old)

A number of respondents were seeking to improve their chances of securing a post in the education sector by studying for relevant qualifications, like Vicky in Derby:

Interviewer: *'And are there those sort of jobs available at the moment?'*

Vicky: *'Not many that's why I've got to do an NVQ in it as well because all the ones that are available you've got to have NVQ 1 and 2.'*

(25–34 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child under one year old)

Other respondents tended to paint a rather bleaker picture, often coloured by personal experience of extensive but as yet unsuccessful job search. Brenda in Islington was a case in point:

Interviewer: *'How many jobs do you think you've found to apply for in the last year or 18 months?'*

Brenda: *'About 40.'*

Interviewer: *'And have you been getting interviews for quite a lot of those?'*

Brenda: *'No, just been walking round with these work trial things...'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; lone parent; youngest child five years old)

However, many had not even been able to find any posts to apply for, despite regular searching. Farah in Derby outlined the difficulty:

Farah: *'...as soon as I get the job sheet from the city council and then I look and especially part-time [but] I can't find anything at the moment.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with parents and partner; youngest child eight years old)

Wendy was trying to get back into her previous occupation by filling in for staff who were off sick, but so far without success. She put this down mainly to lack of new opportunities:

Wendy: *'[It's not been easy to find a job] in a way because I did used to work in schools as a supervisor and I tend to just do relief at the moment but there's no jobs for me to be able to go back to do part-time every day because my job's been taken.'*

(45–54 years old; unemployed; living with partner; only child seven years old)

For Sharon a combination of cutbacks and increased competition meant that she had become more pessimistic about her chances of getting a job:

Sharon: *'There's all the teaching assistants but they're cutting back on all them, because I done a workshop for that, but they're cutting back on all the teaching assistants...nowadays I think everyone's just trying to get jobs regardless of their qualifications, just whatever job you can get which don't help.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child four years old)

The issue of being restricted to school hours was reported to be posing a particularly acute difficulty for those looking for part-time work. Denise in Islington described her experience:

Denise: *'I keep saying I want something like 10 till two "oh there's nothing like that" "is there anything like dinner ladies cos then I could be there for the lunch and then come home"... "oh well a lot of them are agency now and it's very hard to get into dinner lady" so the only thing you can do is maybe when they're at school ask them if you could do maybe playground help or maybe get in that way, maybe if I can help out lunch times but maybe that's just voluntary and you wouldn't get paid for that so it's hard to get into these places.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child 2½ years old)

While some resigned themselves to taking whatever jobs might be made available, others continued to give highest priority to the welfare of their children and also their own peace of mind. Zia in Derby spoke about the adverse mental effects that working full-time was having on people she knew:

Zia: *'That kind of work, no it isn't available at all. If I was on flexible from half past nine to three o'clock that would be much better. Offices and whatever job you go for you won't have sort of flexible hours, you have to go from nine to five...I've got many friends round here they are just single, they don't have any relatives at all here and they're finding it really difficult going to work and with the children, what's happened is they'll be having mentally a lot of pressure on themselves and in the end they're taking all that pressure and they're getting depressed. So there should be something in between those hours and I think there'll be loads of parents who wish to go to work from half past nine to three o'clock.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; only child ten years old)

Ella concluded that the only way that more lone parents could find work was to create more of the right kind of job opportunities:

Ella: *'I hope things get better for us lone parents. There needs to be more jobs to fit around our kids. At the moment it's very difficult for us, they [government] want us to work but there aren't any jobs. They should contact stores and set up a scheme for lone parents where all the jobs during school hours go to lone parents first.'*

(25–34 years old; unemployed; lone parent; only child nine years old)

3.6 Finding work

Respondents in work or searching for work reported that they had used the usual range of methods to find out about and apply for jobs. Several had stuck to formal channels, including the Job Centre, sometimes over a fair period of time, like Tania:

Tania: *'I was still doing the weekly job search and sending things in and the jobs came up in the June, and I applied for seven in one week because there were seven children's centres with the same jobs.'*

(45–54 years old; working full-time; divorced; youngest child 16 years old)

In contrast, Steve was fortunate enough to find another job straightaway:

Steve: *'I got the job from the paper, Derby Evening Telegraph...what happened was I was between jobs, read the paper, first job, rang them up, said "we'll take your details, come for an interview" and I've been in that job ever since...and then because I've got experience in the career that I've chosen from me previous background, I chose this career cos this seemed like a long standing position and it was a permanent position and they offered me quite a few benefits so I thought this must be the road that I should take, so I took this road and I'm nine months into it.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; living with partner; youngest child seven years old)

Martin was the only respondent who mentioned that they had taken the initiative and taken steps that went beyond responding to job advertisements:

Martin: *'It's been mainly internet based, spec letters, word of mouth, looking at business papers to see if any companies are actually doing well which is always a good sign but the business parts of the papers have all been doom and gloom but there are bits where it's positive now.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

For others, finding out through word of mouth proved to be more fruitful, although it was not necessarily their only means of job search. In most cases this involved friends passing on the information. In Gemma's case her friend had a job at the same workplace:

Interviewer: *'First of all how did you find out about the job that you're in, because you say you work at Rolls Royce?'*

Gemma: *'Yeah I found out via a friend round the corner.'*

Interviewer: *'Was she working there?'*

Gemma: *'Yeah at the time she worked there and then she went on maternity but I found out via her and got the number and gave them a call.'*

(16–24 years old; working part-time; lone parent; only child two years old)

For Pauline an opening had been passed on by friends who had heard about it from others:

Pauline: *'A friend [at church] told me that the [café manager] position was going so I'd just finished my other job and I said "I think I can do it" so they interviewed me and said yeah. I'd been looking on the internet, to get the assistant nursery nurse one I hunted in shop windows, [I looked] everywhere to get a job...I needed a job so ranging from cleaning to anything just to get a job and at the time I got this I'd got another offer at another shop but I preferred this one.'*

(45–54 years old; working part-time; lone parent; only child 16 years old)

One respondent, Debbie, happened to be in the right place at the right time, obtaining a post linked to the qualification she was working towards with her training provider:

Debbie: *'...because I did my training at Ace, I did a full year and that's how I got the job through that, they offered me the job [in their own nursery] at the end of my training...'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; lone parent; youngest child three years old)

Although most of the respondents in the 'job search' group were strongly committed to continuing their job search, several were aware that they faced constraints or barriers in competing for the jobs that did become available. (Of course, a lack of suitable jobs, as discussed in Section 3.5, could also be seen as a barrier in itself.)

One area of weakness mentioned by some people was a lack of experience. Sometimes this was connected with their decision to stay at home during the earlier formative years of their children, and their consequent absence from the labour market. This was how Keira felt:

Interviewer: *'So you think the difficulty is how employers might view you?'*

Keira: *'Yeah definitely and also that I was 17 when I had my daughter so they see as maybe "she's young, did she even finish school? No life experience" kind of thing as well which doesn't help.'*

(16–24 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child three years old)

Cassie thought her lack of experience combined with her age made things very difficult:

Cassie: *'The only thing I think is my downfall is my age because they'll say there's lack of experience there and your age, it's my age that's going to get in my way due to not having experience with the work, that's my only worry, but my mum she was 42 when she got into working in a doctor's surgery and she went to college through the surgery and just upgraded to Grade 1 receptionist so she'd done really well, I think it's about 18 years now she's been working, 20 years. She went into work very late, I'm two years older I know and things are harder, it's harder to get a job now, but that's the only worry I have got, my age.'*

(35–44 years old; permanently sick/disabled; lone parent; only child 13 years old)

For Michelle her lack of experience and poor qualifications seemed to have a knock-on effect on her self-confidence:

Interviewer: *'What did you think the barriers were then to you...'*

Michelle: *'I think mostly was not enough experience, it wouldn't be experience I think, it would be education wise, not enough qualifications, because I didn't have any qualifications when I left school and that's always brought me down as well and then when I left school I never had any qualifications and I always think I'm dumb.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child eight years old)

However, for Julie it was more a question of lacking experience in specific aspects of work:

Julie: *'...but the actual computer side of things I'm not really so hot at. It's not really because I've been left behind as in let down by any sort of services or anything it's just that I haven't really had that on my radar of what I could do, I had it set on teaching assistant and then thinking I don't know if I really want to be in a classroom of 30 six years old so I've been trying to broaden what I could think of doing and that's what's different rather than actually feeling I've got left behind. I suppose there is an element of that cos of lack of confidence from not working.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child two years old)

One person (Debbie) who was already in work, but in her first ever job, also quoted lack of previous experience as a barrier to progression.

Debbie: *'This is my first proper job...[I've been doing it for] 14 months...Now I would like to find new employment because it's only minimum wage but I've never done the interview process, I've never filled in an application form, it's still scary to move on, I think that's why sometimes I'm stuck doing what I'm doing because I'm scared. If you've not had the experience, I've never even done a CV.'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; lone parent; youngest child three years old)

Another prominent characteristic mentioned by a number of respondents, as well as Michelle above, was a lack of basic or appropriate skills or qualifications:

Sarah: *'I didn't have any qualifications at the time so I was looking basically for work in a shop, cashier, stacking shelves.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child two years old)

Nicola: *'Well it depends what kind of job it is, because I'm not very good at reading and writing when I went to school because of my home situation it would have to be a job without too much reading and writing and computers really.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child 1½ years old)

One male respondent, Ian, had also had problems because his previous certificate, obtained overseas, was not recognised by employers.

Ian: *'[I] came from abroad it's hard to get a job so you were looking for certificate, I got the experience to do a job, I wasn't certificated, I had to go to college, but I couldn't afford to go to college so I went back to agency, so I go through agency, I got a laundry job...Yeah I tried to apply for quite a few jobs but some of them turn me down cos I don't have enough experience than other kind of people that were looking.'*

(25–34 years old; working full-time; living with partner; youngest child age unknown)

Some had also faced difficulties in finding out about or accessing more specific types of training that would prepare them for a job in a chosen profession. Getting hold of all the relevant information had been a struggle for Helen:

Helen: *'Actually I found it quite limited, the places who were actually doing this level of this particular course, I've been able to find two places in all of London...[Finding this out has]...taken me hours on the internet. I went to the learning centre as well, they did help, they looked at courses on the internet but sometimes what's on the college website and what is in say a hot courses book, it can be different sometimes, it can differ so sometimes a thorough search is needed. I did actually go to [a place] in Camden, ...but I found that they weren't very helpful at all... [so I've had to do it] on my own really.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; lone parent; youngest child six years old)

Gaining access to the course they want may also be very difficult, as Debbie found out:

Debbie: *'I want to go into [working with] pregnant teenagers, that's what I really want to do...apparently the course doesn't run in Derby it runs in Chesterfield...I can't go there every day. She said it may come to Derby [but until then I won't be able to get trained].'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; lone parent; youngest child three years old)

Steve had completed his training, but had then been kept waiting in vain for other certification to be provided.

Steve: *'...I was trained at East Midland Care Training and I did me literacy level 1 and 2 and me numeracy level 1 and 2 and passed them and I wanted to continue that and do this and that but because I waited for the CRB and had to wait for a year for this CRB, I couldn't get a job in care because I didn't have a CRB so I was in limbo for a year so by the time I got the CRB they didn't want me any more.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; living with partner; youngest child seven years old)

Finally, in terms of cultural expectations acting as an impediment to women taking paid employment, the limited evidence from our interviews is that these may be beginning to break down. Thus, while the 'male breadwinner' family model remains strong for many couples, this is often a time-limited arrangement, with the mother seeking to find work once the children have grown older. However, this then is likely to raise similar issues about lack of experience and changing requirements to those already mentioned above. Carol summed up the issues well:

Carol: *'...I always wanted children since I was young, it's something that I wanted and I thought if I have my children and they grow up then I can get a job later on cos I didn't want children at a later age, I'd rather I started them young then have my career after but I didn't think how hard it would be getting a job and that things would change all of a sudden that way it has now, it was 14 years ago that I had my first child and things wasn't as difficult as it is now to get a job... you need more grades, you need more proof, you need CRB checks for a lot of things and you need more money because everything goes up in price and it's just everything, it's a lot harder nowadays.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

Similarly, the tendency for Asian women to stay at home has all but disappeared for younger generation, according to Zia, a respondent in Derby:

Zia: *'In these days all girls are working, all people are minded like they should go to the work, it's not what it was 10 years before, we had cultural pressure or anything like that, in these days it isn't like that, it's quite different with all cultures, especially for Asian cultures the girls can go to the work in flexible places and in flexible hours.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; only child ten years old)

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored and assessed the interview responses with regard to people's actual engagement with and experience of their local labour market. Interestingly, this group of respondents reported that they faced very similar issues to those parents who have, for now at least, decided to stay at home. Given that most of what they said was based on their experience of active job search, this is an important endorsement that the widely shared views about the jobs market were not just a matter of perception or hearsay. Having said that, it is also important to record that several of the respondents had eventually been successful in their job search, and had found ways of combining working with parental responsibilities.

The key themes that emerge from the evidence presented in this chapter can be summarised under four headings:

- **Constrained job opportunities** – This related both to limitations on the feasible geographical scope of job search (or commuting), and to the restricted hours that primary carers (usually mothers) felt they were able to offer. In many cases the two combined with reliance on public transport links to constrain the number and range of job opportunities open to mothers. Thus, most women reported that they were only interested in part-time work that they could fit around the school day, given their responsibility for dropping off and picking up their children. This meant that the competition for jobs where this was possible was even more intense.
- **Work experience and confidence** – A number of women thought that motherhood had served to distance them from the labour market, even though they are now making strenuous efforts to find work. Those who had children at a relatively young age reported that they had little or no training or work experience before having their first child. Even those that had some previous experience of work said that being out of the workforce for many years while caring for young children had negative consequences when they started looking for employment again.

- Gendered roles – Most of the women interviewed explained their position in relation to the labour market with reference to their role and responsibilities as a mother, no matter how determined they were to find a job. In contrast, hardly any of the men who were interviewed made any reference to issues of childcare and parenting responsibilities when discussing barriers to work.
- Family and household support – For those women who lived in a two-parent family or in multi-generational households (e.g. living with parents), the availability of support with childcare duties improved the viability of finding and retaining paid work. However, this did not necessarily open up the option of seeking better quality jobs. Rather, it meant that they were more disposed to regard the generally low paid, part-time, often casual, work that was on offer in a positive light.

In broad terms, those respondents who were actively trying to find paid work, or who had already done so, underlined that the majority of parents with the role of prime carer have a positive attitude to formal employment. Unless support was available from other family members, then the extent to which a job could be fitted around childcare responsibilities tended to be the key test. However, the extent to which such opportunities were available appeared to be extremely limited.

4 Easing the transition into work: Transitional and in-work benefits

4.1 Introduction

It has long been acknowledged that some people in receipt of benefits are fearful about coping financially with the transition into work and do not necessarily recognise paid employment as a financially viable or realisable option. In response, a number of policies have been introduced in recent years in an attempt to help ease these worries. These have concentrated on ensuring that work pays; supporting the transition into work; and providing advice and assistance about moving into work. This chapter explores knowledge and understanding of various initiatives and interventions associated with these policy strands and their effectiveness in assisting parents to move into a sustainable employment situation.

Discussion starts by considering initiatives introduced in a bid to ensure that people are financially better off in work, before going on to consider awareness and understandings of back-to-work support measures. Attention then turns to consider access to and usefulness of advice and assistance received about moving into work. Discussion concludes by reflecting on the impact that these various forms of support and assistance have had on perceptions about the viability of work. The specific initiatives and benefits discussed were all operational at the time of interviewing. Some have subsequently been reformed or withdrawn.

4.2 Ensuring that work pays

4.2.1 Initiatives and supports

Various in-work benefits have been introduced in an attempt to address concerns among benefit recipients about the difficulties of securing employment that provides a level of earnings that warrants being in work. The aim has been to ensure that the vast majority of people are financially better off in work than on benefits (Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), 2009). Key initiatives include:

- Working Tax Credit (WTC) – People working more than 16 hours per week, who are on a low income may be able to get WTC. The WTC includes a specific element to support the cost of registered childcare for working parents. The childcare element can help with up to 80 per cent of eligible childcare costs.
- National Minimum Wage – Almost all workers aged 18 and over are entitled to the National Minimum Wage, which was introduced in 1999 and is revised on 1 October each year.

People in work and on low incomes can also be eligible for various other benefits, including:

- Income Support (IS) – Can be payable to people who do not have to sign on as unemployed, for example, because they are a lone parent or a carer, who have a low income and work less than 16 hours per week.

- Child Tax Credit (CTC) – A means-tested allowance for parents and carers of children or young people who are still in full-time education. Payable regardless of whether the parents are in or out of work. Nine out of ten families with children qualify for CTC.
- Partial Housing Benefit (HB) – HB can be payable as an in-work benefit. People can get part of their rent paid if their income and capital (savings and investments) are below a certain level.

In addition, various targeted initiatives have been introduced to support parents in paid employment. These include:

- Time Off – In addition to improved maternity and paternity rights, working parents can take up to 13 weeks parental leave for each child until their 5th birthday. The employer does not have to pay staff taking this leave. To be entitled to time off an employee must have parental responsibility for the child and have worked for their employer for at least one year previous.
- Flexible Working – Permits staff to ask an employer for a new working pattern to help them care for their child. Employees have a right to request a flexible working pattern if they have a child aged under six or a disabled child under 18. The employer has to consider the request seriously. The employee must have worked for the employer for at least 26 weeks, be the child's mother, father, adopter, legal guardian or foster parent – or be the partner of one of these – and have responsibility for the child's upbringing.

Some child development measures also support parents in paid work. For example, Early Years Education entitles all three- and four-year-olds to up to five two-and-a-half hour daily sessions a week, for three terms each year, with a 'registered provider' such as a school, nursery, playgroup or registered child minder.

4.2.2 Knowledge and understanding

Interview respondents were asked a series of questions exploring their knowledge and understanding of these different in-work benefits and tax credits. While it was not possible to establish exactly what benefits and credits individual respondents might qualify to receive, their personal situations indicated that they would qualify for many of the supports reviewed above. It was, therefore, striking to find that many were unaware of what in-work support is available.

Tracy, a lone parent living in Islington whose youngest child was two years old, was not alone in presuming that she would not be entitled to any financial support if she moved into work.

Interviewer: *'In terms of formal support and assistance what sort of benefits and allowances are you receiving currently?'*

Tracy: *'I get Housing Benefit, Child Tax Credit, Income Support and Child Benefit.'*

Interviewer: *'Do you think you're claiming all the benefits that you're entitled to?'*

Tracy: *'I honestly don't know.'*

Interviewer: *'So how did you find out about the other ones, did you talk to somebody, did you have advice?'*

Tracy: *'I spoke to my mum I think.'*

Interviewer: *'So you've never spoken to anybody at the Benefits Agency or anything?'*

Tracy: *'No.'*

Interviewer: *‘What benefits do you think you’d be entitled to if you were in work?’*

Tracy: *‘None.’*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; lone parent; youngest child three years old)

A particular area of confusion was HB, a majority of respondents being unaware that HB is available to people in work on low incomes, a finding consistent with previous studies (Turley and Thomas, 2006).

Awareness of other benefits and support targeted at parents with young children varied between initiatives. Most parents had heard of WTC and CTC, for example, but only a handful of respondents were aware of Time Off for working parents or Flexible Working (see Table 4.1). However, exploring these understandings further, it became apparent that respondents had often heard about a particular benefit but were unclear about the specifics of the support and assistance provided. For example, seven of the 28 respondents indicating that they were aware of WTC reported being unclear about eligibility criteria. Some respondents also referred to WTCs and CTC interchangeably or referenced them both under the catch all of ‘tax credits’. As a result, the key characteristics and eligibility for each were sometimes mixed up by respondents.

Awareness and understanding of particular benefits varied widely between people who were currently or had recently been in paid employment and people with no recent history of being in work. People in work evidenced a greater understanding of WTCs, time off for working parents and HB and IS as in-work benefits. This reflected the fact that many of these respondents were currently or had recently been in receipt of these benefits. However, there was no obvious correlation between being in work and awareness of Early Years Education (available regardless of employment status) and Flexible Working (an in-work support). Four of the five parents with children under the age of six who were in work, for example, reported being unaware of their right to ask their employer for a flexible working pattern.

Table 4.1 Awareness of different in-work benefits and support

Support or benefit	Number of respondents	
	Yes	No
Working Tax Credit		
Sample: all respondents responding to the question (n = 46)	28	11
Early Years Education		
Sample: all respondents responding to the question who have children who are five years old or less (n = 21)	9	12
Time Off		
Sample: all respondents responding to the question who have children who are five years old or less (n = 22)	5	17
Flexible working		
Sample: all respondents responding to the question who were the parent or legal guardian for a child under six years old or a disabled child under 18 (n = 22)	5	17
Income Support		
Sample: all lone parents and carers responding to the question (n = 20)	10	10
Child Tax Credit		
Sample: all respondents responding to the question (n = 44)	34	9
Partial Housing Benefit		
Sample: all respondents responding to the question (n = 38)	15	23

4.3 Support with the transition into work

4.3.1 Initiatives and supports

Worry about the financial implications of returning to work is known to be common among people on out-of-work benefits. The top three worries are reported to be not having enough money to live on; not coping financially until the first pay day; and not having enough money to cover housing costs (rent or mortgage payments) (Woodland *et al.*, 2003). Various start up costs can also be associated with entering work, such as buying equipment or clothing. Added to this, the complexity of the tax and benefits systems means that the financial gains of being in work are not always clear to benefit recipients. In contrast, income from benefits is predictable and rarely fluctuates. People can, therefore, consider a move from out-of-work benefits into employment as risky, with an uncertain financial outcome and unknown implications for the wellbeing and security of their family.

In response to these concerns, various (time limited) back-to-work support measures have been introduced and made available to people moving into paid employment for at least 16 hours per week. Key measures include:

- Job Grant – A tax free lump sum (of £250 for parents) people may get when starting full-time work (at least 16 hours per week), if they have been in receipt of one or more of a number of benefits for at least 26 weeks before starting work, including Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Incapacity Benefit (IB), IS and Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA).
- HB run-on and Council Tax run-on – People who were getting help with housing costs while out of work, can claim Extended HB and Extended Council Tax Benefit (CTB) for up to four full weeks after starting a new job. To be eligible a person will need to have claimed income-based JSA, income-related ESA or IS for at least 26 weeks continuously just before starting work.

In addition, targeted initiatives have been introduced to support lone parents during the transition into work. For example, In Work Credit (IWC) is a fixed tax free payment of £40 per week (£60 per week in London) for parents bringing up children alone (which also applied to couple parents who were part of a pilot in London between 2007 and 2010). It is payable for up to 52 weeks on top of earnings. To qualify a person must be bringing up children on their own, starting work of at least 16 hours per week and expecting to work to last five weeks or more, as well as having been in receipt of IS or JSA for at least 52 weeks or more without a break. Other examples include the In Work Emergency Discretion Fund, which gives help in the form of a one-off payment of up to £300 to overcome unexpected financial barriers that might arise when a lone parent first starts work and might otherwise make it difficult for the lone parent to remain in employment. In Work Advisory Support is also available from Jobcentre Plus advisers. This involves continued advice and guidance from a personal adviser to resolve any problems people might face during the first 26 weeks of a return to work.

4.3.2 Knowledge and understanding

Knowledge among respondents of these different initiatives designed to ease the transition into work was limited (Table 4.2). Only a minority were aware of Job Grant and Extended HB, and only a minority of lone parents were aware of IWC, although it was possible that some respondents did not qualify for the latter and were, therefore, not informed about it by a Jobcentre Plus adviser.

Table 4.2 Awareness of a selection of back-to-work benefits

Back-to-work benefits	Aware?	
	Yes	No
Job Grant		
Sample: all respondents responding to the question (n = 41)	11	30
Extended Housing Benefit		
Sample: all respondents responding to the question (n = 40)	14	26
In Work Credit		
Sample: all lone parents responding to the question (n = 22)	5	17

It was not uncommon for respondents to have little or no understanding of back to work and in-work benefits, particularly if they had limited contact with Jobcentre Plus. In most cases, knowledge and awareness was limited to people who had a recent personal experience of the transition into work and had applied for and/or received a particular measure. For example, nine of the 11 respondents who were aware of Job Grant had previously received a Job Grant payment upon moving into employment. In contrast, respondents without a recent experience of moving back into work were typically unfamiliar or confused about back-to-work measures. For example, only one of the 14 lone parents questioned who was not in paid employment reported being aware of IWC, resulting in this initiative having little impact on financial worries about moving into work. Limited awareness of IWC might, in part, reflect the fact that some of these lone parents were, at time of interview, not required to be actively looking for work because of the age of their youngest child.

Recognition of different benefits was further complicated by the difficulty that some respondents had distinguished between measures. Job Grant, for example, was often confused with Back to Work Bonus, which it replaced at the end of 2008. Some respondents also struggled to recall the name of the specific benefits they received during the transition into work. For example, people talked about receiving a cheque that they used to help cover costs, such as buying clothing for work, but were only able to confirm that it was a Job Grant payment once the interviewer had clarified the characteristics and qualification criteria.

Respondents who had financial assistance during the move into work talked positively about the help received. Nazeem was a lone parent with two children aged 11 and 16 years old. She had recently started a job at a local hospital working 27 hours per week after a long period out of work. Nazeem had a patchy knowledge of in-work and back-to-work support and benefits. For example, she was also unfamiliar with Time Off and Flexible Working. However, she was currently receiving IWC and had received extended HB payments during her first month in work, as well as a Job Grant payment, although she initially reported never having heard of Job Grant. Nazeem talked positively about the help received:

Interviewer: *'Did these benefits and support measures make you feel more confident [about moving into and being in work], are they helping you?'*

Nazeem: *'They did help...yeah they did, especially the £100 that they gave me, I bought myself some shoes and my uniform for work and £40 for the CRB check. If I'd had to do it all by myself, I would've needed £100-£200 from my own pocket just to begin my job'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child 11 years old)

Debbie, a lone parent who had recently moved into part-time work, echoed these comments about the help provided by transitional benefits, focusing, in particular, on the importance of HB run on:

Interviewer: *'Did these benefits, supports make it easier for you to think about going back to work?'*

Debbie: *'Yeah.'*

Interviewer: *'Did they actually make it easier for you to go back to work?'*

Debbie: *'Yeah.'*

Interviewer: *'How did you find out about them all?'*

Debbie: *'You go to your adviser at the job centre.'*

Interviewer: *'They told you about it did they?'*

Debbie: *'Yeah they have to, you're not going to go back to work if you're going to get in debt before you've even got through the door are you?'*

Interviewer: *'A lot of people worry about that don't they?'*

Debbie: *'Yeah so I think the best one on there is that they continue to pay your Housing Benefit and Council Tax for those four weeks and I think they pay your childcare as well. I think it was only two weeks of my childcare to help get me back in.'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; lone parent; youngest child three years old)

Perhaps not surprisingly, the small number of people who had been in employment on an ongoing basis for a number of years were less familiar with back-to-work and in-work benefits, reflecting their limited recent contact with Jobcentre Plus and other advice and information services. Ameena was a lone parent who had been in full-time employment for three months and who had been working on a part-time basis for the previous eight years. She reported having no knowledge of support to assist with the transition from benefits into work and assumed that she was not entitled to any in-work benefits:

Interviewer: *'In terms of state benefits and allowances are you actually receiving anything at all?'*

Ameena: *'No I do get working tax credit.'*

Interviewer: *'Does that make life easier for you?'*

Ameena: *'I don't know how much I get to be honest, no I get child tax credit.'*

Interviewer: *'Has anybody ever sat down with you and talked through what your entitlements are?'*

Ameena: *'No.'*

Interviewer: *'Do you think you're claiming all the benefits that you're entitled to?'*

Ameena: *'I don't know.'*

Interviewer: *'Is it just that you don't have the time to find out?'*

Ameena: *'Well I'm working so I'm not entitled to anything, that's what I assume, I'm working full-time so why should I be entitled to anything?'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child age unknown)

4.4 Advice and assistance about moving into work

4.4.1 Initiatives and support

In addition to financial support designed to help people with the transition into work, various New Deal programmes have targeted advice, guidance and assistance at helping people into work. These programmes have been delivered by a network of Personal Advisers (PAs) employed by Jobcentre Plus who are charged with encouraging people to move through the transition into paid employment. The PA role involves helping people recognise and overcome barriers to work, such as lack of skills, and assisting them to make job applications and prepare for work. PAs also serve as 'gatekeepers' to the benefits system, ensuring that people required to actively seek work as a condition of receiving benefit are doing so. It is a condition of most key benefits that clients attend regular sessions with a PA, but there are also a number of voluntary New Deal programmes targeted at particular groups:

- Compulsory New Deal programmes – people claiming JSA are required to take part in New Deal after receiving JSA for a specific period of time. This is six months for people aged 18 to 24 years old and 18 months for people who are 25 or over (or after claiming for 18 months out of the last 21 months.). From November 2008, lone parents whose children are aged 12 and over have been moved onto JSA if they are capable of work.
- Voluntary New Deal programmes – some New Deal programmes are voluntary and, as long as a person is eligible, they are free to decide whether to take part or not. These include New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP), New Deal for Partners, New Deal 50 Plus (ND50+) and New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP), which offers a package of support provided through a PA, who takes clients through the process of how to find a job and offers practical advice and help about finding childcare and training. Advisors also provide information about how benefits will be affected by starting work and how to apply for in-work benefits or tax credits.

4.4.2 Contact with a PA

Asked what services they approached or made contact with for help finding work, 28 respondents reported that they had been in contact with Jobcentre Plus. Seventeen respondents reported no contact with Jobcentre Plus. Seven of these respondents had an income from an alternative source (a partner in work or a pension) and were not receiving out-of-work benefits, seven were lone parents with children less than 10 years old¹, two were receiving IB and one reported that her husband was the main claimant.

It was difficult to clarify under which New Deal programme the 28 respondents who had been in contact with Jobcentre Plus had received help from a PA, but most of these people were in receipt of JSA, suggesting that contact was part of a compulsory New Deal programme. Among lone parents on IS who were likely to be eligible for NDLP, only six out of 19 reported being familiar with the Programme and only four reported having a PA through the programme, although this finding might reflect the tendency of some advisers to provide advice and assistance without reference to a branded programme name, such as NDLP, as well as the fact that in London some back-to-work services for lone parents have been contracted out to Employment Zones. No reference was made to any other voluntary New Deal programmes, although explicit questions were not asked about NDDP, New Deal for Partners or ND50+.

¹ At the time of interviewing, a lone parent who was capable of work was able to claim IS only until their youngest child reached age 10, at which time most were required to claim JSA and seek work. From October 2010 this was reduced to when the youngest child reaches the age of seven years old.

Only two respondents complained about difficulties accessing the help and assistance to move into work from Jobcentre Plus. Both were women who were married or in a long-term relationship. Mandy reported that her husband worked as a car mechanic and that the family was receiving WTC, partial HB and CTB. Mandy complained that support and assistance is targeted at lone parents and people on benefits and that little help is available for people trying to move into work who have a partner already in work:

Interviewer: *‘So you’ve mentioned some of the issues around finding work, what would you say are the main problems?’*

Mandy: *‘There’s not much help for actual married couples trying to find the other parent work, you’ve got loads of places for single parents, people on benefits, like Income Support, they’d rather try and get them back to work than actually help families like us where one parent is working but we do need another parent working. There’s nothing out there cos I can’t just walk into a dole office and say “I want to try and apply for these jobs” because those priority jobs go onto the people on social benefits.’*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

Sarah recounted approaching Jobcentre Plus for help getting back to work only to be told that she was not eligible for support. This was despite the fact that her husband was claiming benefit for her and, on this basis, she would appear to have been eligible for advice and guidance on training, finding work and childcare provided through the New Deal for Partners:

Sarah: *‘I was fed up with being a stay at home parent, this was before I had my two year old. I went to help to seek work but because my husband’s claiming benefit for both of us they were willing to try and help him but he couldn’t work because of his back so when I asked if they could help me the said no, there wasn’t much they could do for me so basically the job place was refusing to help find work for me.’*

Interviewer: *‘That was the job centre was it?’*

Sarah: *‘Yes, I had to ring around and complain to several people and was finally given an appointment at the job centre in which I went for a few appointments to try and find work but in the end I had to leave cos I found out I was pregnant with my youngest.’*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child two years old)

4.4.3 Help received

Respondents who had been in contact with Jobcentre Plus frequently questioned the value of the help and assistance received. Martin was 36 years old and lived with his wife and two children, who were three and four years old. He had been unemployed for 18 months and was in receipt of JSA. Asked whether he thought he was claiming all the out-of-work benefits he was entitled to Martin reported having ‘no idea’ and went on to reflect on his experience of Jobcentre Plus:

Interviewer: *'Has anybody at the Jobcentre talked to you about "this is what you're entitled to?"'*

Martin: *'No don't be silly, you've never been to a Jobcentre have you? A Jobcentre to me is a bit of an eye opener, they don't really know much about what's happening in their job, they're just there to do their job which is to make sure people are signing on and looking for work, as for giving out information, a) I don't think they've got that information to hand, or they're knowledgeable about it b) I don't think they have the timescale put on them to go through all that information with people and c) I don't think they really care. And I'm sorry for the people that work there, they've got their own pressures from their management, this amount of people, get them in and out the door, make sure they're looking.'*

Interviewer: *'So would you keep away from the Jobcentre or would you still access it in terms of trying to find out about jobs?'*

Martin: *'I don't access it, I look on their website for jobs and that's about all but going in there to ask them anything, they don't have that amount of time, especially under the present climate with so many people unemployed, they've taken on a load more staff and I can tell that they're not too sure what they're doing anyway, but they have this thing called speed signing where you just go in and they'll just say 'sign here' and off you go, they don't even speak to you, depending how busy they are, that's the job centre for you.'*

One apparent consequence of this 'light touch' engagement with Jobcentre Plus was that Martin knew little about in-work benefits:

Interviewer: *'Have you ever done the calculation with the Jobcentre, the better off calculation, where they sit down and work out whether you'd be better off working or not?'*

Martin: *'No my experience of the Jobcentre is literally "sign here and leave" not really offer or assist in trying to find you a job or offering you any training, if you ask them about any training programmes or anything like that they'll say no. I don't know what training programmes they're meant to offer but they don't offer you any.'*

During the interview Martin was informed about various in-work benefits. Subsequently, he went on to express annoyance that no one had ever informed him about these benefits before:

Martin: *'No I'm quite happy to go back into work anyway but it is nice to know that they're there and I would imagine it would be nice to know, if they advised you of these beforehand as well and not to tell you anything I find that very bizarre, I find it a bit corrupt as well because it's like the politicians offer all these but they don't and I find that a bit deceiving.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

In contrast to Martin, Tania had discussed in-work benefits with her PA, but reported not being convinced that the advice received was correct. Tania was a lone parent who was working full-time and whose youngest child was 16 years old. She recounted being informed by her PA that she did not qualify for partial HB, but reported that a flyer she had picked up at work about HB suggested that she might be eligible:

Interviewer: *'Can I just check what benefits or allowances you're receiving currently?'*

Tania: *'Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit and my Child Benefit and I think this is my last week for my over 50 payment that I got for the first year, I think it finishes this week.'*

Interviewer: *'Do you think you're claiming all the benefits that you're entitled to?'*

Tania: *'I think so cos they said you couldn't get Housing Benefit and couldn't get Council Tax Benefit but then I'm not sure...'*

Interviewer: *'Who told you this?'*

Tania: *'That was the Jobcentre Adviser and when I went down to, told me when I was starting work and coming off Council Tax Benefit she looked at what my possible wage was and said "no you wouldn't get it" but then we have this form at work where you can, if you're claiming certain benefits you don't have to paid for our activities and on one of them it says if you're getting, if you earn something like under 10,000, well that's me so I'm not quite sure if maybe I could still get a bit of Housing Benefit or not because she said 'oh no you wouldn't'.'*

(45–54 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child 16 years old)

4.4.4 The experiences of lone parents

Lone parents expressed a number of particular concerns about the help and assistance provided by Jobcentre Plus. Lone parents whose youngest child was less than 10 years old and who were not currently required to look for work typically reported having a rather perfunctory relationship with Jobcentre Plus, who they tended to 'check in' with every six months. While this suited some respondents, it appeared many were uncertain or unaware of transitional and in-work benefits, while some others complained that they wanted more support preparing for a future return to work. Keira, for example, was a 23-year-old lone parent with two children aged three and six years old. Keira reported having no immediate plans to move into work but did indicate that she was keen to enter part-time work once her youngest child started school. She reported being keen to know about available work opportunities that she could fit around the school day, but complained that this support had not been forthcoming from Jobcentre Plus:

Interviewer: *'Have you had any contact with people like the job centre or employment advisors?'*

Keira: *'I haven't, I see them every six months and I just go in and say "I'm starting college" and they're like "OK see you later, see you in six months" and that's it, you don't get any proper support or anything.'*

Interviewer: *'What kind of things do you think might helpful for you?'*

Keira: *'For them to tell me what would be available to me for the rough hours I'd like to do, they don't ask me if I'd work what hours I'd want to do, anything, but that would be good if it was available, if they helped you, just say 'well there's this sort of job you could do' but they don't.'*

(16–24 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child three years old)

Among lone parents whose youngest child had reached 10 years old and were receiving JSA and were obliged to look for work, a common concern was the pressure put on them to find work by their PA (it was not possible to discern if people were seeing a Lone Parent Adviser or a mainstream

adviser). In some cases, this reflected a concern that work was not a viable option given parental responsibilities. Other respondents suggested that they had been directed toward training opportunities and vacancies that did not correspond with their personal ambitions or preferences. Tania, for example, expressed frustration about being directed into a new line of training (European Computer Driving Licence), rather than building on training she had undertaken to support a move into her preferred occupation of teaching assistant:

Interviewer: *'What about New Deal for Lone Parents?'*

Tania: *'I think that's what runs your courses and things...I think that's how I got the Pitman. You get your adviser and then they can put you on the courses, yeah I did have the New Deal adviser yeah, you have to see them every three months.'*

Interviewer: *'Was it useful?'*

Tania: *'I think in some ways yes but looking at it now, the fact that I went when she said "do your European driving" [computer software training] and didn't hold out for something else, cos you're put on what's available, not what might suit you. If we'd kept on, I'd swapped advisors, I did the teachers returner with one adviser and everything and we were going down that line and then he finished as my adviser and I got a different one who then went "you can go to Pitman and do European driving" which sent me in a completely different direction which is what I now regret but I could have done NVQ3 if I'd thought about it so I don't think they always fit the person to the course, I think they look what's available and put you on it.'*

(45–54 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child 16 years old)

A related, but more general criticism, was continuity in the support received from Jobcentre Plus, as Helen observed:

Interviewer: *'How do you feel about the potential move onto job seekers next year?'*

Helen: *'I think because the amount of people you see in the benefit office can vary quite a lot, at the moment the people I've been speaking to have been really nice and helpful and sometimes you can be speaking to someone who feels as though they're pushing you into any line of work straight away.'*

Interviewer: *'Have you had that experience before?'*

Helen: *'Yeah, and it would be nice to...because of the field that I'm choosing [teaching assistant] the work is there, it would be nice to be pushed in the same direction.'*

Interviewer: *'Are you concerned they might try and divert you onto something else more immediate?'*

Helen: *'Yeah.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; lone parent; youngest child six years old)

Another common concern expressed by lone parents was the degree to which support and assistance provided by PAs recognised and responded to the challenges that people who have been out of work for many years (or who might never even have been in paid employment) might encounter, including issues of confidence and awareness of procedures and processes that might be taken for granted.

Finally, some lone parents talked about feeling uncomfortable or intimidated at a Jobcentre Plus office. These comments were rooted in concerns about the behaviour of fellow clients and the difficulties that some people encountered participating in sessions. Sharon is a lone parent who was working 18 hours per week and whose youngest child was 14 years old. She recounted attending various back-to-work meetings and activities, and commented that the group activities had been ‘frightening’ and recalled worrying about not knowing what people ‘were going on about’. On reflection, she concluded that she would have found one-to-one support and advice more preferable and less intimidating:

Sharon: *‘I think when I first started trying to get back into work and when I went into these going back into work things at job centre they go through everything very robotically and show you very quickly where you go and you do this and look for job searches, that’s very good but when you’ve been at home with your children you need somebody one to one almost to spend at least 15, 20 minutes with you showing you how to actually do it properly, one, you don’t know how to use a computer so I had to go on a computer course, and just simple things like that.’*

Interviewer: *‘More one-to-one support?’*

Sharon: *‘Yeah on the, rather than group or two or three to one, but when you go in a large group and you think “OK job search what does that mean, where do you go, how do you do it?” and...you just think “I don’t know what you’re on about”.’*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child six years old)

4.5 The relationship between benefits and work

4.5.1 The financial viability of work

Recent reforms to the benefits and tax credit systems have been designed so that the financial gains of moving into work are increased (DWP, 2009). Most respondents concluded that for them this had not been the case. Even after they had been informed about transitional supports and in-work benefits, 22 of the 28 respondents who were not in work and who expressed an opinion reported being unconvinced about the financial gains of moving into work.

Rachel, a lone parent with an 11 year old child, was one of these respondents. Rachel reported being unaware of Job Grant, IWC, Time Off, the right to request Flexible Working and NDLP. She did report getting information through the post about courses and advice about getting back to work and confirmed that she did attend the local Jobcentre Plus office every six months, but explained that work was not financially viable, as well as pointing to problems with childcare:

Interviewer: *‘How regularly do they [Jobcentre Plus] contact you?’*

Rachel: *‘Every six months, I had an interview just over six months ago and I’ve had another letter telling me that I need to go for another interview and they’re aware of the fact that I am pregnant but it doesn’t seem to stop them.’*

Interviewer: *‘Do they send you stuff through the post?’*

Rachel: *‘Yeah, I get quite a lot of stuff through the post about single parents back-to-work courses, child minding, all advice on getting me back to work, but at the moment, for me to go into full-time work I would be probably £5 a week better off than what I am now. My rent is sky high, about £135 a week and when you look at the Council Tax on top of that, travelling, all that kind of stuff it’s really not worth it at the moment and I’ve got an 11 year old, they don’t really cater for child minders for 11 year olds and I’m not prepared to leave my 11 year old to fend for himself.’*

During the interview, Rachel was informed about transitional and in-work benefits, including IWC. She still reported concerns, however, about the long-term viability of work:

Interviewer: *'Hearing about these, would that make you feel any more confident about entering work in the future?'*

Rachel: *'Generally no. It's not because, to be paying me £60 on top of what I'm getting for a year, that would be great for that year but then what happens the following year? It's going to be back to square one, debt, rent arrears, everything.'*

Interviewer: *'So that might give you security for...'*

Rachel: *'Just for the year and that's it.'*

Interviewer: *'So those don't necessarily make you feel any more confident about work?'*

Rachel: *'Not at all.'*

(25–34; looking after the home; living with partner; youngest child three years old)

Cassie, a lone parent in Islington whose youngest child was 13 years old made a similar point about the transitional support provided by IWC for lone parents:

Interviewer: *'Do you think there are any other benefits you'd be entitled to if you were in work?'*

Cassie: *'No just that new incentive they got, they give you extra 60 quid a month for the first year, that's pretty good, but I know friends that really miss it now, it's a lot of money to miss, in fact it was a week, it was £240 a month extra they were getting, but then it stopped and that's when they say to you "now you have to go full-time" and then everything falls apart with everyone because they can't afford full rent, they don't boost your money up, you got the same wages, doing extra hours for a couple of quid, it's not really helping in that respect else everyone would work full-time wouldn't they, single parents, they would. But they stop the 60 quid a week after a year and then say you've got to look for more hours because you haven't got that money so there's a bit of a catch in it.'*

(35–44 years old; permanently sick/disabled; lone parent; youngest child 13 years old)

Like Rachel and Cassie, people receiving out-of-work benefits typically reported that they would only be slightly (financially) better off in work. This conclusion was informed by assumptions about earning potential, which were balanced against household expenditure. This led some respondents to refer to a 'reservation wage' that was required for work to be financially viable. Samantha, for example, a lone parent in Islington whose youngest child was 13 years old, talked about needing a wage of between £400 and £500 per week:

Interviewer: *'Is there any pressure on you from other people, you actually say that your friends, a lot of your friends and is it your family as well, they work?'*

Samantha: *'Yes.'*

Interviewer: *'Is there any pressure from people around you who don't work to not work? Or any influence?'*

Samantha: *'Well to be honest my mum always says to me "if you go to work you're going to find it so hard because of the money situation" because I get my rent paid because I'm unemployed, this rent here is £110 a week, the Council Tax is £23 a week so it's £133 plus the gas, electric, all adds up and she says to me "you're going to have to get a full-time job earning £4-500 a week to cope" it does scare me yes it does.'*

(25–34 years old; voluntary work; lone parent; youngest child two years old)

The conclusion that work was not financially viable had often been reached despite people receiving an In-Work Benefit Calculation (IWBC) or ‘better off calculation’² from Jobcentre Plus. This finding is consistent with previous studies, which found that in some cases better off calculations can actually reinforce concerns about the financial viability of work (Fletcher *et al.*, 2008) and found no evidence of a positive association between IWBC outcomes and moves into work among existing claimants (Knight and Kasparova, 2006). The conclusion that people are not necessarily better off in work was also shared by some people in paid employment, who explained that economic gain was rarely a motivation to work and that they were only marginally better off in work. A related concern was that income from employment was unpredictable and insecure, prompting concerns about the challenges of managing household finances when in work and raising the spectre of debt.

These findings are consistent with the conclusions of previous studies (see, for example: Fletcher *et al.*, 2008; Harries and Woodfield, 2002; Woodland *et al.*, 2003) and confirm that worries about the financial implications of moving into work remain, despite efforts to ensure that people are better off in work.

4.5.2 Housing and the financial viability of work

In some instances, concerns about the financial viability of work were informed by assumptions about housing costs that social tenants become liable for upon moving into work. Sana, for example, a lone parent whose youngest child was six years old, expressed concern about managing financially when in (part-time) work, pointing to a host of costs for which she presumed she would be responsible, including repair and maintenance of the property:

Interviewer: *‘Are you intending to look for work?’*

Sana: *‘Intention’s neither here nor there, it’s just that I think what if I started working and then I couldn’t afford to pay all the bills, then what am I going to do? Everything I receive is due to receiving Income Support. I get my rent, the Council Tax, if anything in the house is broken or needs repairing they come and fix it for me and it’s clear that if I was to work then I’d have to pay the rent myself, I also have to pay the Council Tax myself. How much am I going to earn working part-time, how much am I going to have to give them and how much am I going to have left to pay for things for the household?’*

Apparent within Sana’s comments is a misunderstanding about eligibility to services and assistance provided by social landlords, which Sana assumes are provided free of charge because she is in receipt of Income Support, when they are actually covered by her rent. Sana returned to these concerns when asked whether there was anything about the benefit system that makes it difficult for her to think about working:

Sana: *‘Well yeah, it’s obvious that if I start working then I’m going to lose my Income Support and then I’m going to have to earn for myself and then I’ll have to think carefully about where I spend my money. With Income Support they give us everything for free, if there’s something wrong with the electricity, the gas, the boiler, if there’s something wrong with the water or the windows or the doors or anything they do all of that for us, they sort it out for free and if you work those companies say that you have to pay for it yourself, the government doesn’t pay for it any more and then you’re in a situation where you think “well where am I going to get my loan from, how am I going to pay it back?”’*

(35–44 years old; full-time carer; lone parent; youngest child six years old)

²

A means of assessing changes in a claimant’s financial position when they move into work.

Sana was not alone in making such presumptions. Keira, a lone parent in Islington who was renting from a Housing Association questioned whether she would become liable for the costs of maintaining and managing her accommodation should she move into work:

Interviewer: *'Do you say you're in housing association?'*

Keira: *'Yeah.'*

Interviewer: *'And you say the rent's quite expensive?'*

Keira: *'£129 a week is crazy and then there's more on top, that would be a problem, your rent and stuff, you don't get help with that, you don't get help with service charges, water rates and gas, electric, TV licence, I could go on, maybe I'd struggle if I had to get a job and pay £130 a week rent for a rat-infested flat with mice and everything, and then if anything breaks, I don't know if you still have to pay for people to come out and fix stuff, or is that if you own the flat? It's crazy.'*

(16–24 years old; looking after the home; lone parent, youngest child three years old)

4.5.3 Benefits payments and the move in and out of work

A final finding of note regarding the complex relationship between (in work, into work and out of work) benefits and work was the fact that almost half of all respondents expressing an opinion (18 out of 38) reported that the benefit system makes it difficult to negotiate the transition into work and/or to cope when in paid employment. Various comments were forthcoming to explain this opinion, but underlying all was the perception that not only, as discussed above, did the system of into and in-work benefits and supports fail to render work a financially viable option, it can also serve to undermine the financial viability of work. Respondents appeared to have arrived at this conclusion for a variety of overlapping reasons, including:

- concerns about renegotiating a return to benefits when a job ends or a person is made redundant. This fear was rooted in presumptions about the nature of work available to many respondents (low paid, casualised employment) and concerns about job security in the current economic context; and fears that the process of renegotiating access to out of work benefits could result in a break in income and result in problems of debt;
- concerns about delays in benefit and tax credit payments when a person's situation or status changes, for example, as a result of a move into or out-of-work or a change in working hours and income;
- fears about the accrual of rent arrears and associated concerns about security of tenure. For some respondents, this concern was particularly associated with the unpredictability of income when moving into and out of work. For others it was perceived to be an ever present risk, given the challenges of managing the household budget when in low-paid work;
- the potential for mistakes in the payment of in-work benefits and Tax Credits to result in the accumulation of substantial debts, a fear underpinned by personal experience and stories of friends and relatives encountering problems.

These concerns are usefully illustrated by the case studies of Helen and Debbie.

Helen was a lone parent whose youngest child was eight years old. At the time of interview she was not in paid work and was in receipt of benefits including IB, but expressed an interest in moving into work. When asked if there was anything about the benefit system that makes it difficult for her to work, Helen expressed concern about the complications of reapplying for benefits should a move into work prove short term:

Interviewer: *'Is there anything about the benefits system that makes it difficult for you to work?'*

Helen: *'Yeah this way yeah, if your job is lost and then you're just thinking that you need to apply the benefit again and you get so much hassle, just to claim it and going back to interviews and these sort of things.'*

Interviewer: *'Is it quite a difficult process?'*

Helen: *'It is difficult because I had this experience, I went on holiday and then they stopped my benefit at that time and then I came back and I did tell them I'm going away for four weeks and as soon as I came back, and then they stopped my benefit and I went through this procedure again and it took me months to get this sorted out with the problem.'*

Interviewer: *'So it was a long process?'*

Helen: *'It was long process and I was really struggling and then all the bills I need to pay and everything and ask my friend to give me some help and she did and then I got my benefit and then pay her back as well and it was too much. It was too much hassle for me at that time.'*

Interviewer: *'So that kind of thing would worry you?'*

Helen: *'It would worry yes.'*

Helen also expressed concerns about the financial viability of work and explained that she would seek to manage these by choosing to work on a part-time basis:

Interviewer: *'Would you be able to work and afford it [rent]?'*

Helen: *'No because it quite high weekly, if I'm getting full-time job I wouldn't be able to afford it, like 300 if you were paying a month and all the household things as well, you need to cook and other things as well, car maintenance and these things as well so I wouldn't be able to cope with it but if I'm on a part-time job I'll probably get some help for the rent as well, otherwise I would have a lot of problems.'*

Interviewer: *'So it's important for you to keep certain benefits to be able to survive financially?'*

Helen: *'That's right.'*

(35–44 years old; unemployed; lone parent; youngest child six years old)

Helen was not alone among lone parents in concluding that part-time work put her on a more stable financial footing, because of the connection it allowed her to maintain with the benefit system. Debbie was a lone parent whose youngest child was three years old and who was working 16 hours per week. She reported being worried about entering work, because of concerns about the complications of returning to benefits and, in particular, the delay in receiving payment:

Interviewer: *'Did you have any fears when you went back into work that say the job didn't work out and you had to go back onto benefits, was that an issue?'*

Debbie: *'Yeah because apparently they don't pay you for four weeks so I said to her "have I got a legal obligation to stay in work now?" and she said "you've got no legal obligation but we won't give you Income Support for the following four weeks" but that's no benefits, no Housing Benefit, no Council Tax so that's four weeks rent.'*

Interviewer: *'That's taking a bit of a plunge going for the job isn't it?'*

Debbie: *'Yeah and if it doesn't work out...'*

Interviewer: *'So what gave you the confidence to go for it?'*

Debbie: *'Because it's a career job, it's a job for life, I think it can only get better. I can eventually do 40 hours if I wanted to.'*

Debbie made a slightly different point to Helen when discussing the financial benefits of part-time work, which was related to her interpretation of the complex relationship between working hours, Tax Credits and benefit entitlements:

Interviewer: *'Are the hours you work important to what benefits you do or don't receive?'*

Debbie: *'Like if I did 30 hours all them decrease.'*

Interviewer: *'So you're getting some of these [benefits] because of the hours you're working or the income that you're getting?'*

Debbie: *'Yeah, you can't do any less than 16 hours to receive Working Tax and Child Tax Credits but what I found is if my manager says "would you work two extra hours?" if I do more than that and at the end of a tax year I send my tax form to working tax, my Working Tax Credits will go down because you've done more hours.'*

Interviewer: *'Is it because they think you're now going to work those hours for the next year?'*

Debbie: *'It's on a tax code, it's all based on a tax code so that's what I do as well, I would do overtime but what's the point if you're going to get penalised the following year.'*

Interviewer: *'So it makes your financial management complicated?'*

Debbie: *'Yeah, I don't particularly want to do overtime but I feel, if she says just stay an extra hour I won't do it because I know that the tax will go up and as well on 16 hours you don't get taxed.'*

Interviewer: *'Do you know when you start getting taxed?'*

Debbie: *'Anything above 16 hours.'*

Interviewer: *'Does your employer understand this?'*

Debbie: *'Yeah.'*

Interviewer: *'So she knows when you say no what the reasons are?'*

Debbie: *'Yeah.'*

Interviewer: *'So she's OK with that?'*

Debbie: *'Probably not cos they want me to do 20 hours but when you start getting taxed I probably work them four extra hours for free. Why would you do it...Just complicates everything because in four hours you'd probably lose half of your Housing Benefit and now I don't receive any Council Tax Benefit but I get that single person's allowance but I don't receive any other benefit other than Housing Benefit and it affects them massively and you don't realise.'*

Interviewer: *'How did you find out that it affected them?'*

Debbie: *'The following year, everything dropped, you lost, £50 is a lot of money to lose, cos for the first year when you go back to work you get your go back to work bonus, is that the £200?'*

Debbie's preference for part-time work and maintaining a connection with the benefit system reflected a common concern among parents that equated full-time work to financial uncertainty and, therefore, a threat to residential security:

Interviewer: *'Do you think there's anything about the benefits system which makes it difficult for you to think about working before you got the job? Were you worried about anything?'*

Debbie: *'Debt, like I just said your rent, I think your rent is your biggest worry and your Council Tax because you're going to lose your home and I think that's why people get stuck at home on Income Support because they know that nobody can take their house away but as soon as you go back to work you've got that responsibility, you can get an eviction notice.'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; lone parent; youngest child three years old)

4.6 Conclusion

Various initiatives have been introduced to support the move into work and to help people manage when in work. These initiatives were found to have only limited impact on the concerns of parents about leaving out-of-work benefits and the financial uncertainties they associated with being in work. In part, this reflected the limited awareness, knowledge and understanding of these initiatives among the parents interviewed. This finding points to the importance of any reform of the tax and benefit systems ensuring that the ways that work can pay are more obvious and easier to understand. However, even people who were aware of the complex regime of initiatives, benefits and supports designed to help people to move into work reported concerns about the financial risks of being in work. This finding suggests that previous efforts to ensure that the financial gains of moving into work are substantial have failed to convince.

These findings support the case for moving to a single system of working-age benefits, in a bid to minimise the confusion inherent in the present system and make it easier for individuals to ascertain whether they would be better off in work. These are two of the reasons given in the White Paper *Universal Credit: Welfare that Works* (DWP, 2010) for introducing the Universal Credit, an integrated benefit in place of IS, income-based JSA, income-related ESA, HB, CTC and WTC. The amount of Universal Credit will depend on the level of income and other family circumstances. The Credit will be payable in and out of work, hopefully removing the complicated rules that currently apply when people move in and out of employment. The new system, therefore, appears likely to address many of the problems with the current system revealed in this chapter.

5 Experiences of work

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the experiences of parents who return to work. It begins by looking at the positive experiences of work, including social benefits such as the sense of purpose, independence and self-esteem work afforded, as well as the opportunities for social contact it can provide. Some parents also reported gaining financially from returning to work. Discussion then moves on to consider the negative impacts of work, including the time parents had available to look after children or fulfil domestic responsibilities, such as housework. Difficulties moving off benefits and into work are also explored. Discussion concludes by looking at the factors that help people to enter and sustain work.

5.2 Positive experiences of work

Chapter 2 showed that many respondents contemplating a return to work were motivated as much, if not more, by potential social benefits as financial gains. These perceptions of the benefits of work were borne out by the experiences of those who had worked before their current spell out of the labour market. The gains identified including a sense of routine and purpose, enhanced self-esteem, independence and valued social interaction.

Debbie, a lone parent with two children who was working part-time at a factory, referred to the sense of satisfaction she derived from work:

Debbie: *'I didn't want to stay at home for another five years like I did with me eldest... Me eldest was five when I had the second one and I thought "I don't want to sit at home for another five years". So to start off with I went back into education and did a few courses in confidence building and that led to ultimately my job so it was a nice transition...[it] gives you a bit of sanity if anything else, it's just important to have your own time and have your own sense of achievement.'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; lone parent; youngest child three years old)

Grace: *'I like being in work because it gives me my space as an adult to have adult conversations with different people. You have your regular customers and you have your non-regulars and I enjoy meeting those and seeing them week by week and just having a laugh with them really...so I enjoy all that, the socialising.'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; living with partner; only child two years old)

Such social benefits were often realised despite work not delivering significant financial benefits. In contrast, some respondents reported that a return to work had provided both financial and social benefits. Aameena, a lone parent who worked full-time as a self-employed nursery manager, talked about the benefits of work in terms of both financial gains and meeting people:

Interviewer: *'What do you get out of being in paid employment?'*

Ameena: *'More money for a start, and it drives me to do better now, it was hard but I meet a lot more people and it really gives me great pleasure that the children who will attend will gain something and the parents, because we are very flexible with the parents, and that's the drive, it gives me a buzz really.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child age unknown)

Gemma, who was working full-time, and Mel who was working part-time, both reported that going back to work had made a notable financial contribution to household income. For Gemma, this was the main motivation for returning to work:

Gemma: *'Money, that's the only reason why, if it wasn't for that I wouldn't have gone straight back because I missed out on a lot going to work in the morning and it was horrible leaving her...Yeah my dad says "it'll be best if you go to work" I get tax credits and stuff so that tops it up.'*

(16–24 years old; working part-time; lone parent; only child two years old)

Mel: *'It has been quite smooth [going into work], I mean it helped because obviously I'm with [my new partner] now, he works full-time, I work full-time, I've had my son living here, my eldest son, he doesn't live here any more but he was living here, he was working full-time so he was paying board...so we're relatively well off.'*

(45–54 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child 16 years old)

In such cases, some respondents suggested that financial gains help to compensate for some of the negative effects on family life of returning to work. Parents talked about having a 'little extra money' to pay for trips out with the children, improving the quality of their leisure time.

Respondents who had experience of, or were in, work were generally positive about the financial gains of returning to work. This contrasts with the perception among some unemployed or inactive respondents that work does not always pay (see Section 2.4). However, the parents who were in work tended to be better placed to gain financially from being in work, for a combination of three reasons. First, household situation. Certain household situations render work more financially viable. To summarise, monetary gains were more readily apparent in situations where a respondent had a wife, husband or partner already in employment. In such situations, income secured through work was less likely to be offset by income lost from the removal of benefits, and therefore, more likely to represent a discernable financial gain. Second, the hours worked. Put simply, full-time work was usually more financially rewarding although some part-time workers did identify a 'taper' as benefits were withdrawn that made them reluctant to increase hours (see Chapter 4). Working full-time may increase total income but reduce the amount retained per pound earned. Third, childcare issues. Parents with older children or parents able to call on the help and assistance of a partner or wider family with childcare were more likely to realise financial benefits of entering work.

5.3 Negative experiences of work

Despite the social and financial benefits of work identified above, a number of interviewees recounted negative experiences of work. These centred on the loss of quality time with children; a lack of time for domestic chores; difficulties with benefit payments; and a lack of flexibility from employers. Looking firstly at time spent with children, some interviewees commented that work limited the quantity of time available to spend with children. Ameena, a lone parent who was self-

employed and ran a children's nursery with her business partner, provides an extreme example of the way that work can impede on the time parents have to spend with their children:

Ameena: *'Some days I'm working here till eight, 7.30 in the morning till eight at night and when I go home I have my own three kids, that's very difficult...if I could go back 10 years I think I'd only have one child, children are very expensive, and no matter how much I'm doing I'm still finding that I'm not doing enough, I can't spend enough quality time with them because I work on Saturdays as well, Sundays cleaning and cooking and washing and that's it and then it's Monday again and it's not enough hours in a day.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child age unknown)

The potential for work to impact on the quality of time spent with children was also a concern raised by Steve, who was working full-time as a care assistant. He felt that the demands of his job left him unable to satisfy his children's emotional needs:

Interviewer: *'Do you think there's anything about being a parent that makes it difficult for you to be in work?'*

Steve: *'Yeah there is cos at a time when your child's going off the rails and there's been times when kids playing me up and I'm thinking "I'm at work there's nothing I can do" or I've had to pick one of the kids up, I can't because I'm at work and then the kids are thinking "he don't really care" and I do care but I can't just leave work...Financially I'm better off, socially and mentally I'm not because I'm not the fun loving [man] that I used to be, so the kids can't have fun any more...so you lose a bit of yourself.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; living with partner; youngest child seven years old)

These examples illustrate the tension that can exist between working and fulfilling responsibilities to children. In some cases, parents were only able to manage this tension through a fundamental change in working patterns. Pauline, for example, a lone parent who had been working full-time as an assistant nursery nurse, reported feeling compelled to reduce her hours because of the detrimental effect she believed that full-time working was having on both her child's sense of security and educational development:

Pauline: *'I was working 42 hours [as an assistant]...it was ridiculous, I was going home in my lunch break to do my washing...[and] it does have an effect on the child, that's why I reduced my hours. You're not there to monitor a teenager...have their tea ready for them when they come in, make sure they're doing their homework. If I was on lates I wasn't making sure he was getting into bed on time and I wasn't being a parent as I like to be and I think it makes them insecure...whereas now I'm part-time, I see them off to school and I'm there about half an hour from when he gets in. [The] disadvantage your money drops by half so you don't do as much but I looked it "well I'd rather be happy and have a little and still know who my son is than not". I know that sounds a bit dramatic but that's what I chose.'*

(45–54 years old; working part-time; lone parent; only child 16 years old)

Pauline was not alone in concluding that the loss of income associated with reducing her working hours was a worthwhile sacrifice for the additional time it allowed her to spend with her children. This finding underlines the fact that many parents regarded 'being there' for their children as a critical element of their responsibilities as a parent (see Chapter 2).

Another way of dealing with this tension was to quit work altogether. Lesley, a lone parent living in Islington, reported leaving work when it proved incompatible with spending time with her baby:

Lesley: *'I was working in a hairdressers and I'd been working there for about two years and after having my baby there was a problem with getting childcare and the hours that I worked, it wasn't working out...I used to work nine, 10 hours a day and it used to be originally five days a week but sometimes I would do six so that meant I would hardly see my son so it was basically choosing between the two really...the money that I was on and paying for childcare and travel as well, I just wouldn't have enough to live on so it wasn't worth while, even though I want to go back to work I couldn't physically do it with the money wise as well as finding the childcare.'*

(16–24 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child under one year old)

For Lesley, quitting work appeared to be the only way of resolving the 'choice' between working and being a good parent.

This is not to suggest that working is always perceived as having a negative impact upon children's wellbeing. Grace observed that leaving her two-year-old daughter with relatives when she went out to work at an Indian restaurant in the evening could have a positive effect in helping her child to develop a sense of independence:

Grace: *'She does cry when I leave but it's not long term and as soon as I've gone she forgets about it, she's got plenty of other people, her aunties and uncles and grandma so I don't think it's going to do any damage to her or anything like that and it's probably good for her to give her that bit of independence away from myself anyway.'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; living with partner; only child two years old)

Nonetheless, comments about the positive benefits of work on children were far less common than concerns about the loss of time available to spend with children and the attendant effects on family life. Whilst it is certainly true that parents often saw work as an important duty in setting a positive example for children, as discussed in Chapter 2, it was equally clear that employment can compromise an individual's ability to fulfil their perceived responsibilities as a parent. Many parents were grappling with a genuine tension, as the practical implications of work clashed with more abstract moral sensibilities.

A second difficulty experienced by working parents was the lack of time available for domestic chores, as Tania, Pauline and Wendy explained:

Pauline: *'From the second I wake up in the morning, six o'clock, I have to do as much housework as I possibly can, sometimes prepare the dinner before I leave the house then get here and have to be here early before the shop opens because I've got to get the oven warm, food cooked, so I get here for eight and then shop shuts at three, have to clean everything down, half three, get home at four. If he's training I take him to training, if we need shopping I go shopping, sometimes sit down about eight, it's busy.'*

(45–54 years old; working part-time; lone parent; only child 16 years old)

Wendy: *'I think my main issue is because as a mother you've got jobs to do at home as well and it's trying to get everything...You often think if only you didn't have children and you could just go to work...but you've got to focus on two things at the same time, making sure your child's all right at school, making sure the house is all tidy...trying to clean and everything, then also going to work and doing that job as well as a mother, that is tough.'*

(45–54 years old; unemployed; living with partner; only child seven years old)

These cases illustrate the 'second shift' (Hochschild, 1990) that many women in employment perform, returning from work to look after children and manage the household. Their daily routines show how this combination of responsibilities can occupy most of the waking day.

Tania also talked about how returning to work had served to limit her involvement in various community-based activities, illustrating the trade-off that some people were involved in between unpaid volunteering and paid work:

Tania: *'I've had to give up quite a lot actually, I had to give up the Beavers and stuff like that, I didn't realise how it would hit me actually when I gave it up, I thought it would be all right but like six months into the job I was like, I've had to give up quite a lot to actually be at work because I did do an awful lot in the community and I enjoyed it and I think I enjoyed some of it more than I enjoy the work... I can't do the PTFA [Parent, Teacher and Friends Association] any more cos they meet at five o'clock so you can't be as involved as you want to be cos you can't have the time off...'*

(45–54 years old; working full-time; divorced; youngest child 16 years old)

This example suggests there may be a tension between separate policy agendas that seek to move individuals back into work and promote volunteering as part of the Big Society. Those engaged in community or voluntary activities may struggle to maintain commitments when faced with the dual pressures of working and meeting domestic responsibilities.

A third difficulty encountered by respondents when returning to work was mispayments or delay in receiving benefits, as their entitlement changed. This included initial overpayments that left some individuals in arrears, benefits being mistakenly withdrawn, fluctuations in the level of benefits paid out that made budgeting difficult and delays in reinstating benefits when individuals subsequently lost jobs. The difficulties this can create are captured in the following two quotes which recount issues with, firstly, overpayment and, secondly, underpayment.

Interviewer: *'When you were working were you better off?'*

Tracy: *'Still struggling but slightly better off, I did end up getting in quite a bit of rent arrears. There was a...big confusion over the changeover in benefits and rent and Council Tax and I'm still actually paying for it now...they allowed me to get into so much arrears before anything was done...They only asked for the money back three years ago and I'm still paying it, it's only £6 a week but it's still being paid off.'*

(35–44 years old; looking after the home; lone parent; youngest child eight years old)

Michelle reported having benefits wrongly withdrawn upon entering work, only to find herself overpaid once payments resumed:

Michelle: *'Last year I really did struggle a lot when I went back into work and they couldn't make out what was going on. They thought I was doing 22 hours, thought I was doing full-time work and they stopped all my money for six weeks. I was without money, nothing at all...then, after 2½ months, it was their fault, they admitted it as well, [I had to pay] that money back because they were overpaying me.'*

Interviewer: *'So the benefits system actually created problems for you?'*

Michelle: *'Yeah, instead of helping you, encouraging you, it's a nightmare.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child eight years old)

These quotes indicate that the mechanics of the benefit system can complicate a return to work. Such experiences create a perception that employment can, at least initially, create additional financial problems rather than providing access to a steady and reliable income. The introduction of Universal Credit and higher marginal tax rates might help address these financial uncertainties of returning to work.

A final aspect of work identified as negatively impacting on parents was the lack of support and understanding from some employers for the situation of working parents. Such comments typically focused on flexibility around working hours and time off. Michelle, for example, reported difficulties getting leave that she believed she was entitled to, and had requested through the appropriate channels:

Michelle: *'[My employers] are horrible, I had a bank holiday off cos the kids were off and they give me a disciplinary. And I told them as well, two of them, Saturday and Sunday, I said "it's not fair on the kids, [if] I'll be working on the weekend and they only have a bank holiday off and I don't take them out".'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child eight years old)

In summary, the consensus among parents interviewed was that work can impact negatively on individual wellbeing and diminish the quality of family life. This was particularly the case for mothers. Whilst respondent experiences also show that work can deliver social benefits, as evidenced in Section 5.2, it also needs to be recognised that employment can prove a source of frustration, stress or concern for working parents. Work seems neither unambiguously good nor bad but, rather, an importance source of self-esteem, independence and financial wellbeing that, at the same time, puts pressure on family life. As Ridge and Millar's (2008) report on lone parents notes, working mothers often end up 'spinning plates' as they juggle paid work and domestic responsibilities which can prove an 'intense and demanding endeavour'.

5.4 What makes work possible

Recognising the problems that some parents can encounter in work, the research sought to explore the factors that serve to render work a more viable and sustainable option for some parents. Critical here is to understand how the fears, concerns and needs identified by parents outside of work (as detailed in Chapters 2 and 3) translate into actual experiences of returning to labour market. In other words, do these turn out to be real, present, practical difficulties and, if so, how do people manage them?

The most important factor was revealed to be gender. Few men recognised parental responsibilities as having any impact on their relationship with work, with female partners usually taking on the dominant role in looking after children and managing the household. This contrasts starkly with the women interviewed who, as discussed in Chapter 2, were the primary carer in the vast majority of households surveyed. Focusing on the situation of mothers, three factors emerged as playing a particularly important role in enabling some to make the transition back into work:

- part-time work that provided time to fulfil other responsibilities;
- support from family and friends in terms of childcare;
- supportive and flexible employers.

It is notable that these factors align closely with the concerns and preferences expressed by those out of work in terms of what would need to be in place to facilitate a return to work with hours of work (Section 3.3), informal childcare (Section 2.6) and flexibility from employers (Section 3.4) all cited as considerations. This illustrates a simple but important point. Once these concerns are addressed, women do return to work, particularly if they can do so in a way that does not conflict with perceived moral responsibilities to ‘be there’ for children outside school hours or not to entrust their care to unfamiliar institutions. This implies a need for policymakers to maximise the support available, for example, through encouraging employers to provide jobs that involve family-friendly, part-time hours. This is discussed further in Chapter 6.

Looking firstly at the advantages of part-time work, a number of mothers highlighted the way it left them with time to see their children or to undertake domestic responsibilities, as in the case of Tania and Debbie:

Tania: *‘I’ve still got the mornings to do the community stuff that I want to do [as a tenant board member]...I think if I was working full-time [Tania was working 27 hours a week] I wouldn’t be here to see Amy out to school and I think that is an important bit, I think she would really miss that. I think it does give you time to catch up on stuff...If I was working full-time and that on top I think I’d be worn out really because you just don’t get a break now, that little bit of space where you can just say “this morning I’m not going to do anything” just sit and drink tea for a morning or something so you just get a bit of space to yourself.’*

(45–54 years old; working full-time; divorced; youngest child 16 years old)

Debbie: *‘I do it because I do part-time hours. I don’t think I could do a full-time week because you never get any household things done so then your weekend’s spent doing those things and they should be spent enjoying the time with your children...I’ve been offered a couple more hours at work and I’ve turned it down, I don’t want to, I work two days and a morning and that’s all I want. It gives me those two days in the week to pay me rent, pay bills, do the food shop, clean the house, strip the beds, just all the mundane things that you have to do.’*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; lone parent; youngest child three years old)

Although Debbie suggested that it was not possible to work full-time with young children, for practical reasons and given parental responsibilities, she was also keen to switch to full-time work when her children were in secondary school.

Tania and Debbie's observations illustrate how part-time work can allow mothers to reconcile work with other responsibilities without leaving them too 'tired' or 'worn out' to appreciate life outside work. By limiting their hours of employment, these mothers were able to manage the 'double burden' imposed by combining work with domestic responsibilities. This finding was particularly apparent among the lone parents interviewed.

A second factor that played an important role in enabling individuals to study or return to work was informal childcare provided by family or close friends. In some cases, this support was provided by family or friends outside the household, as the following two examples show.

Gill, for example, a lone parent who worked part-time in adult education, explained how close friends used to step in to help out with childcare when she had to go on fieldwork as part of a university degree course:

Gill: *'When I did need support when they were both younger I was lucky to have godparents who would have both of my children on a regular basis, especially for university because...you had to [attend residential courses] for the weekend twice every year, had to, or you didn't pass your course. So thankfully I have a good support system in place, she's not needed as much to babysit now but she is still the godmother.'*

(35–44 years old; working part-time; lone parent; youngest child 10 years old)

Grace: *'Yeah definitely, [my husband's] family is brilliant, they look after her because working at an Indian restaurant I stay late there, so we leave from here and then she'll probably go to my sister-in-law, her auntie's house and stay there all evening and then come back with grandma here because we all live here and then they'll help put her to bed and when I come home it's fine...sometimes I think my other jobs were nine to five and by the time I get home if I'd had her in those days then in the evening she would have been going straight to bed after she'd had her tea so I wouldn't have spent any time with her so I think it's OK how I work now.'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; living with partner; only child two years old)

It is interesting to note in Grace's comments how support with childcare provided by family members allows her to work in the evening and spend most of the day with her child. This is a good example of how family support can facilitate work outside the school 'window'.

Informal childcare provided by friends or family was also reported to render work more financially viable, as Gemma observed:

Gemma: *'My mum looks after [my daughter] mornings so as soon as I get back my mum goes out because she's doing cleaning and whatever.'*

Interviewer: *'Do you think that without them that work might not be an option for you?'*

Gemma: *'No definitely not I wouldn't be able to get as much childcare, the cost of it these days is unreal so I'd prefer not to because it would be all my wages gone...in my situation I wouldn't pay for it because it's not worth it.'*

(16–24 years old; working part-time; lone parent; only child two years old)

Implicit in Gemma's remarks about the cost of childcare is the assumption that work would not make financial sense if it was not for the free childcare provided by her mother.

In some other cases, respondents reported that other members of the household including partners and older children played an important role looking after children. Pauline, for example, reflected on how she would have never entered part-time work managing a café if it wasn't for the help and assistance provided by her partner:

Interviewer: *'Do you think getting married is going to make a difference to your work and parenting situation?'*

Pauline: *'Yeah I do because I've got a meeting tonight, I could always ring me partner and say "I'm going to be late in, can you [do it]" just things like that whereas now you have to pre-plan everything...I would have never entertained [taking this job] but because I am getting married and I've got that back up I've been able to, if I wasn't I would have never took this job because I just couldn't have done it, you need somebody responsible to back you up in the other end really.'*

(45–54 years old; working part-time; lone parent; only child 16 years old)

Nazeem, a lone parent in Derby, talked about being able to extend her working hours because her 16 year old daughter helped look after her younger siblings:

Nazeem: *'And [now my] daughter's turned 16,...that's really really helpful because she can babysit now, like yesterday I was working and I left them note, I've got wages which I give them some money, no proper money but...if I can't come from work so after school my daughter do babysitting which is really helpful...I can do weekend work as well, she is helping looking after them.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child 11 years old)

Relying on older children to look after younger siblings can help parents meet childcare needs, but it can also exact an emotional toll. There was a clear sense among respondents that it was a necessary rather than desirable arrangement. Michelle, a lone parent who works as a receptionist, talked about feelings of guilt induced at delegating care of younger children to their older siblings:

Interviewer: *'Do you think there's anything about being a parent that makes it difficult for you to be in work?'*

Michelle: *'Most of the time I do give responsibility to our other children to pick the youngest one up but...then it's burdening them with my responsibility...then they miss out on their tuitions at the end of the school because now one's in year 10 and one in year 13...so I feel really bad about that. ...she's taken the role of being a dad. Cos I wanted her to carry on with education and she said "no I want to help you" and I didn't want her to.'*

Interviewer: *'So how does that make you feel?'*

Michelle: *'Really bad cos I sometimes think it's my fault cos she's missed out on a lot of things.'*

(35–44 years old; working full-time; lone parent; youngest child eight years old)

Sharing the load of parenting with older children was clearly having emotional effects on Michelle. As well as being concerned that her second and third eldest are missing out on after-school activities and tuition, there is a palpable sense of regret and a sense of personal responsibility that the eldest child chose to go out to work rather than continue studies in order to help with managing the household. This reveals how older children can facilitate a return to work by looking after younger children, but at considerable emotional cost to the parent. None of the interviewees appeared to consider this arrangement a desirable way of meeting childcare needs.

A third element that appeared to play a role in helping mothers sustain work was flexibility from employers, in either allowing them to take time off to look after children or in providing hours that fit around parenting commitments. Grace, a lone parent who worked evenings in a restaurant, reported appreciating the sympathetic and supportive attitude of her employer, who let her leave work to look after a sick child:

Interviewer: *'Do you require flexibility from your employer because of the responsibilities you have as a parent?'*

Grace: *'There have been times I've asked them can I leave early or things like that and they are very understanding. They know myself and my husband very well anyway and they're very understanding. They know [my daughter] as well and they know if she's been ill and grandma's called me "[my daughter's] poorly she's asking for you" and I've said "I'm going to have to go my daughter's ill" and they've been very good and let me go early or have half night or something.'*

(25–34 years old; working part-time; living with partner; only child two years old)

Gemma, a lone parent who worked part-time in a factory in Derby also talked about appreciating the flexibility shown by their employers in allowing them to work around their childcare responsibilities:

Gemma: *'Yeah obviously you'd have to make up that time so when I'm coming in and going out to make it fit round the hours for the little one and myself in work. They're quite good with us now, they're good with my hours because it fits round Amelia now but before they was putting me on any sort of hours and I told them that I've got a little one and responsibilities so I need to sort it out so they did, they've been great with that.'*

(16–24 years old; working part-time; lone parent; only child two years old)

This shows how the ability to sustain work can be aided by the supportive approach of employers who were willing to accommodate parenting needs.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that a series of factors including part-time work, support from family and friends and the flexibility of employers serve to support a return to work and aid job retention once in work. This suggests that the nature of available work, including the attitudes of employers, as well as the availability of supportive networks, play an important role in making work possible. These findings underline the importance of social and economic context in facilitating a return to work. The ability to balance work with parenting responsibilities seems to be underpinned by the structure of employment opportunity within local labour markets, as well as the personal resources an individual can draw on within their own social networks (informal social capital). In this sense, it is the structure of opportunity which plays a critical role in shaping the possibilities for employment.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This report has explored the relationship between work and parenthood for adults with dependent children living in low-income neighbourhoods. This chapter provides a précis of the key findings to emerge and provides some reflections on associated policy implications. Discussion is organised into four sections which mirror the four core chapters of the report in scope and focus: returning to work; searching for work; easing the transition into work; and experiences of work.

6.2 Returning to work

6.2.1 Key findings

- The decision to stay at home to look after children often had a strong moral foundation. Staying at home was also sometimes described as a necessity. For a few parents staying at home was related to a lack of employment prospects, which was attributed to personal barriers such as poor health and low skills levels and external constraints such as a lack of suitable jobs.
- Many parents were reluctant to combine paid work with formal childcare. While many simply considered it as too expensive, some had strong moral objections, which centred on the perception that looking after children was their responsibility. Several respondents suggested that staying at home is a legitimate role for parents to play before returning to the labour market.
- Most respondents shared the view that paid work is also important. This was because of the personal benefits it provides and the positive example it sets to children. The prospect of an increase in income associated with a move into work was typically a secondary consideration.
- The interviews revealed a strong cultural propensity to think about the possibility of paid work, and to emphasise its importance. There was little evidence of a cultural aversion to work or a 'dependency' on benefits. In short, the interviews demonstrated that the work ethic remains a key motivating force in the majority of households.
- Holding strong moral positions on both the importance of looking after children **and** going out to work was not seen as incompatible, with a return to work considered by nearly all respondents as a natural phase in parenting dependent children. Accordingly, the key decision centred on **when** rather than **if** it was appropriate to return to work, with the age of children and, to a lesser extent, the availability of childcare acting as the two most important factors influencing this decision.

6.2.2 Policy implications

- The availability and cost of childcare can represent a barrier to work. Policies to make affordable childcare more readily available would help some parents return to work. In this respect, the decision by the Coalition Government to extend the policy of free nursery places for three- and four-year-olds is clearly important. Any overall reduction in the availability of free places could undermine policies to encourage parents to return to work.
- The majority of parents prefer to look after children themselves, or use close family and friends as informal childcare. Their capacity to return to work is, therefore, shaped by their ability to find work that fits around nursery or school hours or, alternatively, to access trusted sources of informal childcare. Childcare policies will have little impact on this group. Instead, policy will need to continue to encourage employers to offer employment with 'family-friendly' hours that fit around the nursery or school day. Whilst all parents with school-age children currently have the right to request flexible working patterns, research suggests that many employers, especially smaller ones, are reluctant to allow flexible working³. Clearly, further thought needs to be put into how to enable employers to accommodate flexible working requests.
- The requirements of Lone Parent Obligations (LPOs) do not always align with parental views about the appropriate time to return to work, in terms of the age of the youngest child. Some parents fully expect to look for work before their child reaches seven, but others identify the beginning or end of secondary school as suitable points to return to work. In the latter case, enforcing LPOs will involve overriding parents' concerns about what is best for the wellbeing of their children. In such cases, employment advisers on the frontline may well find this a difficult policy to administer.
- Decisions about returning to work are driven primarily by perceptions of what is best for the wellbeing of children, as well as parents themselves. Financial gain is rarely a primary concern. Parents tend to only contemplate a return to work when they believe that it will not impact negatively upon their children, in terms of their emotional or educational needs or put them at undue risk. Policies seeking to encourage parents back into the labour market by 'making work pay' will clearly, therefore, 'speak' to some parents, but will not necessarily counter the strongly-held views that some other parents hold about their role and what represents an appropriate time to return to the labour market. Decisions about returning to work are made as much, if not more, on moral as financial grounds.

6.3 Searching for work

6.3.1 Key findings

- Four key themes emerged as important in shaping the job search patterns and practices of the parents interviewed: constrained job opportunities (what is feasible in terms of location and hours); work experience and confidence; gendered roles (virtually all the mothers interviewed related the specifics of their job search to their role as a parent); and family support (support and help with childcare provided by a partner, older child or other family member served to render work a more viable option).
- The key priority for most parents who were the primary carer was whether a job would fit around their childcare responsibilities. Such opportunities were reported to be limited.

³ A survey commissioned by Virgin Business Media of 5,000 small businesses each employing up to 250 people in the UK found just over one in 10 allowed their staff to work flexibly.

6.3.2 Policy implications

- Combining parental responsibilities and work demands access to local employment opportunities. For this reason, many parents talked about wanting to work in schools, either as midday supervisors or teaching assistants. Any reduction in non-teaching posts in schools is likely to impact negatively on parents, particularly mothers, with pre-school or school-age children who clearly value this type of employment opportunity.
- Lone parents who want, or are required, to look for work are likely to benefit from training or work placements designed to reintroduce them to the workplace environment. One option would be to stipulate that contractors delivering elements of the Work Programme for lone parents offer training and work placements, as was the case under the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) programme.

6.4 Easing the transition into work

6.4.1 Key findings

- Various initiatives have been introduced to support the move into work and to help people manage when in work. These initiatives appear to have had only limited impact on the concerns of parents about leaving out-of-work benefits and the financial uncertainties they associated with being in work. In part, this reflected the limited awareness, knowledge and understanding of these initiatives among the parents interviewed. However, even people who were aware of the complex regime of initiatives, benefits and supports designed to help people to move into work reported concerns about the financial risks of being in work.
- Doubts about the financial gains of a move into work were, in part, related to concerns about the low paid and insecure nature of available work. Frequent moves between benefits and work and back-to-work benefits once a job ended or was terminated was associated with the spectre of debt, given presumed delays in the payment of benefits and administrative errors relating to tax credits.

6.4.2 Policy implications

- These findings are consistent with previous studies that have concluded that the complexity of the tax and benefits systems can act as a work disincentive. The allied need for individuals and households to be able to assess easily whether they would be better off in work provides an underpinning rationale for the introduction of Universal Credit. Judging by responses to this study, the move to a single system of working-age benefits that links earnings from work to benefit entitlements has the potential to provide greater transparency and certainty about the financial implications of moving into work. The proposed reduction of high marginal tax rates for a large proportion of parents returning to work may also help to alleviate some of the concerns that parents have about the financial gains of moving into work. However, these benefits need to be offset against the finding that moral concerns about parenting responsibilities generally 'trump' financial considerations. The Universal Credit will only have traction for those parents who believe they can find work that will not significantly impact upon their ability to meet the needs of children.

6.5 Experiences of work

6.5.1 Key findings

- Several factors were revealed to support a return to work and aid job retention. These include: working part-time; support from family and friends; the flexibility of employers; and job satisfaction. In other words, the nature of available work and the availability of supportive networks together make work possible.

6.5.2 Policy implications

- Work can provide a number of social and financial benefits, but it can also create stresses, tensions and pressures on family life. Efforts to increase the financial rewards associated with work through the Universal Credit address some of the issues, but a discussion needs to be had about how work can be balanced against family life. In this respect, continued support for the right of parents to request 'flexible working' is important.

Appendix A

Profile of interview respondents

Table A.1 Profile of interview respondents

Pseudonym	Gender	Age band	Lone parent?	Number of dependent children	Age of youngest child	Self-declared employment status	Ethnic origin	Marital Status	Housing tenure	Interview location
Tania	Female	45–54	Yes	1	16	Full-time work	Other	Divorced	Local authority	Derby
Ian	Male	25–34	No	2	N/A	Full-time work	British or black Caribbean	Married/in long-term relationship	Housing association	Derby
Ameena	Female	35–44	Yes	3	N/A	Full-time work	Pakistani	Single	Private rented	Derby
Steve	Male	35–44	No	0	16	Full-time work	British or Black Caribbean	Married/in long-term relationship	Local authority	Derby
Sana	Female	35–44	Yes	2	6	Permanently sick or disabled/full-time carer	Pakistani	Other	Housing association	Derby
Martin	Male	35–44	No	2	3	Unemployed and available for work	White British	Married/in long-term relationship	Local authority	Derby
Vicky	Female	25–34	No	4	0.1	Unemployed and available for work/looking after the home	White British	Married/in long-term relationship	Local authority	Derby
Taisha	Male	45–54	No	1	7	Unemployed and available for work	British or Black Caribbean	Married/in long-term relationship	Local authority	Derby
Safia	Female	35–44	Yes	5	0.4	Unemployed and available for work	Pakistani	Other	Local authority	Derby
Michelle	Female	35–44	Yes	2	8	Full-time work	White British	Other	Private rented	Derby
Mandy	Female	35–44	No	3	3	Looking after the home	White British	Married/in long-term relationship	Local authority	Islington
Tess	Female	35–44	Yes	3	8	Full-time carer	White British	Single	Local authority	Islington

Pseudonym	Gender	Age band	Lone parent?	Number of dependent children	Age of youngest child	Self-declared employment status	Ethnic origin	Marital Status	Housing tenure	Interview location
Tracy	Female	35–44	Yes	3	8	N/A	White British	Single	Housing association	Islington
Helen	Female	35–44	Yes	1	6	Unemployed and available for work	White British	Single	Local authority	Islington
Sharon	Female	35–44	Yes	2	4	Looking after the home	White British	Single	Housing association	Islington
Nicola	Female	35–44	No	3	1.5	Looking after the home	White British	Married/in long-term relationship	Local authority	Islington
Carol	Female	35–44	No	4	3	Unemployed and available for work	White British	Married/in long-term relationship	Local authority	Islington
Denise	Female	35–44	Yes	2	2.5	Looking after the home	White British	Single	Local authority	Islington
Lesley	Female	16–24	Yes	1	0.6	Looking after the home	White British	Single	Private rented	Islington
Keira	Female	16–24	Yes	2	3	Looking after the home	White British	Single	Housing association	Islington
Sarah	Female	35–44	No	4	2	Looking after the home	White British	Married/in long-term relationship	Local authority	Islington
Julie	Female	35–44	Yes	2	2	Looking after the home	White British	Single	Housing association	Islington
Lizzie	Female	16–24	Yes	2	0.6	Unemployed and available for work	White British	Single	Housing association	Islington
Maureen	Female	25–34	Yes	3	2	Full-time carer	White British	Single	Local authority	Islington
Barbara	Female	35–44	Yes	3	1.3	Permanently sick or disabled	White British	Single	Local authority	Islington
Asif	Male	35–44	No	1	2	Full-time work	Pakistani	Married/in long-term relationship	Local authority	Derby

Pseudonym	Gender	Age band	Lone parent?	Number of dependent children	Age of youngest child	Self-declared employment status	Ethnic origin	Marital Status	Housing tenure	Interview location
Rachel	Female	25–34	No	2	3	Looking after the home	White Irish	Married/in long-term relationship	Local authority	Derby
Farah	Female	35–44	Yes	2	8	Unemployed and available for work	Pakistani	Other	Housing association	Derby
Pauline	Female	45–54	Yes	1	14	Part-time work	White British	Single	Local authority	Derby
Zia	Female	35–44	Yes	1	10	Looking after the home/full-time carer	Pakistani	Single	Homeless	Derby
Gemma	Female	16–24	Yes	1	2	Part-time work	White British	Single	Other	Derby
Grace	Female	25–34	No	1	2	Part-time work	White British	Married/in long-term relationship	Local authority	Derby
Kylie	Female	16–24	No	4	0.1	Unemployed and available for work	White British	Married/in long-term relationship	Other	Derby
Wendy	Female	45–54	No	1	7	Unemployed and available for work	British or Black Caribbean	Married/in long-term relationship	Other	Derby
Debbie	Female	25–34	Yes	2	3	Part-time work	White British	N/A	Housing association	Derby
Rebecca	Female	35–44	No	N/A	N/A	Full-time student	Other	Married/in long-term relationship	Local authority	Sheffield
Adil	Male	35–44	No	2	3	Permanently sick or disabled	Pakistani	Married/in long-term relationship	Private rented	Sheffield
Lloyd	Male	45–54	Yes	2	9	Unemployed and available for work	British or black Caribbean	N/A	Housing association	Sheffield
Sean	Male	25–34	No	1	1	Unemployed and available for work	N/A	Married/in long-term relationship	Local authority	Sheffield

Pseudonym	Gender	Age band	Lone parent?	Number of dependent children	Age of youngest child	Self-declared employment status	Ethnic origin	Marital Status	Housing tenure	Interview location
Brenda	Female	35–44	Yes	2	5	Unemployed and available for work	White British	Single	Local authority	Islington
Ella	Female	25–34	Yes	1	9	Unemployed and available for work	British or Black Caribbean	Single	Housing association	Islington
Samantha	Female	25–34	Yes	2	2	Voluntary work	White British	Single	Local authority	Islington
Hansa	Female	35–44	No	4	5	Part-time work	Indian	Married/in long-term relationship	Private rented	Derby
Salim	Male	25–34	No	2	0.2	Full-time work	Pakistani	Married/in long-term relationship	Private rented	Sheffield
Husna	Female	45–54	Yes	0	19	Permanently sick or disabled	Pakistani	Single	Local authority	Derby
Muna	Female	25–34	Yes	2	6	Part-time student	Pakistani	Single	Housing association	Derby
Mel	Female	45–54	Yes	2	16	Full-time work	White British	Single	Housing association	Derby
Gill	Female	35–44	Yes	2	10	Part-time work	White and Black Caribbean	Single	Housing association	Derby
Nazeem	Female	35–44	Yes	3	11	Full-time work	Pakistani	Single	Local authority	Derby
Yalda	Female	25–34	Yes	2	4	Full-time work	Pakistani	Single	Other	Derby
Cassie	Female	35–44	Yes	1	13	Permanently sick or disabled	White British	Single	Housing association	Islington
Mark	Male	45–54	No	1	7	Government scheme	British or Black Caribbean	Married/in long-term relationship	Local authority	Derby
Marcia	Female	35–44	Yes	4	5	Part-time work	Indian	Single	Private rented	Derby

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In recent years, considerable effort has been put into supporting parents to make the transition into work. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University to undertake a study to explore whether these incentives were helping parents to overcome the barriers known to impede their engagement in the formal labour market.

The research focused on two main tasks; the re-analysis of in-depth qualitative interviews of parents from a previous study commissioned by DWP (Fletcher et al., 2008) focusing on the interaction between parenthood and work, and a series of additional interviews to explore issues not covered by the original interviews.

The report outlines findings and policy implications on the following issues:

- full-time parenting and decisions about returning to work;
- job search and important considerations for parents;
- easing the transition to work – transitional and in-work benefits;
- experiences of work.

If you would like to know more about DWP research, please contact:
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Families and Work: Revisiting Barriers to Employment

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